

## Ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrates new, locally owned resort east of Groveland



Promoters and developers hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony Wednesday for about 100 people at the new locally-owned Firefall Ranch resort east of Groveland, which is now accepting guest reservations that begin May 8.

When it opens for business next week, Firefall Ranch will have 55 stand-alone cottages and villas, a main lodge, and general store; a tavern/bar/grill restaurant and a formal dining restaurant; a pool house with game rooms, changing rooms, and restrooms; and a separate events center.

Promoters say Firefall Ranch is part of the First Light Resorts, which includes Rush Creek Lodge and Spa and Evergreen Lodge.

The majority of people at Wednesday's ceremony were Tuolumne County residents, business owners, or associated with the county's tourism industry.

"Today is all about opening the place up to locals so that they can see for themselves what Firefall Ranch is all about," Teri Marshall, director of marketing for the Evergreen and Rush Creek venues, and for First Light Resorts. "We invited about a hundred people. Almost everybody's local. The real story is locals and local outfitters and local retailers. When people talk about Firefall Ranch, we don't want it to be all about Yosemite all of the time. We want to have this as a platform to showcase the many riches that Tuolumne County has to offer."

Marshall named businesses including Yosemite Flight Tours, Miller Jeep Tours, Pine Mountain Lake Golf Course, and Echo Adventure Cooperative, which are all based in the county. Firefall Ranch is a destination that will have easy access to Groveland and other parts of the county.

“They’re all just right here, we already work with them at our other lodges, Rush Creek and Evergreen,” Marshall said. “Our recreation teams and our front desks are very well-educated and well-versed in what the local offerings are, so we’re going to continue that approach to hospitality. In the same way we already work with those outfitters at the other lodges, we’ll do the same thing here.”



People in line for refreshments before the ceremony included Shirley Horn, whose daughter Rachel Sabatine and son-in-law Andrew Sabatine own Around The Horn Brewing Co. in Big Oak Flat.

Horn, who is also a board member of the Yosemite Highway 120 Chamber of Commerce, hopes the new resort will help drive visitors to other area businesses.

“They’re close to town,” she said. “That means their visitors here will have an easy time getting into town and enjoying the entertainment and other opportunities in Groveland.”

Tom Crosby, president of the Tuolumne County Business Council, also came for the ribbon-cutting.

“Tuolumne County is blessed to have this local model of partnership and collaboration in the artful construction of a truly spectacular project we can all enjoy,” Crosby said.

He praised Firefall Ranch's physical setting, "a beautiful meadow surrounded by forested mountains," and called it "the perfect place for couples and families to explore nature and the historic cultural wonders onsite and beyond."

Firefall Ranch is owned and built by Tuolumne County contractor Robert Boyer in partnership with the Chicken Ranch Rancheria of Me-Wuk Indians of California. Boyer Construction part-owners include co-vice presidents Jesse and Michael Oliva. The Boyer and the Oliva families own Firefall Ranch in a partnership with the tribe.

Lisa Mayo, president and chief executive officer of Visit Tuolumne County, told ceremony attendees she was thrilled to be at Firefall Ranch for the first time.

"It's incredible to celebrate this historic milestone on this first day of May," Mayo said. "It's a special day. We are kicking off the eighth annual California Tourism Month."

In 2016, the California Legislature passed a bipartisan resolution declaring May to be California Tourism Month, to spotlight tourism's role as a key economic driver for the Golden State.

"That same spotlight shines on Tuolumne County, with tourism as the county's largest private sector industry," Mayo said. "In 2022, travel spending in Tuolumne County was \$251 million. That was a great comeback as we all went through a lot of things we went through a few years before that. We have 4,000 jobs in the tourism industry in our county."

The addition of Firefall Ranch is a beacon of hope for the local economy, Mayo said. Construction of the new resort over the past year has employed more than 50 local workers, plus numerous local subcontractors. The resort itself will employ 80 people once it's open to the public and fully staffed, Marshall said.

Robert Boyer came up to speak and asked the other owners and their family members to come up. Boyer said he, his family, and his company decided to buy the Firefall Ranch property in June 2020. Then they recruited Chicken Ranch Tribal Chairman Lloyd Mathiesen and other tribal leaders.

"They got involved and that started us on because they were the impetus behind us really getting forward," Boyer said. "We got going two years ago, and we've been working on it ever since. Bank of Stockton, I want to thank them. They helped us get to the finish line. They've been great partners. It's been a great joy. I come out here every day and I love it. All the people who work on this are local subs, subcontractors, individuals. Some of them I've been in business with for 40 years. It's been a team effort, with the tribe, with the banks, with the county."

Mathiesen came up to give a blessing and he said it's been an adventure since the Chicken Ranch Tribe joined with the Boyers and the Olivas to back and build Firefall Ranch. Mathiesen praised the natural surroundings and expressed hope that opening day next week will be as beautiful as the ribbon-cutting.

“Right now, you don't hear anything but the trees and the birds,” Mathiesen said. “We are very lucky and blessed to be part of this project. I want to thank the creator for bringing everyone up here. I want to thank the creator for allowing such great people to be up here working on this project. We hope the creator will do the same next week, when we open, that he allows the same thing to happen, to allow everyone to come up here to enjoy this great country that he gifted us, and to bring back some of that old school family values that we put into building this place.”

Boyer Construction has also expanded Evergreen Lodge, and built parts of Rush Creek Lodge and Spa, farther east off Highway 120 near the entrance to Yosemite National Park, and built The Armory entertainment venue in downtown Sonora.

In addition, Boyer Construction handled the \$35 million reconstruction of the City of Berkeley's Tuolumne Camp off Highway 120, which burned in the 2013 Rim Fire. Other clients have included Hetch Hetchy Regional Water System Services and the City and County of San Francisco.

Firefall Ranch is being promoted, managed, and operated by First Light Resorts, the name for the owners-operators of Rush Creek Lodge and Spa and the century-old Evergreen Lodge between Highway 120 and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir.

Evergreen Lodge dates to 1921, when it was originally developed to support the building of O'Shaughnessy Dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley. Rush Creek Lodge and Spa opened in 2016. First Light Resorts is owned by former Stanford roommates Lee Zimmerman and Brian Anderluh.

Firefall Ranch is named for the Horsetail Fall lighting phenomenon that naturally occurs mid- to late February each winter in Yosemite Valley, which in turn is named for the unnatural, summertime Firefall displays staged for campers on summer evenings from 1872 to 1968, when park concessioners used to dump burning hot embers from the top of Glacier Point to the valley floor 3,000 feet below.

The location of Firefall Ranch next to Highway 120 used to be a stop on the original stagecoach route to the park in the 1870s, according to First Light Resorts. The property has its own network of trails for walking and a natural pond.

For more about Firefall Ranch, including reservations, go to [www.firefallranch.com](http://www.firefallranch.com). For more about job openings at all three First Light Resorts, including Firefall Ranch, go to <https://careers.yosemitehotels.com>.