

Lots Shakin' in the Marina

VF SF - MARINA Chron 5-5-94

BY SAM WHITING

Chronicle Staff Writer

As an experiment in sociology, San Francisco's Marina District will solve the restaurant riddle of the '90s: How many coffee bars, burrito bars and bistros can one neighborhood withstand?

By the end of May, five new restaurants are scheduled to open along the Chestnut Street strip: three coffeehouse/cafes, a fresh Mex place with mesquite rotisserie chicken and the latest concept — a pasta bar. These will complement the six Italian trattorias, five espresso stands and four taquerias that are al-

ready up and running — or at least standing. If this train keeps rolling, the Marina may have to be declared a double-latte abatement district.

"They've taken a perfectly good crummy neighborhood," joked one observer, "and ruined it."

The transmogrification of the Marina from a traditional Italian enclave with a Lions Club pancake breakfast to a newly chic dining and drinking district fueled by 24-year-olds, is rooted in the Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989. Home to countless yuppies in the '80s, many of the densely populated corner apartment buildings col-

lapsed onto their garages or had to be vacated for retrofitting. Old-timers, middle-timers and even new-timers got to solid ground and never returned.

Chestnut Street was given up for dead, but Angela Alioto stood at a rally and shook her purple-painted fingernails in defiance. When the rental buildings reopened, they were like spanking new dormitories, with plenty of cozy studios for the young and frisky, fresh from college. One apartment building at Divisadero and North Point came to be known as Club Paradise, with blenders whirring and piña colada par-

MARINA: Page E9 Col. 1



BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE

Nighttime skaters frequent Chestnut Street in the Marina, which has risen like a yuppie phoenix from the quake's ashes

MARINA: Drenched in Double Lattes

From Page E1

ties on the roof.

A typical first-floor apartment in the Club had two female tenants, but it seemed like 10 with all the comings and goings and hair dryers blasting. They moved out and a group of guys claimed their apartment and an adjacent one.

"The doors are always open and you see them yelling down the hall," says Dave Hawk, 30, an upstairs resident. "There's always a ruckus going on, and they're always inviting everyone in the building."

Some Marina regulars snicker that their humble neighborhood became suddenly fancy after the quake. The national media sensation described it as "posh," and the gullible decided it must be, and invaded.

The post-graduate pipeline, combined with the windsurfing fad, has turned the Marina into a cross between a college town, like Davis or San Luis Obispo, and a surf town, like Newport Beach, where people drive around with a board on the roof rack and wear shorts — even into the bars at night.

"The old businesses can't compete with the left-lane pace of the yuppies," says Max Applegarth, who will try to meld the old with the new at his Caffe Centro, a hip European-style bistro offering lunch, dinner and, of course, the Marina lifeblood — weekend brunch.

"You get 10 different places serving brunch, you still wouldn't be able to serve them all," he says of the demand.

The Marina commercial district has no restaurant restrictions, unlike Union and Fillmore streets, the Castro and Upper Haight, where new food services are prohibited unless one eatery closes and another opens on the same site. Chestnut could conceivably be cafes end to end and up the side streets to Lombard.

Feeding Off the Traffic

"People see traffic down there, and they like to feed off the traffic," says Jerry Moscovitz, a long-time leasing agent. "The crowds down there attract even more people."

When a trend works, everybody else wants a piece. "Until the lines fall, I'll assume there's room for it," says Jeff Saad, 26, co-owner of the sweltering Sweet Heat fish taco house on Steiner off Chestnut. On May 17, Caffe Centro will spread its Bohemian spirit to a former gourmet picnic store three doors down from Sweet Heat.

A few weeks later Andale Taqueria, a 65-seat Mexican restaurant with proven success on the Peninsula, is expected to open around the corner on Chestnut, followed by Pasta Pomadora, a 20-

seat counter offering noodles from Cafe Adriano on Fillmore.

This boom in competition "just raises the neighborhood a notch further," says Saad.

Applegarth, 30, San Francisco born and raised, is sinking \$100,000 into his Caffe Centro, and will have 45 seats inside, with a tasteful tile floor and bar built of two-by-fours stacked like Lincoln Logs. Mark Millstein, 36, another San Francisco native, is also sinking \$100,000 into a similar cafe called the Grove, at Chestnut and Avila, where Willow clothing couldn't cut it. Meanwhile the Coffee Roastery, with 40 seats, will open a block beyond the Grove.

"You know how many sushi bars there are in Japantown?" says Matt Holmes, a real estate agent who works with chain operations. "That's how many coffee bars there will be on Chestnut."

The Marina is comparatively so clean and orderly that the local eccentric, who walks in traffic up one side of Chestnut and down the other, wears horn-rims and a sports coat over a white shirt and tie.

Polite homeless entrepreneurs sweep the sidewalks for tips, and what passes for graffiti is a neatly written message on a plywood construction door: "Jerry Healy is the greatest rugby player I know."

"I come over here sometimes just because there isn't garbage, but you don't get any diversity here," says Maria Graham, 24, who lives in the Mission.

She visits the Marina on weekend nights and has noticed that when groups of people ramble



Robin Hartback (left) and Alyssa Lyons, both of Marin County, say the Paragon Bar & Cafe is 'definitely a hot spot'

down the street, everybody in the group is dressed exactly alike, with the same haircuts.

Starbucks Invasion

The homogenization became apparent in December 1992 when Holmes inserted Starbucks in the space of Ratto's Hardware, which closed earlier in the year after a half-century run. The Marina Toy Chest folded last week after 28 years, and See's Candy will end its 46-year stint by summer.

Rumors of which mom and pop shop will be next to fall are traveling like the 30-Stockton. Word on the street is: After moving its distinctive neon down the block to Chestnut and Steiner in 1992 to make way for Noah's Bagels, Hunt's Donuts is closing for good, seduced by the rental offers for its space, which it owns.

Marina Day & Nite grocery is giving way to the Pottery Barn, which will in turn free its corner space at Fillmore and Chestnut to its parent, Williams-Sonoma. Victor's Market is closing in a year, leaving only the Marina Super, which is mostly known as a produce market.

"We're losing the mix here is what's happening," says Richard Schenone, owner of the Wine Shop, with 25 years on the street. "We've got five coffeehouses and no bakery. You want to get a birthday cake, it's not in the neighborhood."

The Paragon Bar & Cafe was the first big post-quake blockbuster, opening in November 1991. Then came both Starbucks and Noah's Bagels in December 1992.

On September 25, the 30-seat Sweet Heat opened, offering Mexican food prepared by fashion models. It followed by just a week the 80-seat Cafe Marimba, which announced its arrival at the old Eppler's Bakery site with hourlong waits and twin palm trees on the sidewalk, creating an entry of a grandeur that hadn't been seen since the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition for which the Marina was landfilled.

On a warm night it still feels like a waterfront fair on the cozy strip, with the young and the tanned flowing along Chestnut in waves, filling both sidewalks and often spilling into the street.

Last month, the Paragon — formerly Paul's Saloon, a bluegrass bar with a roaring fire and nobody to warm — threw a UC Davis alumni party, and the back flow had 25 people still waiting in line at 11 p.m. on a Tuesday night.

Closer to the weekend, the narrow barrooms at the Horseshoe and Marina Lounge become so jammed that people draw a deep breath before walking through the door.

Signs of Change

Even the venerable Windows — promising "Beverages for Adults" — is showing signs of change. When the door opens, a whiff of strong beverages for adults still wafts out with the smoke, but Windows now has a CD jukebox. This has some of the regulars testy because "King of the Road," the bar sing-along theme song, is not yet out on CD.

Those who don't want to fight

the drinking crowds sit in the coffee bars to witness the promenade.

"I'm a big people watcher, and it's great," says Joanna Sullivan, 26, a former Marina resident who now comes over from San Rafael. On a Thursday evening, Sullivan and Sue Cochran, 28, sit at an open window at Starbucks, leaning up against the rail as if the sidewalk were a racetrack.

"If you're going to come to the city at night," Sullivan says, "it's one of the nicest places to walk around."

"I'm just amazed at the audacity of the people in front of Noah's Bagels," says Hawk. "It's the No. 1 power struggle in the Marina right now — the buses vs. the preppies."

A secondary struggle is the generation war between the perky upstarts and the aging burghers who don't like to see their neighborhood overrun.

One crank in brown polyester seems always to be lying in wait to attempt citizen's arrest when somebody takes a bike or Rollerblades onto the sidewalk.

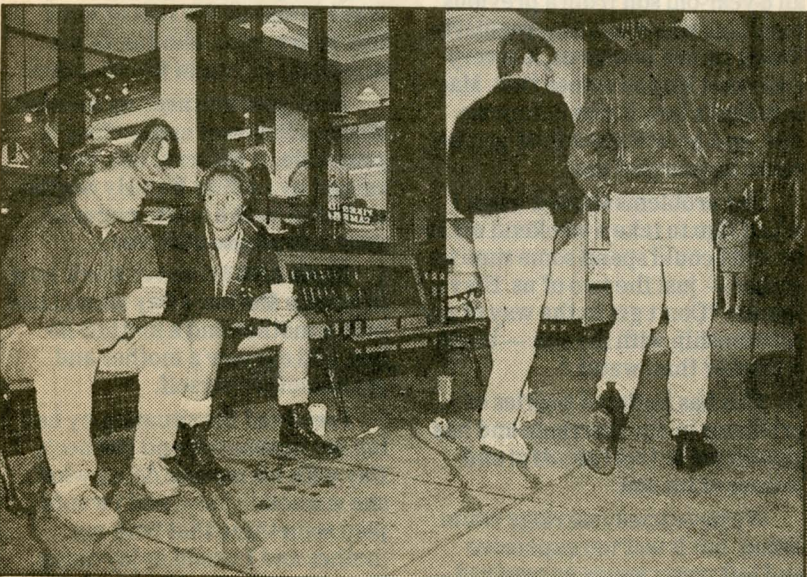
The dives, like Danny's, Daddy Paul's and K's Cocktails, retain their salty charm, with six people spread out at the bar and a cloud of smoke overhead. If a group of loud partiers in college sweatshirts and madras shorts barge in, they will quickly be made to feel they're crowding the regulars, even with three empty barstools on either side. The smoky bars, dark restaurants and quirky knickknack shops are apparently not under pressure to meet the escalating rents. If they are, they'll be pushed out soon enough.

High Rents

"I hate to see the traditional shops go, but the landlords can't refuse the high rents that these corporations are able to pay," says Linda Bosco Fioretti, 29, a third-generation proprietor of Lucca Delicatessen. "But at least the neighborhood is healthy and you don't see a lot of empty storefronts."

If the chains — like Starbucks and even the Supercuts that is to open this spring — keep coming, attracted by the crowds of young spenders, the people who form these crowds might be turned off by the tacky shopping mall atmosphere and stay away.

"Chestnut has always been more local, where people aren't afraid to go out," says Moscovitz. "I hope success doesn't spoil the street."



Tysinn Ghia (left) and Jeni Vitale of Santa Cruz like to go to Chestnut Street because it is 'festive, active, friendly'

PHOTOS BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE