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The Townhouse

Moonshine to Caviar: The History of an Emeryville Landmark.

By Laura Barnoski

“What can I get you?” the bartender asks a smartly dressed young woman as she sits on the black and red barstool and hooks her right heel into the brass rail. She surveys the bottles behind him Chivas, Dewar's, Stolli, Absolut, Bombay, Cuervo - all neatly lined up on two brightly lit shelves.

Looking for something with less of a bite, she sees the wine selections, handwritten in white crayon on antique mirrors behind the bar. “89 Cambria Chardonnay \$6.50” reads one of the mirrors. She opts for something less expensive.

“I’ll have a Samuel Adams,” she decides as she reaches for a pretzel and looks over at a painting by a local Emeryville artist. The bartender, Paul Harrington, a 24 year-old Berkeley architecture student with a clean shave and a ponytail-heads for the tap.

“You new around here?” he asks her as he sets down a napkin and a pint of Samuel Adams on the zinc-covered bar.

“I moved here a couple of months ago. Heard about the Townhouse from a friend of mine. He says it has quite a history.”

“You're right about that,” Paul answers as he tosses her a postcard and heads for the end of the bar where a slightly balding man in a business suit orders an Absolut on ice. On the postcard is a Townhouse that the woman barely recognizes as the one she has just entered. A decrepit looking wooden shack is depicted there - what used to be Vernetti's Townhouse at 5862 Doyle Street in Emeryville.

She turns the card over to find the caption: *“All right youz guys, you’re covered! Vernetti’s Townhouse has been covering you with what you want since Father Joe Vernetti established this pleasure semi-palace in 1926. The dames and the dice are semi-out now, but the delectable food is definitely in!”*

The Townhouse has had a number of lives. What began as a bootlegging house built and rented out by fireman Frank Mesnickow in the 1920's became Vernetti's Townhouse - a neighborhood bar and restaurant - from 1936 until 1977. Sold in 1977, it then evolved into a country-western bar and political hangout that lasted until 1988.

Now an upscale restaurant specializing in dishes from fresh sautéed oysters to wild mushroom risotto, the Townhouse has a history that was dictated by changes occurring around it. These changes range from minor shifts in musical styles to the massive change

of Emeryville from an industrial hub to a commercial area that many young professionals and artists call home.

"It was a bootlegging place back in the '20s," says Johnny Silva, a 75 year-old resident of Emeryville who grew up in a house directly behind the Townhouse. "A guy named Blackie use to run it," he explains as he takes his daily stroll around the streets of east Emeryville.

A veteran of prohibition, Johnny Silva got his training with alcohol at an early age. He regularly hid 5-gallon cans of liquor from the "feds" in the hay behind his house, and got expelled from school at age 12. His charge: Bringing a can of gin to school and getting his classmates drunk. "When I saw those 1928 Buicks coming," he says over the noise of the Powell Street traffic, "I'd run from place to place to warn everybody."

An experienced bootlegger himself, Joe Vernetti moved down the street from his uncle Tony Fracchia's Cottage Inn – a bootlegging place at 1310-67th Street and began renting the building on Doyle that he would open in 1936 as Vernetti's Townhouse. "It was a place where the old gang could hang out," says Silva as he adjusts his cap over his shoulder-length gray hair. "We would have bourbons and beers and sing old-time songs."

Johnny remembers the days before landfill when the Bay's water extended nearly to the Townhouse. "We used to sit and watch the bay for floating logs," he says. "We'd go out in a boat and get them to use in Joe's big fireplace."

More than a place for immediate neighbors, the Townhouse was a favorite with the working men of industrial Emeryville. "I'd go in every payday," Johnny says, reminiscing about his days working in the "Butchertown" section of Emeryville. "Joe was a nice fella. He'd cash our checks and give us bourbon and water."

Joe added a restaurant to his bar in the '40s. "He left it old and rustic outside, didn't paint or spruce it up," says Joe's 46 year-old son, Rod, who at one time worked as a bartender at the Townhouse. Speaking of the old west, boxing, and horseracing paraphernalia that decorated the dark wood walls, Rod says, "My mother, sister, and I picked that stuff up in Grass Valley, Lake Tahoe, and the mining country."

"Walking into Vernetti's Townhouse was like walking onto the set of an old western," recalls customer Al Horowitz. With its windows boarded up, the Townhouse was dark at every hour. Large wagon wheels were among the restaurant's trademarks, and saddles were hung throughout the place. From their positions on the walls, mooseheads with mighty antlers surveyed Joe's clientele.

Next to the mooseheads and saddles were mementos of Joe's other two loves - boxing and horseracing white photo of "The Great Jeffries-Johnson Contest for the Heavyweight Championship Held at Reno, Nevada July 4th 1910" narrated the fight from "Round 1" to "Round 15" to "The Knockout". Wearing only boxing gloves and what look like a 1910

rendition of today's biking shorts, Jeffries and Johnson were two masses of colliding white flesh.

Scattered around these portraits of flesh were yellowing photos of horses, trainers, jockeys, and racetracks. Joe's largest collection, hung in a frame several feet long, included a photo captioned "Oakland Racetrack - Burns Handicap 1907". Surrounding the old Emeryville track's cheering crowds were other pictures of Joe's racetrack friends - men in three-piece suits and cigarette-puffing women in dark red lipstick.

"My dad was pretty close with the track people," says Rod Verneti. "He opened the kitchen to attract them from the track after they ran their horses." Joe's plan proved successful, as his bar and restaurant served such turf celebrities as Willy Shoemaker as well as visiting entertainers like Harry James, Betty Grable, and Tony Curtis. The Townhouse created a down-to-earth, family atmosphere that the celebrities loved. Even Joe's cocktail napkins - pieces of a roll of toilet paper he kept behind the bar showed off his down-home humor.

Establishing himself outside the bar, Joe was also a founding member of the East Bay Society of Gentlemen Chefs. "If I were ever to go into the restaurant business, Joe would be the guy I'd like to have as a partner," says Mitch Hoffman, Joe's friend and a fellow Gentleman Chef.

Having met Verneti in 1947, Mitch describes him as "a laugh a minute," then adds "He was a tough guy, though. Nobody'd fool around with Joe."

"We'd all wear our chef's hats at our luncheons," Mitch remembers as he leans back in his yellow terry cloth shirt and blue sweatsuit. Another feature of the Townhouse walls, pictures of the Gentleman Chef include one of "Chef Ray Burns, Chief Onion Peeler" and "Chef Frank Nicholas, Hotel Claremont" Photographed in front of one of Joe's saddles, Ray and Frank smiled in enjoyment of their full stomachs. Joe too donned his chef's hat for some pictures. Prominent under his white hat were the dark hair and eyebrows of a pure Italian. "We were a real gung-ho club," confirms Hoffman.

Describing Joe as "a great gambler" who frequented Reno and Las Vegas, Mitch says, "We played cards in his place. People would also shake dice at the bar."

Despite Joe's application for a card room license from the City Council, none was given to him. "The boundaries for legalized gambling went directly around the Townhouse," says ex-Emeryville Police Chief and former Townhouse customer John LaCoste. "For some reason the city didn't want Joe to have a license," LaCoste adds. "Looking at the boundary maps, it's so obvious, you have to laugh."

"Sure, there was some gambling at the Townhouse," says Rod Verneti, who actually lived in a cottage out back for five years. Rubbing his finger over the dark eyebrows he inherited from his father, he says, "Emeryville was wide open in those days."

Besides rumors of gambling there were also rumors of women. But Johnny Silva denies that Joe Verneti was involved. "Chubby Turner ran a brothel next door to the Townhouse," says Johnny. "Joe didn't really care."

Confirming that Joe's customers often dropped in on Chubby and his three "hostesses", Johnny says he didn't mind living behind Chubby's. "It didn't bother me," he says in his slight Portuguese accent.

The Townhouse was also known for stories about its bartenders. Johnny remembers Joe's first bartender. "His name was Chuck," he says as he fixes the collar of his brown checkered shirt. "He had one arm. Lost the other one in a lumber mill." This handicap didn't hinder Johnny's ever-present bourbon and water, though. "He was a good bartender," Silva adds.

In 1946, bartender Raymond Henderson could work with both arms, but not for long. "On the night of March 31," says Rod, "My dad had just left the bar as three youths came in for some drinks." Pulling out a sawed-off shotgun, one of the men shot Henderson in the chest and stole a total of \$2700 from six customers. "Raymond identified the killer while he lay dying," Rod explains as he looks at the yellowed Oakland Tribune clipping in front of him, "but they never found him."

"We didn't have any real problems again until the late '50s," Rod recalls as he shifts his large body in his wooden dining room chair. He remembers a night in '59 when some burglars made a hole in the ceiling and stole two German luger pistols and a German helmet. "My father was pretty upset," says Rod. "One of his friends gave those to him." Also getting away with \$47 from the register and a good amount of liquor, the burglars prompted Joe to have his place wired.

In 1970, Joe finally bought the Townhouse from Frank Mesnickow. But plagued with high blood pressure in 1977, he decided to sell his self-made Emeryville landmark. Still living about twelve blocks away in Emeryville, Rod admits, "I was sad to see the change."

While Joe and his wife Peggy retired in Silverado, developers Tom Wenaas and Jim Carnitato took over the Townhouse. Tom and Jim kept all of Joe's memorabilia and the name Verneti's Townhouse, but added a new dimension to the Townhouse's country-western style.

More items of western lore were added to the dark wood walls. A long board with a snakeskin nailed onto it hung close to the door. "54 Inch Diamond back by Steve Rose 1978" read the green felt tip caption. Completed with a head and a rattle in the same felt tip pen, Rose's piece left little to the imagination.

"There was so much crap hanging from the ceilings," recalls former waitress Marilyn Farnsworth. And under the "crap" were various beer posters and bumper stickers. A favorite with customers was one of the bumper stickers behind the bar: "Cowgirls Are For Riding."

Aside from adding these nuances, Tom and Jim built a larger and more efficient kitchen. Attracting the growing number of Emeryville businessmen with specialties like "The Cattleman's Sandwich" and "Townhouse Chicken", the Townhouse had a busy lunch crowd.

To keep their place crowded well into the night, Tom and Jim decided to turn the Townhouse into a real country-western bar, introducing nightly entertainment and dancing to hot country-western bands. In the era of John Travolta's "Urban Cowboy", their business boomed.

By 1982, the Townhouse and its music were so popular with country-western buffs that club talent booker Ken Greenberg put together an album entitled "Townhouse Live!" Including such bands as the Texas Chainsaw Band and Chuck Wagon and the Wheels, the album featured such tunes as "Beer Drinkin' and Hell Raisin'" and "Drunk and Asleep at the Bar."

Besides attracting country-western fans, the Townhouse was also a hub of political activity. Frequented by Tom's and Jim's friend and business associate, then-Police Chief John LaCoste, the Townhouse became known by what John recalls as "City Hall East."

"What I remember about the Townhouse was that John lived there," says Emeryville Fire Chief Ray Vittori. A staunch Democrat, John was known for entertaining politicians and holding meetings and fundraisers at the Townhouses.

"I filled the void of City Manager to a large degree," John explains, referring to the beginning of Emeryville's period of commercial development. "I dealt with businessmen who wouldn't normally meet at the Police Chief's office." Among his guests were Evan Dobelle, one of President Carter's campaign aides; Hamilton Jordan, Carter's White House Chief of Staff; and Chip Carter, the President's son.

"They loved it - We all did," recalls LaCoste. "As you can tell," he says, referring to his red cowboy boots and blue corduroy cowboy style jacket, "I've always been a cowboy at heart."

LaCoste's history with the Townhouse goes back to its early days. "Frank Mesnickow was my uncle," he says, referring to the building's original owner. "Uncle Frank used to have a fish pond where the gravel parking lot is now," John explains. "I broke my shoulder playing ball there once."

Although he has lived in Emeryville for all of his life, LaCoste admits that he didn't become a regular at the Townhouse until 1977. Offered ownership by his aunt when his uncle died, LaCoste declined because "bars and law enforcement don't mix." He may have rethought his answer years later, spending much of his time at the Townhouse drinking Chivas and playing video games.

The place that Jim and Tom owned added to the volume of Townhouse lore. Added to Rod's old cottage were a jacuzzi and a two-way mirror. Spanning one whole wall, the view through the smoky gray mirror is through a secret shelf that pulls out of the wall of the adjoining room.

"I knew about the jacuzzi, but not the mirror," LaCoste says. "I'm not surprised, though," he adds with a laugh.

Joe's fireplace also got some unorthodox use one night when a drunk attorney made advances at a married woman and got knocked into it. "I don't think it counts very much because he was an attorney," John says with a laugh as he pours more cream in his coffee.

"There was also an older guy who died, but not in a fight or anything," John remembers. "Rand McFarley. He was a customer there for so long that he used to act as a host sometimes. There's a plate on the bar top with his name on it."

Besides a colorful clientele that ranged from three-piece suits to Harley Davidson riders, the Townhouse also had unique employees. "There was a very peculiar waitress," says Marilyn. "Her name was Cindy Lee, and she had very large breasts. I heard she had a picture of herself topless and would let customers see it for a dollar ."

Townhouse customers were greeted by more than Cindy Lee and her ample bosom. Next to the front door, a black and white dog would lounge day and night, sometimes waking up to check out newcomers. Asleep most of the time, the dog soon lay under a sign that reassured customers "This Dog Is Not Dead."

Despite this unprecedented success of the Townhouse, Tom and Jim were forced to sell it to Lathrop Construction in 1982 when Tom was charged with embezzling \$7 million from the company. Closed for a year, the Townhouse was eventually sold to Bob McManus, a 44 year-old Oakland attorney. Reopened in 1983 with a five day celebration that included free country dance lessons, it attracted old customers whose response was "Thanks for not changing it."

While the tradition continued, the Townhouse did not return to its former success. "Skip Anderson took it over temporarily in 1987," recalls John LaCoste, "but he couldn't get a cabaret license." Closed in 1987, the Townhouse sat unused and untouched while the "Urban Cowboy" trend fizzled under Emeryville's influx of biotechnology firms, young professionals, and artists.

In September of 1989, workers at Clean Environment Engineers on Doyle Street watched in amazement when a dark haired Frenchman began to repair, clean up, and paint what was once Verneti's Townhouse. Giving the building an antique-looking off-white finish and hanging a new sign done by a French artist friend of his, Joseph LeBrun saved the name but changed the concept.

The new menu and the presence of daylight in the restaurant has attracted many new customers for LeBrun and his partner, Chef Ellen Hope. Describing the new Townhouse as "A Grill with Funky Charm," critic Janet Fletcher of the Oakland Tribune writes, "The grilled half-chicken is exceptional here, browned and juicy and showered with stewed garlic cloves." She adds, "I think Hope and LeBrun are onto something."

Whatever the two are "on to," the old regulars can't seem to give up the Townhouse either. "The way it was couldn't have lasted," admits Mitch Hoffman. Remembering a recent dinner he had there, he adds, "I'm amazingly pleased with what Joseph did to it."

While LeBrun adds the finishing touches to the intricate flower arrangements that he creates for the restaurant every week, a new regular in Levi's and a button-down shirt strides through the red front door and takes a seat at the bar.

"Hi, Paul," he says. "I'll have one of your famous martinis." At the other end of the bar, another customer looks around, taking in all the new decor. The walls around him are quiet, yet they hold many secrets.