

TRAVELS WITH THE MULLALLYS



PHOTOS BY DAVID MULLALLY — SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

New decks with front row seats to inhale the coastal view at The Sea Ranch Lodge.

A Central Coast hospitality A-Team relocates to The Sea Ranch

My last memory of the Sea Ranch Lodge was dinner on a blustery December evening in 2018 wondering why the only heat source was a small electric space heater. Shortly thereafter, the neglected property closed its doors leaving everyone to wonder about the future of the iconic gathering place as rumors of an imminent rescue by a private group floated up and down the coast.

By early 2019, the Lodge and 20 guest rooms sitting on 53 oceanfront acres was officially under new ownership. The sigh of relief was almost audible when the ownership group demonstrated an understanding and appreciation for the development's guiding principles of good land stewardship. They pledged to preserve the lodge's architectural integrity while resuscitating it as the heart of The Sea Ranch community.

Sixty years after the secluded development became "the California architectural monument of the 1960s designed to be in harmony with the natural elements," Sea Ranch's 10 miles of inspiring dramatic coastline remain protected and the original concept still prevails. Earlier this month when the lodge announced its reopening after an almost three-year restoration process, my husband David and I headed north basking in perfect Indian summer temperatures along Sonoma County's back roads.

Occidental was a charming little one-street hamlet on our way to Guerneville, gateway to the Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve. The Russian River corridor of redwoods and pine-shaded cabins exuded a Big Sur vibe as we approached the rustic enclave lined with quaint art galleries



Executive Chef Eric Piacentine assures plate perfection in the kitchen, The Sea Ranch Lodge.



The Sea Ranch Lodge flaunts its revitalized exterior.

and funky shops. Like Big Sur, Guerneville stands at the edge of a pristine natural realm vulnerable to flood and fire and the Reserve was still recovering from last year's blaze.

We snaked along Highway

I's precipitous cliffs to The Sea Ranch Lodge hoping to steal a few minutes with Executive Chef Eric Piacentine before dinner. The lodge flaunted its new redwood exterior, fresh landscaping and oceanfront

decks. Inside, the General Store showcased logo apparel, gift items and snacks. The new café featured a menu of enticing breakfast goodies and light lunch items. We stepped down

MULLALLY » PAGE 3

WHERE IT'S AT

Thorogood visits ready to destroy

You know what I like about George Thorogood?

He's a wisecracking funny guy who also loves rock and roll. Pretense is nonexistent in his repertoire, just straight-shooting from the hip. No belly button gazing, only a passion for giving his fans what they come to expect

from him, a rocking good time. While he jokes around about his guitar playing expertise, at 71-years-of-age he knows a thing or two about the music business and why he's in it. If there was anyone who personifies the journeyman musician, it's George Thorogood.

Case in point. The song titles and what he sings about. What you'll hear on his "Good To Be Bad Tour: 45 Years Of Rock," making a stop Nov. 12 at the Golden State Theatre, are the songs you've heard before, whether it be on the radio and MTV, on your music listening device, or at a live show. "Bad to the Bone," "Move It On Over," "I Drink Alone," "Who Do You Love," "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer," and maybe some songs you've heard Bo Diddley, Stevie Ray Vaughan or the Rolling Stones do. While his music is described as blues-rock, he doesn't claim to be a torchbearer for either of those idioms.

"I'm just Thorogood and I go up there and play my tunes for the people who dig 'em," he said point-blank. "As far as me carrying on something, the only thing I'm carrying on is the tradition of certain rock bands from the late 60s, early 70s, like Steppenwolf, or Savoy Brown, The J. Geils Band, Canned Heat. I don't know if I'm even carrying on that tradition, I just come out of that format. Bo Diddley and I once did a blues festival over in Maryland, and we were sharing a trailer, and I said, 'Bo, I don't know why they keep calling me up to play these blues festivals. I can't play blues,' and Bo went, 'Neither can I.'"

So he gets me laughing and I mention to him that his longevity on the touring circuit is close to rivaling the Rolling Stones.

"Ha ha!" he exhaled with force. "Well, I learned from them. What were the proper things to study, because I wanted to play the guitar like Keith Richards and sing like Mick Jagger, and I wanted my hair to look like Brian Jones. I said to myself, 'So if you're going to do this man, you'd better get into Jimmy Reed and Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and Robert Johnson.' Once I did, it was like a drug. I fell in love with that music. I was so fortunate. I like to tell people if you consider people like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Elvin Bishop and Steve Miller, I went to the same college that those guys did. They graduated with honors, I squeaked by with a C+."

Even though Thorogood is one of America's great A-Team bar bands, with the kind of music that boogies hard and sells beers, he is a product of the pop culture that popularized the blues. He understands that artists who go on to be major rock stars more often than not start with a love of the blues. They may not be playing the songs of their idols anymore, because they've gone on to another rung on the ladder and built a repu-

PEERLESS » PAGE 2

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Occidental is cloaked in fall colors along the Bohemian Highway.

Mullally

FROM PAGE 1

to the lounge now buzzing with animated fireside conversations across from a jazz trio. Late afternoon light flooded the room and picture windows framed the Pacific panorama of meadows and rocky bluffs outlined by white water. Floor to ceiling natural wood warmed the lofty space in contrast to the bar's cozy nook.

I spotted a head of blond curls in the open kitchen and introduced myself to Executive Chef Eric Piacentine. In the few minutes before his attention darted back to the dinner bustle, I learned that he had been at Bernardus Lodge for eight years and Big Sur Bakery for four years just before being seduced by The Sea Ranch.

"I was ready for a new adventure and felt an instant familiar attraction, great enough to uproot me from Big Sur," Piacentine said about Sea Ranch.

When I asked what he had brought from Big Sur, his northern Italian blue eyes twinkled with a smile and he replied, "my dimples and my fiancée, Julie Rossi, now the Lodge's food and beverage manager."

Piacentine's goal is to offer a "welcoming" experience with "elevated comfort food." His focus is on "local and seasonal" and in an isolated area like Sea Ranch, "local" rises to a whole new and sometimes challenging level. Piacentine works with commercial purveyors, but local fishermen and friends with gardens also play a role in creating menus. The process is dynamic and organic to adjust to the unexpected.

I didn't realize how deeply connected The Sea Ranch Lodge team was to the Monterey Peninsula until I met Kristina Jetton, general manager, Rachel Schanding, director of sales and catering, and Jennifer Rodriguez, catering manager. Carmel Valley Ranch and Ventana had long threaded this tight-knit mission-driven team together. Schanding had put the Sea Ranch bug in Jetton's ear, and Jetton lured Piacentine and



Downtown Guerneville is a blend of quaint and funky shops and art galleries.

Rossi. The Monterey Peninsula is a hospitality industry treasure trove of talent and some savvy person in the ownership chain of command obviously figured out that assembling an A-team was key to making the Lodge's comeback a success.

Until the unveiling of the renovated guest rooms expected in 2023, overnight travelers will have to rely on The Sea Ranch bank of vacation rentals and small motels in the town of Gualala. There are plans to design flex space into the guest room revitalization project along with ideas to incorporate temporary meadow glamping options for special events.

The other building block in the Lodge's long-term plans is David Hillmer, a respected local general contractor and project manager whose reputation and lightning efficiency combined with exceptional interpersonal skills and solid connections are serving the enterprise well to negotiate hurdles and explore solutions to scant employee housing.

Another Central Coast contingent in attendance was artist Erin Lee Gaffill from Nepenthe and her husband Tom, whose energy was infusing the guests with Big Sur spirit. Gaffill's work launched

the Lodge's first pop-up art show that evening. I remembered being enchanted by her work a year ago admiring Gaffill's Big Sur landscapes with red barns in Sea Ranch's Lyndondesign Gallery.

We were having such a good time that I almost forgot we were actually there to eat! David and I finally sat to savor an outstanding dinner beginning with seared diver scallops and late harvest tomato soup appetizers. The tart apple salad with Gravenstein apples and white cheddar was perfectly seasonal. The cipollini onions with David's prime beef filet excited my taste buds as much as the potato risotto with my baked salmon. As a dessert lover, I couldn't resist the apple galette and caramel sauce anymore than David could stay away from the salted chocolate with elderberry syrup.

Maybe it was sugar-induced euphoria, but walking back to our coastal cabin under a cloak of stars and Sea Ranch magic, I thought I felt a caress of Big Sur bliss.

Linda B. Mullally and husband David share their passion for travel, outdoor recreation and dogs through articles, hiking books and photography at www.lindabmullally.com, Falcon.com and Facebook.



PHOTOS BY DAVID MULLALLY — SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

The Central Coast A-Team at The Sea Ranch Lodge. L to R Jennifer Rodriguez, Kristina Jetton, Rachel Schanding, Julie Rossi, Chef Eric Piacentine, Tom and Erin Lee Gaffell.

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