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FEATURED

Among the best: Silvies recognized by golfing magazines

By Richard Hanners Blue Mountain Eagle Jan 22, 2019



The Chief Egan mountain meadow 9-hole golf course at The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch.

Contributed photo/Silvies Valley Ranch

The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch, operating since a soft opening in 2017, has caught the eye of golfing professionals across the U.S.

The boutique resort south of Seneca recently was recognized by two nationwide magazines, while the resort's chef was given a top award by the Oregon Beef Council.

Golf Magazine, with a circulation of 1.4 million, recognized the resort's McVeigh's Gauntlet 7-hole ridge course as "the best new golf experience of the year."

The 1,177-yard McVeigh's Gauntlet course includes par-3 and short par-4 holes and features goats as caddies. The leashed goat-caddies can tote a handful of clubs in leather golf bags up and down the course's steep, rugged terrain.

Golf Digest, with a circulation of 1.6 million, recognized the Hankins and Craddock courses as two of the top-four best new courses of 2018.

"This is the first time that any property had two new courses ranked in the top five in a single year," Colby Marshall, the resort's general manager, said.

The Hankins and Craddock are reversible 18-hole courses designed by Dan Hixson, the golf course architect known for his work at Bandon Crossings in Oregon and Wine Valley in Washington.

The concept of a reversible course isn't new — the historic Old Course at St. Andrews in Fife, Scotland, is still flipped occasionally. Nine greens are shared by the Craddock and Hankins courses, with a total of 27 greens, 17 fairways and 36 holes.

Golfers approach the nine shared greens from different angles as the course reverses each day on 120 acres of maintained property. The Craddock course runs clockwise, while the Hankins runs counterclockwise, starting from the solar-powered clubhouse. The courses are named for homesteaders in the Silvies Valley.

Guests can also play the Chief Egan course, a mountain meadow 9-hole par-3 course. Special reduced rates are offered to residents of Grant and Harney counties, Marshall said — \$75 to play on an 18-hole championship award-winning course.

Sean Hoolehan, the past president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, joined the agronomy team at Silvies in 2018.

“There really is no other place like Silvies in the golf world,” Hoolehan said. “I played most of the great golf courses in the United States, and many in Europe, in my 40 years in golf course management. Nowhere else will you find an experience like this.”

Summertime visitors also can enjoy cattle drives, rifle and pistol shooting, fishing in the ranch’s ponds and creeks, and mountain biking on the two-track trails that crisscross the ranch.

Guests from metropolitan areas or countries with restrictive gun laws quickly take to the frontier atmosphere, Marshall said. That includes shooting at the pistol range, long-distance sharpshooter range and the Western-style range, where guests shoot lever-action, open-sight rifles at metal targets that ping when they get knocked down.

The resort also offers a wide range of winter activities, from snowshoeing and cross-country skiing on the snow-covered golf courses to ice fishing and ATV tours.

A fun new winter attraction is “cool golf” played on the Chief Egan course, Marshall said. Extra-large cups are set up at the “greens,” and golfers use high-loft clubs to drive neon-green tennis balls, he said.

“There’s no pressure,” he said. “It’s a family fun activity that often ends up as a snowball fight after five holes.”

Ozzie and Arnold, the Clydesdale horses that pull guests on wagon rides in the summer, are being trained to pull a sleigh for winter guests, Marshall said. The resort is also interested in lining up snowmobile touring for guests through an outside contractor.

Founded in 1883, the ranch's 140,000 acres of deeded and leased land in Silvies Valley is home to mountain meadows, ponderosa pine forests and the Silvies River drainage. Ranch hands manage 2,600 goats and 4,500 head of cattle.

The Retreat & Links at Silvies Valley Ranch is a 34-room resort offering luxurious accommodations, fine dining and a conference center. Golf Magazine recently recognized the Lodge at Silvies Valley Ranch as one of the 13 most spectacular golf course restaurants.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner is served ranch-style every day at long wooden tables shared by guests, staff and management. The beef and chevon comes from grass-fed cows and free-range goats raised on the ranch, and the meat is USDA-certified organic.

Chef Damon Jones, recognized as a premiere ranch-to-table chef, was recently selected as the Chef of the Year by the Oregon Beef Council.

Jones hails from Alabama, but his father has roots in Central Oregon. Jones began his culinary career as a sous-chef in New Orleans for the Brennan family restaurants and at Emeril's. Jones said he learned the principles of "scratch cooking" in New Orleans — owning the entire meal from start to finish.

In Oregon, he worked at the Rogue Valley Country Club, Crosswater at Sunriver Resort and the Larks Restaurant at the Ashland Springs Hotel, where he was the executive chef. He came to Silvies in March 2018.

Ranch-style meals at Silvies include seven courses featuring what's available locally and what's in season, Jones said. Silvies grows some herbs and vegetables in a micro garden and greenhouses. Local ranchers are invited to a more laid-back, buffet-style ranch barbecue on Fridays.

In addition to the opportunity to prepare great meals, golfing drew Jones to Silvies. His passion for golf explains why he has worked at so many golf resorts, he said. When he's not golfing or cooking, Jones said he enjoys the quiet and solitude of Eastern Oregon.

Richard Hanners is a reporter for the Blue Mountain Eagle. He can be contacted at rick@bmeagle.com or 541-575-0710.

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