Original article in S. F .--Miscellaneous V. F.

PAMPHLET FILE BR. 26

CORTH BEAGH-THE BEAT

"What you should do," said big Jim Lucky at Vesuvio's, his beefy fist clutching a man-size glass of beer, "is rent a room at Sam Wong's Hotel and live down here. Hear that guy preaching gibberish at Columbus and Broadway. Meet the characters. Wander the alleys, hang out in the coffeehouses, drink wine at the little Italian joints. Really eat, sleep and breathe North Beach to get the feel of it."

Now, that sounds great just Jack Kerouac's ghost and I, making the rounds of San Francisco's favorite nocturnal stamping ground. For the 12 years I've lived in this city, the first thing I do when friends come to town is plan an excursion to North Beach. We stuff ourselves with linguine, talk art in the bohemian dives and people-watch over cappuccino. Strolling among Broadway's girlie clubs, I tell them how Carol Doda, the silicone queen, used to dance on a piano that descended from the ceiling of the Condor Club. now closed.

North Beach, like Montmartre and the French Quarter, is one of those romantic, rebellious neighborhoods right in the center of town with terrible parking. You can walk there from Chinatown, Fisherman's Wharf or the downtown financial district. But don't look for the beach; it vanished under landfill long ago. Hike

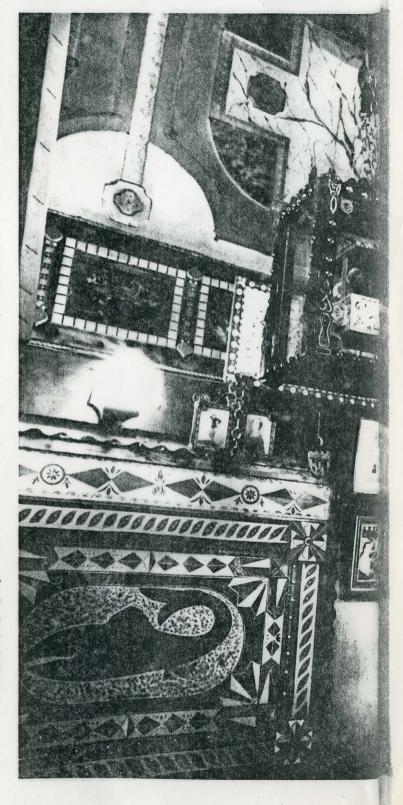
down the neon-streaked diagonal of Columbus Avenue and follow the smell of garlic into a maze of streets and lanes that pant up Telegraph Hill, where old Coit Tower stands like a sort of Tower of Pisa that doesn't lean.

North Beach grew from the sweat and spaghetti of hardworking Italian immigrants. You can still buy bocce balls at Figoni Hardware, open since 1924, and homemade sausage at pungent Molinari's Delicatessen, dating from 1896. Spurts of Italian still animate many cafés, and even the whoosh of the espresso machines seems to have an Italian accent.

Yesterday's Little Italy is now a multi-ethnic enclave, however. When Italians began moving out in the 1950s, beat poets and Asians moved in. Over time, some well-loved institutions expired. Jerry Dal Bozzo, owner of Calzone's restaurant, calls today's upscale North Beach a "yuppie neighborhood with an Italian flavor."

But North Beach is better than that. After a night at the Washington Square Inn, the area's most gracious bed-andbreakfast, North Beach came alive for me in a human way. I saw Asians doing morning t'ai

Just as in the rest of North Beach, too much is never enough at Caffè Sport, where owner Antonio La Tona tidies up.



BY REBECCA BRUNS PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN LOENGARD





chi in Washington Square, the heart of North Beach and the city's most beautiful plaza. I spied an old couple sharing their breakfast from a paper bag. I heard a grandmother belting out "That's Amore" at the Caffè Trieste.

Jim Lucky is right. North Beach gets under your skin, not just as an entertainment district and a microcosm of creativity, preservation of the past, and superb food-but as a schmaltzy old character in its own right. Where can you find so much sentimentality, such heart, anymore in the naked city? Come meet the North Beach that locals know and love-its coffeehouses, watering holes, shops, nightlife and restaurants-and the people who bring them to life.

A COUPLE OF **COFFEEHOUSES**

The coffeehouse is the social nucleus of North Beach. Misunderstood geniuses nurse their dreams in some 25 North Beach cafés—or caffès—as the beatniks did in the Fifties. Into this laid-back scene the Caffè Roma (414 Columbus Ave.; telephone 415-391-8584) introduced a gleam of elegance: light-flooded picture windows, a patio and murals of rosy cherubs baking, serving coffee, rolling dough and scattering candies in a Titianesque nirvana that melts into the ceiling and the coffeescented air.

Owner Sergio Azzollini and his wife, Angela, opened the

Left: Sandro Veronesi, a young poet from Rome, has an audience with the High Priest of Hip, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, at his City Lights Bookstore. Above: T'ai chi in Washington Square; scenes of the city at the base of Coit Tower.







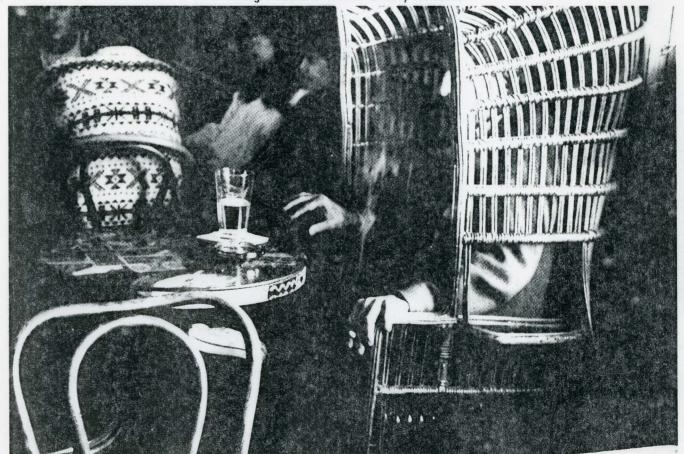
Coffee, tea—or in some minor cases, ennui—at Caffè Roma.



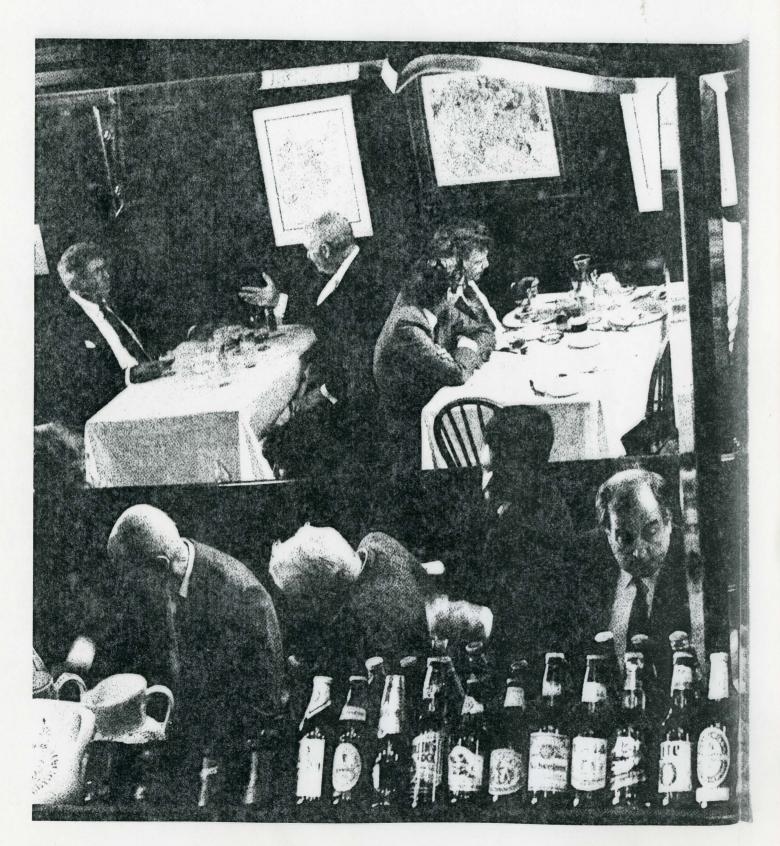
A salute to the city that's heads above the rest, from Beach Blanket Babylon.



Having a wonderful time at Quantity Postcards.



Hiding out at a favorite hangout, Vesuvio Café.







Roma 16 years ago after falling in love with the murals, painted in the early 1900s when the building housed the Nebbia Pastry Shop. They've restored the murals twice since launching their big coffeehouse in the sky. To sit down to the sublime eggplant parmigiana, pasta primavera or succulent pizza is to join the angels. A meal for two costs about \$40 without wine.

No place taps the old-fashioned family fervor of North Beach like the Caffè Trieste (601 Vallejo St.; 392-6739; no credit cards). A friend of mine ventured across town every Saturday for 10 years to have his coffee here. Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac gave readings in the 1960s. Francis Ford Coppola reportedly hid in a corner for three months to write the Godfather III script (his studio is at Columbus Tower, a quirky pie-wedge of a building up the street).

Nobody stands on ceremony. Behind the counter, a rouge-cheeked Mama places plump éclairs in a glass case, licking a whipped-cream glob off her finger. Customers—with a mix of ponytails, rumpled suits and little gold glasses—share the tables. Run by the lovable Giotta family, the (Continued on page 194)

Left: Reflections of the lunchtime ritual at the Washington Square Bar & Grill. Top: A pretty girl, the nightly ruse at Finocchio's.

NORTH BEACH

(Continued from page 121)

Trieste has probably changed less since it opened in 1957 than those creaky social halls in the Old Country. The first coffee-house on the West Coast—same yellowed mural of a Sicilian fishing village, same pawed newspapers—it will probably outlive them all.

You don't go there for the food—the pastries and pizza look like bad cardboard-but the coffees are good. And the Saturday afternoon concerts, starting at around one, beat anything short of a transatlantic trip to a real Italian beer garden. The whole Giotta family sings, and customers dance in the aisles. Gianfranco, the eldest son, gives old standards like "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" the real Tony Bennett treatment, his gold pinkie ring flashing as he lets the audience know that "it's okay to cry, folks." When Yolanda, mistress of éclairs, comes on in her brown vinyl apron for "Romagna Mia," the crowd goes wild and the young girl blooms in her blushing face. Ida, a stylish matron with bouffant hair and ample chin, softens every heart with her slightly off-key version of "La Vie en Rose"—in Italian, of course.

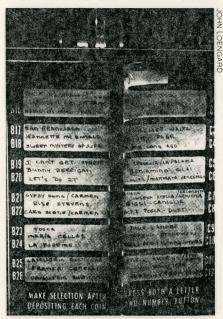
"If every world leader came here on a Saturday afternoon, we could solve the world's problems," says David Wise, who sells albums of the show. Cappuccino costs \$1.70, wine \$2.25.

MUST-STOP SHOPS

Eight giant dead grasshoppers slung on a pole between two hunters. Flying swine. Andre the musical contortionist playing banjo with his feet wrapped around his head. Marilyn, naturally, at every stage of her career. They're all at Quantity Postcards (1441 Grant Ave.; 986-8866), an odd shop, wallpapered with about 10,000 other selections, that is a pithy-correspondent's dream-or a word-hog's nightmare. Walk in and marvel at the sheer specialization of the inventory. Owner Willy Landesman hatched the idea from a trunk of old postcards in his dad's barn in Missouri. His 12-year-old shop, almost a museum, elevates the postcard

to a tongue-in-cheek art form. Even sober cards, eulogizing Mom and the squeaky-clean nuclear family, absorb the outrageous quality of the others to become little parodies of themselves. Cards range in price from a nickel to \$100.

A chic ceramic shop like **Biordi Art Imports** (412 Columbus; 392-8096) is a real sitting duck in quake-prone San Francisco. Yet not one of its festive bowls, roosters, tiles, plates or pasta dishes, all hand-painted in Italy, took a tumble during the 1989 tremor that cracked the Bay Bridge and toppled freeways. Owner Gianfranco Savio, however, recalls how exactly a year later, on October 17, 1990, a terracotta frieze fell and shattered several



B23: Callas sings Tosca at Tosca.

vases. Delayed reaction? After all, the store has been on Mediterranean time since it opened in 1946.

Majolica pieces glow along the walls in hues reminiscent of the medieval Italian hill towns where they're made: sky blue, buttery gold, turquoise, rust red, honey brown. Their arabesque designs hark back to the Islamic-influenced Spanish island of Majorca, whose traders first brought Italy majolica pottery, usually made from strong red clay and fired twice to a lustrous finish. I love the whimsical landscapes of the Amalfi coast on tiny tiles by Luciano, and his rendition of San Francisco's Victorians as little turreted castles. Prices range from \$11 for a tile to \$7,000 for a fireplace mantel.

"If it were famous but not comfortable, I'd never come back," says a visitor who's spent hours in the Beat Section Poetry Room at City Lights Bookstore (261 Columbus Ave.; 362-8193), San Francisco's most celebrated literary outpost—and the only one in town with heavy weekend traffic till midnight.

Named for the Charlie Chaplin film, City Lights was America's first all-paper-back outlet at a time when paperbacks weren't considered real books. Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti opened the place in 1953 to support his literary magazine, also called *City Lights*, but so many booklovers and beatnik-stalkers showed up that no one could shut the door. The magazine eventually folded, but the store more than quadrupled in size.

Wandering among its 43,000 volumes, I always feel the whacked-out irreverent vibes of artists who've read here, and always spot browsers who look like William Burroughs or Charles Bukowski. City Lights excels at avant-gardism and even publishes its own contemporary works. The early Pocket Poets Series, showcasing Ferlinghetti's poems, skyrocketed when Ginsberg's controversial *Howl and Other Poems* was released. Performance artist Karen Finley recently packed the house reading from her new *Shock Treatment*, another City Lights title.

THE FLAVOR OF NORTH BEACH

The photocopied menus, plastic breadbaskets, chunky-junky wineglasses, and waiters in T-shirts suggest an indoor picnic, not a chichi bistro. Still, Caffè Sport (574 Green St.; 981-1251; no credit cards; closed Sunday and Monday) is the hottest Italian culinary circus in town.

Feast your eyes on the interior decor. Owner/chef/decorator Antonio La Tona, trained in wood restoration, has turned this cramped restaurant into a Sistine Chapel of kitsch. Painted pots, decoupaged tabletops, wine racks, carousel poles, miniature chariots cover every nook in a gilded chaos that makes it hard to concentrate on the food.

The first time I ate here I was seated at one of the communal tables, with everybody's elbows in one another's pasta. The

NORTH BEACH

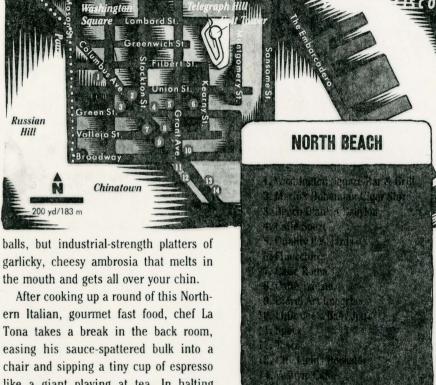
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second time around, the waiters were so curt I felt like giving 'em a meatball in the eye. The third time, a wonderful waiter danced around with steaming plates and declared, "Everybody leaves happy."

You cannot eat the pasta all'aragosta (lobster), scampi all'Antonio (prawns with zucchini and white garlic sauce) or melanzane palermo (eggplant parmigiana by any other name) without rejoicing that you were born—and praying that you won't die from overeating. These are no wimpy servings garnished with melon

that's hailed for its open kitchen. Aproned Pavarottis behind the counter used to be famous for breaking into "Santa Lucia" while sautéing skilletfuls of calamari. Lately the chorus has leveled out to more percussive arrangements—fiery sizzles and musical fork-taps on glasses that call the waitresses to pick up their orders. Some customers drum their napkin holders in reply, sounding like Shriners at a convention, but mostly they're busy shoveling down the rigatoni.

Owner Franco Montarello designed all the recipes, picked up from his mother and his own restaurant adventures ("Hey, I can do better than this"). Born in Genoa, he was a garbage collector before



ern Italian, gourmet fast food, chef La Tona takes a break in the back room, easing his sauce-spattered bulk into a chair and sipping a tiny cup of espresso like a giant playing at tea. In halting English (he's been in America for only 25 years), he recounts his past as a cook in Sicily and the 1969 opening of Caffè Sport ("I name it Sport because is easy to remember"). His face lights up as he takes out a photo of his five-year-old son (a spitting image) and cries, "I love him so much! My baby eat only pasta and fish." Caffè Sport fare. Lucky kid. Lunch or dinner for two costs about \$45, and reservations are essential.

"Rain or shine, there's always a line," goes the saying at Little Joe's/Baby Joe's (523 Broadway; 982-7639; no credit cards; closed Monday), the unfancy eatery

taking over the first Little Joe's on Columbus in 1971 and moving to bigger premises in 1982 to feed the hungry herds. Everyone falls for the two specialties, *gamberoni napoli* (linguine with prawns, mushrooms and tomatoes in a white wine garlic sauce) and *cacciucco* (savory seafood stew). Dinner for two is only about \$30.

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

"Lovely girl, that boy," says Tommi Rose as a foxy singer leaves the stage. Tommi,

burs from a white slit dress, adjusts his breasts, muttering, "C'mon, they'll think you're nuts," and warns the crowd, "If this girdle goes, half of you are going with me." The antics at Finocchio's (506 Broadway: 982-9388: usually closed Monday-Wednesday but call ahead for schedules) are part of San Francisco's longestrunning floor show and its only ongoing drag show. "It started in the 1930s when people at Dad's downtown bar put on wigs and impersonated women for laughs," says Concetta Jorgensen, Joe Finocchio's daughter, who works at the club. "Some customers come in the footsteps of their grandparents who saw the show long ago," she says. Tourists often cram the 350 seats, staying through all three shows for the price of one.

And the performance itself? A glitzy, funny whirl of song, dance, dirty jokes and remarkably sleek thighs. Johnny Velez swings a voluptuous head of hair and strips down to a beaded bikini. Kelly Michaels, "official fake Madonna of the Bay Area," does an amazing lip-sync/ dance routine in pointy bra and bleached hair (his own). J. J. Van Dyck, as a bawdy granny with fly-swatter lashes, advises the ladies, "Knockers up, perky, perky!" And a big hand for Tommi Rose, the sassy emcee with 400 costumes, who works by day (like most of the performers) as a hospital administrator. Admission is \$15; there are three shows a night.

Hamlet it ain't, but for campy fun nobody does it better than Beach Blanket Babylon (678 Green St.; 421-4222). This musical extravaganza masterminded by Steve Silver has passed the Ziegfeld Follies in number of performances: more than 5,000 since its 1974 debut. The show keeps changing, and crowds keep coming. A versatile 10-person cast lights up the Club Fugazi, an old Italian community hall, with insane song-and-dance numbers, celebrity spoofs and what has to be the world's leading collection of huge, hilarious hats.

The show's story line is simple: Dorothy (of Oz) is searching the world for love. En route, she meets the king of France prancing around in a sky-scraping pink wig, and a host of rabbis singing "Have a Tequila" (to the tune of "Hava Nagila").

The finale features an 8½-foot-high headdress displaying the San Francisco skyline. The show costs \$15-\$27 per person, depending on when you go, and reservations are necessary.

WATERING HOLES

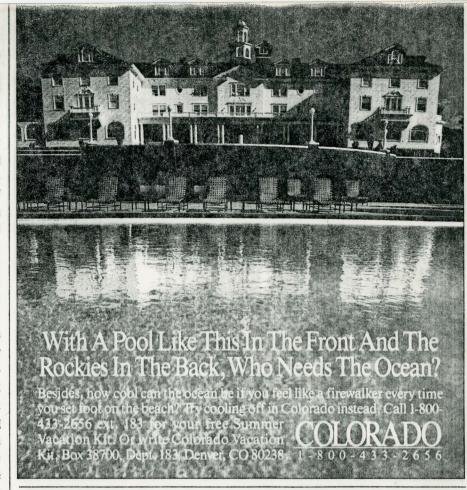
The Washington Square Bar & Grill (1707 Powell St.; 982-8123) is the ultimate watering hole for the elite—TV newscasters Walter Cronkite and Tom Brokaw, ex-mayor Dianne Feinstein, local columnist Herb Caen—and beautiful people looking for the elite. Media mavens favor the Washbag probably because they've heard it's where they're supposed to hang out.

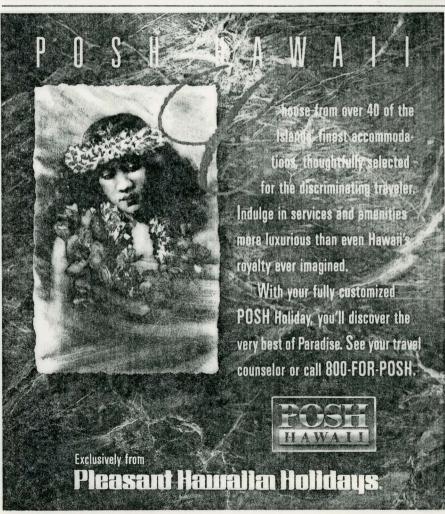
What's the saloon's secret? Red walls and likable food do not a success story make. The late columnist Stanton Delaplane once wrote, "You could make a grocery store of the place." He called it faceless. "Ah, but there's something here," he added. "It's a feeling. . . . In places like these, talent bounces on the trampoline of glory." Some attribute the long-running success to the social skills of ex-proprietor Ed Moose, who after 17 years sold the place in 1989 to Peter Lomax. So far it's still thriving.

I've never seen it less than packed. Well-coiffed hairdos and gold earrings mingle with distinguished gray temples and bald spots in the standing-room-only aisle by the bar. Above the low roar of conversation, an upright piano tinkles out tunes like "Blame It on My Youth." Dick Fregulia, one of the club's several pianists, loves the way "the world comes to me"—truer at the Washbag than at any other place in North Beach. Dinner for two costs about \$50.

"Yes, I remember Kerouac," says the bartender at Tosca (242 Columbus; 391-1244; no credit cards), lining up 30 cappuccino glasses along the bar. "After two drinks he'd turn into an idiot. In fact, I started drinking after I met Kerouac."

You hear stories of Bob Dylan, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and, more recently, Coppola and Sam Shepard with pal Chuck Yeager (of *Right Stuff* fame) gravitating toward this dark film noir bar, a classic long before its time. A writer could easily conjure up Cosa Nostra cronies plotting in





NORTH BEACH

the back booths over cigarette smoke and shots of whiskey, with strains of Caruso and Callas crackling from the 1948 jukebox. Old Italians still drift in and slouch on the barstools, talking quietly. Tosca has seen them come and go since it opened in 1919.

From the entrance, the long mahogany bar seems to stretch away into the past. anchored at either end by massive espresso machines from the early Thirties. Murky paintings cover a darkened wall with scenes from the opera Tosca. In a private back room, owner Jeanette Etheredge keeps a pool table for friends-"You almost have to be God to use it," says an insider.

Tosca's vintage gentility has a calming effect. It's rarely overcrowded. The house cappuccinos—a warm blend of chocolate, steamed milk and brandy-go down easy. The venerable arias rise above the thump of the disco next door. Like a solid tree, Tosca just gets better with age. Cappuccinos cost \$3.50, martinis \$3.

"All they need here is a fire-eater," says a friend as we sit in the back of Specs (12 Saroyan, in The Alley; 421-

4112: no credit cards) while a stream of North Beach eccentrics passes by. A handwriting analyst reads my scribbles and my palm (I have lots of luck, but am a procrastinator-me?). A toothless man selling chopsticks shakes his tin can in our faces. A graying hippie sells us a left-wing newspaper for a quarter. Millie the flower lady whacks a guy on the arm and says, of his date, "Give her a rose!"

At various times a joss temple, speakeasy, fishermen's club and lesbian bar, Specs lives on in an 80-year-old building tucked in an alley, the most offbeat of the old offbeat bars. You don't fit in unless you have a beard, angry poetry manuscripts in your closet or acid flashbacks.

It's a dusty archive of glass-cased curios: a whale's eardrum, phallic African statues, a 1929 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica-all gathered by owner Richard Simmons (Specs himself) or his customers. The low ceiling and brick walls create a cozy cocoon for discussing social injustice, unemployment and the good old days. Wine is only \$2, mixed drinks \$2.50 and up.

Mario's Bohemian Cigar Store (566 Columbus Ave.; 362-0536) is a fancy name for a hole-in-the-wall chow house, and it doesn't even sell cigars anymore. But the linoleum-topped bar and half-

es never lack for diners, "It's homey and comfortable," says manager Julie Crismani. "We don't rush people: it's still a neighborhood café." She remembers the old-timers who used to play cards, drink wine and puff Italian cigars-De Noboli, Parodi, Toscanellifrom behind the counter. Nobody knows exactly how old Mario's is; the building records burned in the 1906 quake.

In 1971 Mario Crismani added his name to the shingle and began serving food that sparked an instant following. The eggplant and meatball focaccia sandwiches crunch and ooze with cheese, onions and marinara sauce. And caloriecounters, beware of Mario's apple turnovers and lemony cheesecake. Sandwiches are \$4.75 and up; desserts

Sitting near James Joyce's photo on the upper balcony of Vesuvio Café (255 Columbus Ave.; 362-3370; no credit cards), you can gaze into the gas flames of the old crystal chandelier and slip back to the glory days of smoke-filled poetry readings and the anti-establishment fervor that fired the later hippie movement. Except for those intrusions, Vesuvio's hasn't changed much since 1948, its peeling painted windows and dim interior "in a pleasant state of arrested decay," as

S. F. DAY TRIPS (Continued from page 113)

office, which has helpful brochures and maps. Then amble down the tree-shaded street, past real estate offices and restaurants, a record store, a kids' clothing boutique, a stationery shop, a bookstore and newsstand. One intriguing stop is the Real Food Company, a kind of New Age general store where you can pick up such Sausalito staples as tofu cookies, sundried tomatoes and sushi rolls, plus a bottle of Mendocino's Red Tail Ale or a blueberry banana smoothie.

Plan on breakfast at Fred's Place (1917 Bridgeway; 332-4575; \$5 to \$10). At this busy 5-table, 12-stool restaurant, lawvers in pinstripes chow down pancakes and hash browns elbow to elbow with artists in shorts and T-shirts.

Another distinctly Sausalito site is the

Casa Madrona hotel and restaurant (801 Bridgeway, 94965; 332-0502), a multistoried complex that climbs from Bridgeway into the hills. Lunch in the airy, glassenclosed restaurant exemplifies the magic of Marin: To your right the towers of San Francisco shine like some celestial citadel, to your left hillside evergreens wave, in front of you dance the white masts and blue coverings of yachts in Sausalito harbor, and in the distance gleam the green hills and million-dollar houses of Belvedere. Lunch costs \$18-\$40. dinner \$40-\$80. Note: Casa Madrona's 34 comfortable rooms offer an alternative to San Francisco hotels. Rates run from \$95 to \$300.

Getting There: If you can, go by ferry and enjoy the wind, water traffic and fabulous views of San Francisco and Alcatraz. Travel time: 25 minutes. For more information, call 332-6600.

You can also get to Sausalito by bus or car from San Francisco. By car, cross the Golden Gate Bridge and get off at the Alexander Avenue exit a half-mile beyond the bridge. Follow Alexander Avenue until it becomes Bridgeway; then stay on Bridgeway right into the heart of town. For bus schedules, call the Golden Gate Transit Authority at 332-6600. Total time:

TIBURON AND ANGEL ISLAND

Tiburon is one of the Bay Area's most

one write-up recently described it.

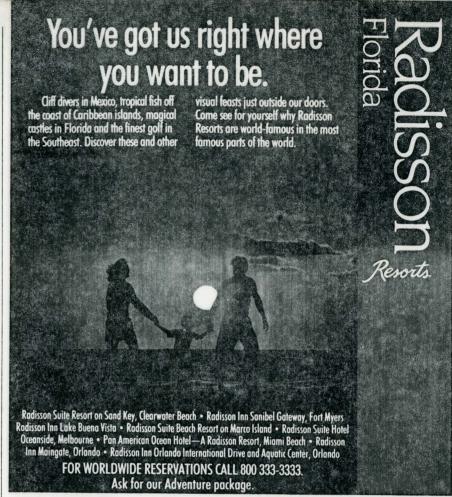
Its walls have filled up with the work of "easel weasels" who traded their art for wine. Today, the bar is a collage of canvases and memorabilia like the Beatnik Kit ("Don't Envy Beatniks, Be One"). Though this grand old dame now draws a cleaner-cut crowd, enough Commiepinko-artist-spy-weirdos still keep the place rumbling.

Jim Lucky, who works here, can tell stories by the hour about Vesuvio's founder Henri Lenoir ("nine days older than dirt and wears the same beret he wore in 1956"), Carol Doda ("I knew her when she was a 34B"), Kerouac and Ginsberg ("both lost in the abyss of civilization, they didn't know they carried the turmoil inside them"), sometime poet Paddy O'Sullivan ("he came back one day with no hand, said it was bitten off by a tiger in India") and "enough characters to satisfy Damon Runyon for the next 200 years." Bohemian Coffee (brandy and amaretto) is \$3, or try a Jack Kerouac (tequila, rum, orange and cranberry juice) for the same price.

Now I see why Lucky always returns to North Beach after nomading around the world. "There's a mystique here, a camaraderie I've found nowhere else on earth." ◀◀

desirable addresses, and a little backroads roaming will take you past spectacular houses with equally spectacular bay views-and price tags to match.

Just 15 minutes from Tiburon, Angel Island—the largest island in the bay, 10 times the size of Alcatraz-offers a delightful combination of history, vista and wildness. Some visitors simply set their picnic baskets on the wide green lawn at Ayala Cove, where the ferry docks, and savor the scent of pine, the swish of the sea and the stately homes and bright harbor of Tiburon a mile away. Others go straight to the ranger station behind the lawn, where displays detail the island's historic roles as military site, quarantine center and immigration processing station. Those with energy explore the is-

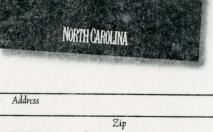


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