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New Residential Project Debuts Next to Rancho La Puerta

San Diego's "Godmother of Wellness" explores 4,000 acres of rugged territory in Tecate

Gillian Flynn | Jul 12, 2022



The grand Spanish Colonial dining hall is central to the culinary experiences at Rancho La Puerta. The legendary vegetarian cuisine— and salsa bar—have spawned a cooking school and a cookbook.

At 100 years old, Deborah Szekely is busy adhering to her rituals. This morning at her home in [Mission Hills](#), she's signing copies of her new book while poring over customer reviews from [Rancho La Puerta](#) in [Tecate](#), which she cofounded 82 years ago. "Be an innovator but also a completer" is one of the aphorisms plucked from her weekly chats at "The Ranch" and repurposed for her centennial book, *100 Lessons from a Grasshopper*. The title comes

from her late husband Edmond Szekely's description of her "grasshopper mind"—which springs from one idea to the next without stopping.



Szekely celebrated her 100th birthday on May 3 with not one, but three parties, including a book launch and a charitable initiative for Our Green Umbrella, a tree-planting campaign focused on underserved Tecate neighborhoods.

Long before wellness became a trillion-dollar global industry, the vegetarian resort was serving up farm-to-table cuisine from its rugged terrain alongside yoga and sound healing. Today, her daughter, Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood, who grew up at The Ranch milking goats, is its president. Brightwood is also a revered landscape architect who has been dreaming up this wellness community for the last 10 years. Every boulder, orchard, and sycamore tree creates a glorious landscape unlike no other place in [Mexico](#).

"There's lots of drama. That's the beauty of the topography here," she says.

To protect its access to Mount Kuchumaa, the family purchased several parcels of land over the years, including an adjacent ranch and creek now home to The Residences, The Winery, and the upcoming Eco-Village. Homes start at \$733,163 for a 1,961-square-foot casita; 4,299-square-foot villas fetch \$1.7 million. There's also a fractional ownership model.



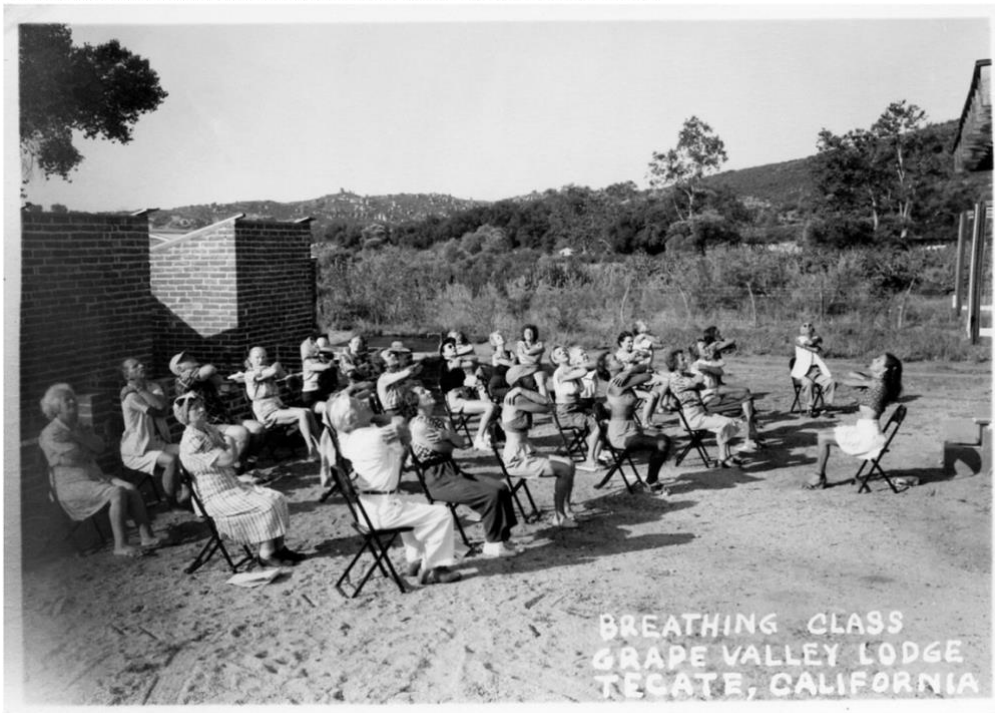
Family-owned and operated since 1940, Rancho La Puerta began as a campsite where guests pitched tents, swam in the river, and listened to educational seminars by Edmond Szekely. His wife, Deborah, was 18 at the time.

Szekely's enduring gratitude, and commitment to reignite the guest experience, have created a camaraderie here. Year after year, families return for hiking, the cooking school, and now, pickleball. So when the resort launched its long-awaited residential project, it was these guests who had the first right to purchase. And they did. The woman is a "completer."

Other guests come for what's absent—high- volume tourism. It creates space for an indelible connection to the land. In fact, Brightwood likes to point out that hundreds of guests have made pilgrimages to scatter ashes of loved ones under the heroic oak trees. The breeze, scented with honeysuckle and jasmine, carries them away.



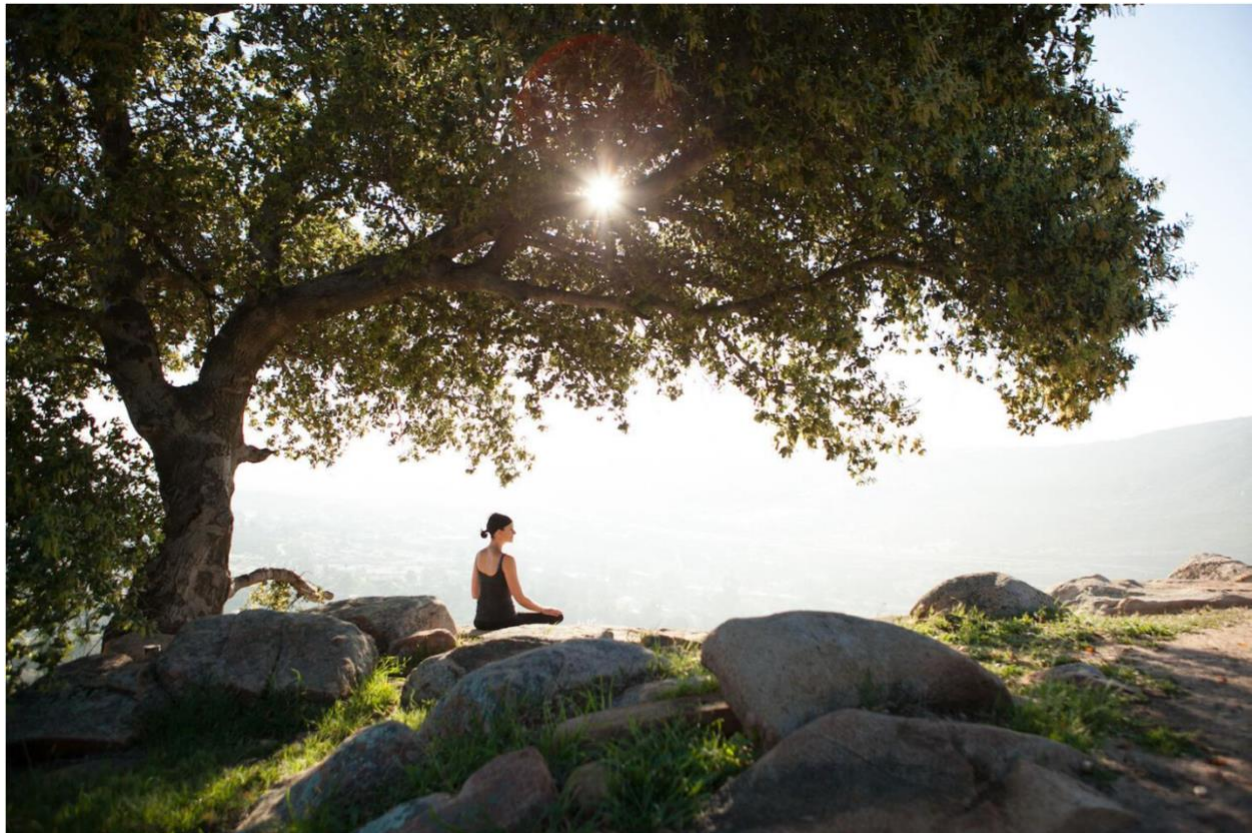
There are four pools on the Rancho La Puerta property, which host aqua jogging, swimming, and water therapy.



In Rancho La Puerta's early days, a week's stay was \$17.50. Szekely's mother was born in Brooklyn and became vice president of a New York vegetarian society. To escape the Depression, the family moved to Tahiti in 1930, where they ate lots of bananas and tropical fruit.



The next-gen president of Rancho La Puerta, Sarah Livia Szekeley Brightwood, is also a revered landscape architect. Her plans for the new residences include designs with privacy and sustainability top of mind. A Villa terrace, shown, boasts natural shade and native plants.



Oak trees, less commonly seen in Mexico, were planted by the Szekeley family. They are now rooted in The Ranch's sense of place and central to the guest experience.



The Residences feature large picture windows on Mount Kuchumaa and the vineyards. A forthcoming winery and restaurant will provide a place for guests and residents to sample fruits of the harvest.



Bedrooms at The Residences have circadian lighting systems to optimize sleep. All rooms are designed with nontoxic materials and layouts that connect to the outdoors.