

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Escape to Aravaipa Farms

Pat and I have found paradise, and it's only about an hour's drive north of Tucson. I'm talking about Aravaipa Farms, a country inn along Aravaipa Creek, just outside the west entrance of the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness Area.

Ten miles north of Mammoth on Arizona Highway 77 you turn off on E. Aravaipa Road. After passing the local Campus of Central Arizona you're engulfed in a pristine Sonoran desert, following along Aravaipa Creek, lined with large, old sycamore and cottonwood trees and natural grasses. You can almost feel the historic presence of former Creek-side residents including native Apaches, pioneer homesteaders, Basque Angora sheepherders, and traditional old west cattlemen.

Carol Steele came to Aravaipa Creek 15 years ago from Phoenix where she interrupted a fabulously successful career as an entrepreneur in food arts. Inspired by her father, who often told her that she could do anything in life, Carol was a groundbreaking developer of gourmet food services and a 1992 inductee into the Phoenix-Scottsdale Culinary Hall of Fame.

In 1995 Carol was looking to "escape from technology" and achieve a balance in her life. So she bought a working orchard farm. As Carol tells it, her mother's response to this bold move was, "You're insane!"

Over the next few years Carol converted the original barn and outbuildings into five casitas that Carol advertises as a peaceful, romantic retreat and accommodations for visitors to the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness Area.

Today Aravaipa Farms is a successful country inn and the farm organically produces peaches, apricots, pears, and pecans from its orchards, has a garden and greenhouse for vegetables, and a henhouse for eggs. From all of this – and regular trips to stores in northern Tucson along Oracle Road – Carol prepares wonderful gourmet meals for her guests.

Breakfasts are do-it-yourself from tasty ingredients in your casita refrigerator. Lunches are brought to your casita in picnic baskets (or tote bags if you're hiking the canyon). The evening meal starts with guests getting together for wine on the patio, followed by dinner at a communal table in a cozy dining room.

Pat and I spent three delightful days at Aravaipa Farms, taking a break from TV, WIFI, and cell phones. We were celebrating Pat's birthday and at the first wine gathering, we discovered that two of the other four couples were also celebrating birthdays.

Our “Mountain View” casita was spacious and comfortable, eclectically decorated in a combination of rustic furniture, folk art, Carol’s treasures, and regional books. Outside the casita, we had our own burbling fountain and gazebo, plus plentiful chairs, lounges, and tables.

Besides “vegging” around our casita, we walked the grounds at Arivaipa Farms, checking out the orchards and numerous birdhouses, and also did a lot of reading and playing Scrabble (I finally won a game). Of course Pat did a little knitting.

Running right through the Farms, Aravaipa Creek is one of a handful of Arizona natural waterways that runs year round, formed in the mountains to the east and fed by springs along the way. The Creek has chiseled a narrow winding canyon – preserved as the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness Area by the U.S. Congress in 1984 – that offers some of the most spectacular and remote scenery in Arizona. The Canyon contains a lush, diverse habitat for almost countless species of birds, mammals, amphibians, and butterflies.

The Wilderness is administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) – not the Forest Service or Park System. The distinction is important; you can hike through the Canyon, but there are no improved trails, and except at the beginning, no helpful trail signs. In its June 2011 issue, *Arizona Highways* features the Aravaipa Canyon trail as one of their ten favorite hikes in Arizona.

We spent several hours hiking in the beautiful Wilderness Area – a really unique experience, unlike any other hike we’ve tried. Actually, it’s hard to call it a “hike,” more like a “wade.” The natural land path keeps changing sides of the Creek, so you find yourselves continually crossing the Creek. Our feet got wet quickly and pretty soon – rather than searching for land paths – we defaulted to walking in the Creek. Progress was very slow, but fun.

We have long wanted to visit Aravaipa Farms. The setting, Carol’s hospitality and wonderful cuisine, and the other guests made this a memorable experience.

Note: Access to the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness is limited to 50 people per day in an effort to preserve its wild character. Permits (\$5 per person) are available only through the BLM’s Safford Field Office, (928) 348-4400, or the Arizona Bureau of Land Management website: “On-line Permits.”

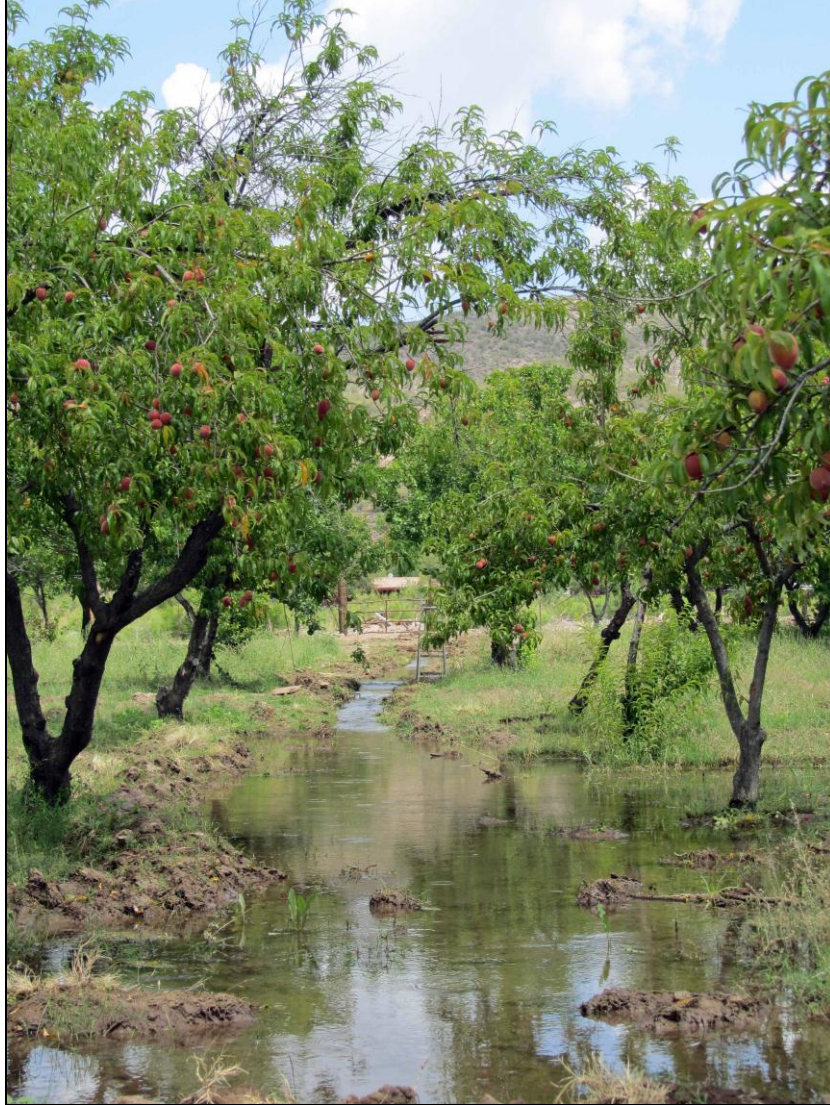
Sources and Information: Aravaipa Farms website, aravaipafarms.com; online at “Arizona Heritage Waters / Aravaipa Creek,” *Arizona Highways*.



Here's Pat resting on a rock in the middle of Aravaipa Creek on our hike into the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness. (Photo by Bob Ring)



We spent a lot of time lounging outside our Aravaipa Farms casita. (Photo by Pat Wood)



Carol Steele harvests a lot of fruit from her peach orchard. (Photo by Pat Wood)