

## **A little bit of Vegas in the Wine Country: The fabulously '50s Flamingo in Santa Rosa has hosted celebrities, hookers and families**

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Bugsy Siegel had nothing to do with the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa, a classic 1950s roadside oasis whose graceful glass and stone design was inspired by the fabled Flamingo that the dashing mobster built in the Las Vegas desert. But "Ma Barker" has enjoyed a long association with the seductive Santa Rosa resort.

She's a former San Francisco barkeep who was given her notorious nickname by the guys she kept out of trouble at Cotter's Corner on Mission Street. She's been checking into the Flamingo as Ma Barker for about 40 years, one of the flock that returns every year to this lovely, laid-back spot that seems to transport visitors to some endless early-'60s summer.

You half expect to see Dean Martin lounging poolside with a blonde and a martini, or sauntering through the curving glass-enclosed hallways, along polished flagstone paths framed by bands of plant-dotted white rocks.

But there's nothing retro about the Flamingo, where you can sit under a giant sycamore or cedar and watch kids cavort in the pool as the big pink neon bird revolves atop the landmark 50-foot pinkish-beige tower. This is the real thing: a piece of midcentury motor-land modernism -- call it L.A. Corbusier roadside architecture with a Frank Lloyd Wright desert-stone touch -- set amid manicured gardens beneath a canopy of conifers.

The Flamingo has had its highs and lows -- Santa Rosa society partied there in the late '50s and '60s, and ladies of the night opted for the hourly rate in the '70s -- interior upgrades and expansions. "But the feeling hasn't changed," says Maureen Schueszler, a.k.a. Ma Barker, a saucy 70-year-old San Ramon retiree who gets together with a gang of old friends at the Flamingo for a week every August.

They don't get a heat on and carry on the way they used to -- it's been ages since somebody grabbed a rose, jumped into the pool fully clothed and did a Spanish dance -- but they still indulge in the serene summer pleasures of a place that feels oddly reassuring in these anxious times.

" You come out of the San Francisco fog, go up to the Flamingo and it's like you're in Hawaii," Schueszler says. "It's your own little haven."

That's what Hugh Coddling had in mind when he built the Flamingo in '57. The Santa Rosa real estate developer, who went on to build shopping malls, homes and churches around town, liked the Flamingo in Vegas and set out to build a similarly sleek resort in Santa Rosa, without the casino.

" I admired that hotel," says Coddling, 87, whose partners in the venture included a Nevada hotel man named Frank Hofeus, who'd had a hand in Vegas' old Hacienda Hotel (it was imploded in '96). Coddling can't recall who designed the Santa Rosa Flamingo, but says it was the same architect who designed the Hacienda. Unfortunately, the designer's name doesn't even appear in the architectural archives at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas library.

Whoever it was, his design for the Santa Rosa hotel clearly owes a debt to the original Vegas Flamingo designed by the Los Angeles modernist architect George Vernon Russell. (The famous neon champagne tower that signified the casino for many years was installed during a 1953 remodel, six years after Bugsy Siegel was gunned down in his Beverly Hills home.)

The original Flamingo's clean horizontal lines, curving glass curtain walls and planes of rugged, staggered stone -- not to mention the tower with the name "Flamingo" written vertically -- are echoed in the Santa Rosa hotel.

The Flamingo in Vegas, which opened in '46, "combined two different trends: the vernacular motel and the modern styles developing in Los Angeles," Alan Hess wrote in his book "Viva Las Vegas: After Hours Architecture." The Flamingo and the casinos that followed were influenced by the work of modernist L.A. architects like Richard Neutra and John Lautner, says Hess, particularly sleek nightclubs like the Lautner-designed Coffee Dan's, and the Trocadero, which Russell had remodeled for Hollywood entrepreneur Billy Wilkerson.

Wilkerson hired Russell to design the swank Vegas resort that became the Flamingo; in need of cash, he took on investors, among them the mobster Siegel, who pushed Wilkerson out of the picture.

A decade later, Coddling ran short of cash and had to drop out of the Santa Rosa Flamingo project, although he later developed large chunks of the town. He says nobody from the Vegas operation ever hassled him about

using the Flamingo name, although decades later the Hilton, which owns the current Vegas Flamingo, tried unsuccessfully to get the Santa Rosa resort to change its name.

The hotel opened with a gala bash featuring comedian George Fenneman. "The whole town turned out," says Santa Rosa Press Democrat columnist Gaye LeBaron, who attended the gala with her boyfriend, Press Democrat photographer John LeBaron, to whom she's been married for 47 years.

"In the early days, the Flamingo was the social center for what passed for society in Santa Rosa," says LeBaron. "Hugh Coddington, his current wife and his entourage would sweep into the room."

LeBaron belongs to the adjoining health club and spa that current owner Pierre Ehret built in the late '80s to bring in the locals and subsidize the hotel. She swims in the 25-meter pool, noting the people who now patronize the place: families with little kids, Africans and Europeans touring the Wine Country, burly cops and forestry workers attending conferences.

The clientele was less diverse, of course, in 1959, when the property was sold to a group that included Chicago hotel man James D. Harvey. He put the Flamingo on the map as the place to stay north of the Bay. Movie stars like Jayne Mansfield bunked there when they were in the area.

The Flamingo changed hands a number of times, and by the mid-'70s was in shabby shape. In '78, after the city threatened to shut down the hotel unless it got a seismic retrofit, the then-owners decided to close and sell the place. Werner Ehret, a German entrepreneur who, among other things, had introduced gum-ball machines to Germany after World War II, snapped up the 12-acre property for \$2.4 million, not much more than it was built for in '57.

Ehret had just bought a big cattle ranch in Calistoga to complement the one he owned in Calgary. "The real estate agent said to himself, 'I have a sucker on my hands, I might as well try to sell him more,'" said Ehret's son Pierre, a former Wall Street banker who took over the Flamingo in '88 and now runs the family's international business. Among other things, he owns a boutique hotel in Berlin called Louisa's Place, and has converted the Calistoga cattle ranch into a 450-acre vineyard that grows Cabernet, Malbec, Merlot and other grapes for Beringer and other wineries.

His late father loved the Flamingo grounds and set to work restoring the 160-room hotel. He retrofitted the concrete structure, gutted and refurbished the interiors and hired Jerry Davis to run the food and beverage operation.

"The place was in disrepair, a \$3 cathouse. Werner spent a lot of love, time and energy putting it together," said Davis, a onetime Bahamas casino manager who hasn't worked at the Flamingo for two decades but gets together with his family there every few years.

An amusing chap with a bushy reddish-gray mustache and a taste for tropical shirts and blue tennies, Davis, 70, checked into the Flamingo last weekend with 20 family members: two of his four kids, a handful of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, spouses and cousins. They were celebrating the 53rd birthday of his daughter Cynthia, a Grass Valley acupuncturist.

"It's a cool place. I don't know if it's nostalgia, but people feel comfortable here," Davis said. "Pierre has kept the tradition alive. It's been family owned and operated for 25 years," a rarity in the chain-run hotel business.

Davis hired most of the staff when the Flamingo reopened in '79 because Werner Ehret barely spoke English. He hired waitress Victoria Sledge -- "like sledgehammer but drop the hammer," she says -- after asking one question: Do you speak German? She said yes, and has been working there ever since.

Scott Hixson first set foot in the Flamingo eight months ago, but he's been captivated by the place his entire life. A Santa Rosa native who used to work as a guard at San Quentin, where he served Charles Manson breakfast for three years, the 6-foot-6 Hixson now works for the security firm that contracts with the Flamingo. Last Saturday night, he was checking IDs and stamping hands at the entrance to the hotel's neon-lit lounge, where mostly locals come on the weekends to dance to rock and funk bands and mingle with the opposite sex.

"The Flamingo symbolized mystery and money," Hixson said. "The rich and shameless always stayed here. It reminds me of Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack. Look around. That's all original. It's beautiful. This is one of the only original businesses still left in Santa Rosa. The El Rancho Tropicana (where the Oakland Raiders used to practice and party) is gone. This is the last stand."

Fortunately for those who love the Flamingo, Ehret has no plans to sell the 12-acre property, which would undoubtedly fetch a large sum.

"I'm very intrigued and in love with this place myself," says Ehret, 47, a muscular man who used to race Formula Three cars but now races Porsche GTs on the American LeMans circuit and in Europe.

"People come back because they like the ambience," says Ehret, who laughingly calls himself a Kraut, and attributes his perfectionism to his Teutonic background. He was the guy who got the pink flamingo back up and rotating in 1996, when the city declared it a landmark. "We treat people like family here."

Sunday morning, some of the Davis clan was having coffee poolside. The patriarch was chatting with his grandson Gabriel Stricker, a 32-year-old New York management consultant who wrote the book "Mao in the Boardroom." The next day, he was heading off to the Burning Man bacchanal in the Nevada desert, a far cry from the serene scene at the Flamingo.

"That's tribal," Stricker said with a smile "This is family."