

Almonds

Alpacas and Airbnb

a California Ranch Story

By Meyla Bianco Johnston
Photos courtesy Capaldi Ranch



Capaldi Ranch is a trifecta of value-added opportunities centered around the very different businesses of almonds, alpacas and Airbnb.

In the beginning, more than 30 years ago, Daphne and her husband, Ray, were thinking about buying a property in Paso Robles, California with a unique asset: a mature almond grove with more than 700 trees, one of the last almond orchards in their area.

"Ray's cousin, Frank Arciero, came up to look at the property," Daphne says. "Frank got emotional and told my husband the ranch with the

three hills on it reminded him of Ray's parents' farm of olives in Casino, Italy. Instantly, Ray knew he wanted the property."

The Capaldis took the plunge. "Although Ray has never been to Italy, he decided to have a house built on each hill to remind him of his folks' place in Casino. He tells Airbnb guests the story quite often," Daphne says.

Ray did all the dirt work for the houses with his experience as a successful

grading contractor with more than 20 pieces of heavy equipment.

"Anything that was handwork fell to me and whomever I could get to help," Daphne says. "Unfortunately, my husband now has dementia. Fortunately, he can still drive the huge tractors when needed. We have friends with different skill sets who



have allowed me to live this dream. Without all of their help, it wouldn't be possible," she says.

Almond Agriculture

The almond part of Capaldi Ranch is more a labor of love than anything else, Daphne says.

"There isn't much profit, but it's something unique and amazing we can share with others. We don't want to see them just drop from the trees, so we harvest them."

The Capaldis grow organic almonds, which means they "don't fertilize and don't use any chemicals or sprays anywhere around the orchard."

In fact, the farm can be considered a throwback in all the right ways.

Despite the huge water requirement for traditionally grown almonds, the Capaldi's nuts are unique in that they are not irrigated at all. The soil at the ranch is mostly clay, and Capaldi says it works well for dry farming. "Whatever rain Mother Nature provides is what [the almonds] get. Some years are prolific, some are lean," Capaldi says.

On watering, the Capaldis get off easy. But harvesting almonds, big crop or small, is very labor-intensive.

It is "done exactly the same as it was done since the 1940s," Daphne says.

In mid-August, they place tarps around the tree trunks and use a beater that looks like a baseball bat with a large rubber tip to strike the branches and knock the almonds off onto the tarps.

These almond trees are very large because they are more than 65 years old, so to harvest the higher branches, Ray lifts Daphne and helpers up in the tractor bucket to reach. "It can be very precarious!" Daphne says.

"Then you drag the tarps in unison to the next tree and continue on until the tarps are full, maybe two or three trees maximum," Capaldi says. "They are collected in the tractor bucket and taken to a huge area and put on a tarp to dry out for another week or two."

Later, some varieties are bagged

into gunnysacks and taken to a local farm to take a trip through an antique shelling machine. "When we get them back from the sheller, we weigh, bag and label them to sell," Daphne says.

The people who planted the trees all those years ago did make it easy on the Capaldis in one way. Two of the varieties they grow, Ne Plus and Non Pariel, are soft shell varieties that don't need a nutcracker.

Another bonus: almonds last a long while, so the Capaldis need not worry about perishability because "in their natural state (in the shells), they will last for years just sitting in a bowl," Daphne says.

The Capaldi Ranch sells unpasteurized almonds, almost as rare these days as organic nuts.

By law, all almonds must be pasteurized, but Capaldi Ranch is not

Right: A real gourmet treat, these are green almonds, picked before they fall off the tree. As a career flight attendant, Daphne Capaldi knows hospitality, and that improves all her enterprises: almonds, alpacas and Airbnb.

Opposite: One of the last almond orchards left in Paso Robles, Capaldi Ranch was originally purchased because of the rolling hills' resemblance to a family property in Casino, Italy. The trees are mature and are still harvested the same way they were back in the 1940s; with a lot of elbow grease.





required to do so because they are considered a small grower selling directly to their customers at farmers markets or Airbnb. In fact, they sell all of their almonds every year.

Almond Agriculture + Adorable Alpacas

The camelid connection at Capaldi Ranch started after the almond enterprise was already in full swing.

At Bass Lake at a drag boat reunion, Daphne complimented Lisa Theis on a beautiful vest she was wearing. Daphne discovered it was made of alpaca fiber and casually asked, “What’s alpaca?” Theis offered to take Daphne to meet the alpacas a few minutes away at KT-Lee Alpaca Ranch in North Fork, California.

“She took me to her ranch and showed [the alpacas] to me,” Daphne says. “I immediately fell in love with

them and decided to start raising them.”

In 2008, Daphne and Ray started Capaldi Alpacas.

The very first spring, after the alpacas were shorn, Daphne, not one to rest on her laurels, thought, “Now what?”

She started taking classes to learn how to use alpaca fiber. She fell in love with their fiber all over again — this time off the animal — realizing what she could create with it.

“Once I started processing items from the fiber such as yarn, dyeing yarn, making rugs, knitting items and felting fiber over handmade olive oil soaps, I decided to try farmers markets.

“Rather than go to shows to compete with others selling and breeding alpacas, I decided to focus on the fiber. That has worked out extremely well for us.”

“My ‘in’ was the organic almonds and then were gracious enough to allow me to sell alpaca products from my animals.”

Daphne has been selling at farmer’s markets for eight years.

Almond Agriculture + Adorable Alpacas + Airbnb

Another way the Capaldis stay in the black is through renting rooms via Airbnb.

Daphne would “absolutely” recommend other alpaca farmers in other parts of the country try Airbnb. That’s if they love what they do and can effectively project that to others.

Daphne is considered as a “Superhost” by Airbnb, which is defined as an experienced, highly rated host who is committed to providing great stays for guests.

Having been a flight attendant in the past, Daphne knows customer service, enjoys people and likes to engage. This led her to believe she should jump into the Airbnb game.

“Being a flight attendant has made the narrative with guests much easier,” Daphne says. “For 32 years, I dealt with people from all over the world, and I have also traveled quite a bit — I am able to discuss or relate to where visitors are from and appreciate their cultures. I love to ask questions and make sure people are comfortable, feel welcome and try to anticipate their needs, which is what the airline business is all about.”

All this success came as somewhat of a surprise, however.

Recently, Capaldi Ranch got a lot of unexpected attention from the media around the Airbnb portion of the business, underscoring the power of digital media.

“We were shocked by all the press!” Daphne says. “We actually don’t know exactly how it started. We believe a previous guest posted on Delish’s Facebook page. Then it got picked up by several online magazines.

“Although our Airbnbs book up almost all year long, it usually happens slowly. We have been inundated with requests to stay and folks who are in the area wanting tours. We had no idea we were in *O Magazine* [Oprah Winfrey’s lifestyle publication]. In fact, I haven’t had a chance to look at it. People wanting to book have mentioned many online sources I haven’t even heard of.”

Daphne says, “The key to our success with Airbnb is that the picture people see is the scene of alpacas

grazing at the ranch. Most hosts have a picture of their house or the room the guest will be staying in. That image alone got our Airbnb noticed above all others.”

She has also prepared her alpacas for customer service.

“We have trained many alpacas to accept the attention so many people are eager to give them. I never realized how many people actually are obsessed with alpacas — that is the actual word I most often hear.”



At the local farmer’s market, Daphne introduces youngsters to alpacas alongside her booth. The kids seem to have made fast friends with this cria.

Daphne makes sure people staying at the Capaldi Ranch get the full alpaca experience. “We have an on-site store with our items where Airbnb guests like to shop. Our almonds, alpaca items and our farm fresh eggs are all something they can take with them, and they most often do. They love buying a hat or yarn from an animal they just walked around the ranch. So, I suppose they are all symbiotic.”

But making the alpacas, the almonds and the Airbnb triad work

isn’t easy and comes with unusual challenges. Ironically, the hardest part of the Airbnb game for Daphne was “knowing what to charge.” [Editor’s note: the Capaldis charge \$74 per night for “Hideaway” and \$84 per night for “Vista.”]

“The second is the question of whether we allow one night stays — this makes it harder. But this has proved to work for us, as many guests are on a California trip, just passing through.

“If we required two nights, it would eliminate about half of our business. We are not just about making money. We truly wanted an opportunity to share our place with people, second was the income. We are affordable for the average person.

“It’s hard for those new to Airbnb to understand the ‘additional fees’ involved, such as cleaning, Airbnb fee and the county tax. Many people have said that we need to raise our prices due to all the extras we provide, but we have stuck to our original prices and feel good about it. We don’t raise prices during special events as we want to charge a reasonable price all year long.”

Despite these decisions, Daphne says, “The most rewarding part is the joy we see on our guests faces when they arrive and the conversations with people from all over the world.”

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- Personal interview Daphne Capaldi.
• Gulino, Elizabeth. “This Airbnb Is Actually Located on An Alpaca Ranch, and It’s Only \$74 a Night.” *Oprah Magazine*. April 29, 2019. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://www.oprahmag.com/life/a27306323/california-airbnb-alpaca-ranch/>.



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