



V Bar V Discovery Days and Agave Roast Offers Fun Activities

By Carol Wirkus

If you'd like to learn about the ancient technologies of Native People and the history of early explorers and ranching, come to V Bar V Discovery Days and Agave Roast on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, April 16, 17, and 18.

The event will be held at the V Bar V Heritage Site, located south of the Village of Oak Creek on Forest Road 618, just beyond the Beaver Creek Campground. The event is free, though a Red Rock Pass is needed to park at the site.

A highlight of V Bar V Days is the Agave Roast. The taste of Agave is often compared to sweet potatoes, pineapple, or honey. If you want to see the colorful Yavapai Gourd Dancers perform, plan on arriving by 10:30 a.m. on Saturday. The agave roasting pit will be opened following their performance. Be patient because it takes time to dig up, clean and cut pieces for visitors to sample.

Agave is commonly called the century plant because it seems to take a hundred years before it grows a towering 12 to 20-foot stalk. In fact, the rapidly growing stalk grows when the plant is 25 to 35 years old. After flowering, the mother plant dies, but small "pups" grow from the roots.

"The reason we're roasting agave is for the scientific and archeological aspects—to learn more about how the Agave was used by native people," explained Terrilyn Green, the event organizer and Forest Service Cultural Sites Supervisor. "Also, we want to support the efforts of the Yavapai-Apache Nation's cultural preservation office to involve people from their community in the harvesting, roasting and processing of this important traditional food."

Agave was used for food and fiber by every native culture in the Southwest for thousands of years. The cooked Agave heart and the base of the leaves provided good nutritional benefits, while the fibrous leaves were used to make cordage. Previous Agave roasts at V Bar V provided information about the sugar content and nutritional benefits of different Agave species.

All parts of the Agave are protected under Arizona State law. It is illegal to gather any part of an Agave, including the dead stalk, unless you are Native American or have a permit through the state department of agriculture.

Roasting Agave involves a lot of hard work – that is one of the greatest lessons we have learned from going through this process. Members of the Friends of the Forest have provided most of the labor for all the agave roasts at V Bar V. Al Cornell, Roy Julian, Mike Vitek, and Frank Wirkus help cut fire wood, excavate the fire pit, gather the agave, build and maintain the fire, open up the pit, and then restore the land to its original condition when the roast is over.

The Agave plants that will be harvested are identified by Wendy Hodgson, Agave specialist from the Desert Botanical Garden, and members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation. The Friends of the Forest volunteers help dig the Agave out of the ground, which is extremely labor-intensive and dangerous – considering the Agave have a great self-defense system of sharp barbs on every leaf.

Following harvest, the heavy plants are carried out of the desert to waiting vehicles on the road. Agave are harvested at this time of year because this is when they have the highest concentration of sugar. There is evidence that Indians cultivated the sweetest and least fibrous species of Agave.

The Friends' volunteers gather and cut a cord and a half of mesquite wood for the roasting fire. Chainsaws and pick-up trucks make this process easier – the work involved before these tools were available must have been huge! Mesquite gives the Agave a nice smoky flavor. The first year the event was held at V Bar V, apple wood from West Fork pruning was used, which also nicely flavors the Agave.

Four days before the Agave will be served, the volunteers prepare the roasting pit at V Bar V, digging out the existing three-foot deep pit that is lined with stones. Al Cornell starts a fire by friction using a hand drill. A blazing fire is maintained for about five hours to build up a bed of coals. The Agave hearts are placed on the bed of coals and covered with plant material or wet burlap. Finally, the pit is sealed with earth, and a fire is built on top to complete the roasting pit.

Visitors who come to V Bar V Discovery Days can look forward to enjoying other unique experiences. Members of the Yavapai-Apache Nation will share traditional food, including samples of prickly pear juice. Al Cornell will demonstrate how to make fire by friction. Roy Julian, President of Friends of the Forest, will make cordage and sandals from yucca fibers. Other volunteers from the region will show how stones are knapped into arrowheads. Visitors are drawn to see how beautiful pottery is made and fired using ancient techniques.

A highlight for kids is the opportunity to throw long darts using an atlatl at one of Ruth Cornell's lifelike drawings of a prehistoric creature. A mountain man display will highlight what a camp would have looked like, including clothing, tents, food, and tools. Cowboys from the University of Arizona V Bar V Ranch will tell about the history of the ranch, and kids can practice their roping skills. Volunteers from Friends of the Forest are happy to tell you about the unique petroglyphs at V Bar V.

For more information about V Bar V Discovery Days and Agave Roast, go to www.redrockcountry.org or call 928-592-0998.

Friends of the Forest welcomes new members. For more information, visit www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.

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