

Casa Orinda Celebrates its 75th Birthday

By Sophie Bracinni

Secret fried chicken recipe, juicy steaks, ham and eggs, guns, moose head, and incredible stories make up the spirit of Casa Orinda, the oldest continuously operated restaurant in Contra Costa County. Last Wednesday, the Orinda Historical Society honored John Goyak and his sister Charlotte, present owners, as they talked about life at the Casa. The restaurant is a landmark where generations of Orinda residents and Contra Costa diners have come to eat at their favorite tables; a place where politics are discussed and romantic involvements interlace.

Jack Snow came from Montana to Orinda in the early 1930's to work on the Caldecott Tunnel. Jack was a social man, he enjoyed company and a good time and since there was not much in that category at the time in Orinda, he decided to start his own restaurant. In 1932, he opened Casa Orinda where it stands today. At the time the restaurant was surrounded by grazing land and a few trees. The bar was a rallying place for the cowboys and a location to eat and catch up with friends. There was a rotisserie in the back and you could be served chicken, beef... but no lamb. It was cowboy food, some of which can still be found there today.

John asked his brother Tommy to join in and manage the place. History has it that Tommy was a gambler and all kinds of games took place upstairs. At the time, "Crossroads" restaurants, like Casa Orinda, were considered "out of bounds," with poker and slot machines flourishing up to the



Artifacts and memorabilia from the Casa Orinda


1950's. People say that Tommy Snow might have been playing a dangerous game when in 1965 he was found murdered in his car. His killer has never been found.

Jack had to take the reins back, but he looked for a partner to manage the place. At that time the Board of Supervisors used to have dinner at the Casa after their meetings. Some say that's where the real business was done. That's how Jack met and befriended Superintendent Ivan Goyak, John and Charlotte's father, and proposed to take him on as a partner. John Goyak started part time in the kitchen when he was still a student and Charlotte did the hosting. At the time, the Casa was serving 2 breakfasts, lunch and dinner and Charlotte was practically living there. She's seen generations of Orindans and has hired many of their kids for part time jobs. In 1978, the Goyak family took full ownership of the Casa.

Charlotte went on to pursue other interests, but John stayed with the restaurant and is still managing it today. That continuity, over 75 years, explains how the original spirit was preserved. Ivan Goyak and his wife Mary retained one of the 4 apartments that sit above the Casa and when they are in town, that's where they stay.


Besides food, the charm of the Casa comes from its unique decor. When a decision was made to do away with the linens on the table, the family asked all the ranchers in the area to come with their brands and "brand" the tables. You can still see these markings today. The large rodeo paintings that can be admired in the dining rooms were commissioned by Jack Snow. When he retired, he left his gun collection, which still hangs on the wall. Today, these artifacts, the trophies, the wooden tables are the ingredients of this unique Casa Orinda atmosphere. Some aficionados call it a "home away from home."

Today, when mayors from Contra Costa meet, they have dinner at the Casa; regulars come back to their favorite table and ask for their preferred dish. Class reunions meet there, like the Miramonte class of '73 which convenes in the restaurant every five years. The tradition of hearty cowboy food is maintained and John Goyak chooses only the best ingredients available in our area for the delight of his clients and friends. New dishes are added as "daily specials" but change on the main menu only occurs once in a while. Rooted into the ranching past of Orinda, this landmark carries on into the 21st century, preserving 75 years of Lamorinda history.




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