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The Return of The Barn

By *Sophie Braccini*



Inside the new Moraga Barn at the corner of Country Club Dr. and Viader Dr. Picture courtesy of Canyon Construction

Chris Avant may have always had, in the back of his mind, the idea of returning the Moraga Barn to one of its earlier functions. Avant is the owner of Canyon Construction, a leading innovative and sustainable builder, which bought the historic 1914 Moraga Hotel to house its headquarters and transform it into a showcase of the company's craftsmanship.

Over the years, the building also served as a mercantile, a post office and a library before ending up as a bar. During Prohibition, an "n" had been added to "The Bar," stamping the place forever as the Moraga Barn. So when the Avant Canyon Group filed an application to sell alcoholic beverages with the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, long-time Moragans were hit with a feeling of dQ•vu.

"I come from a family of winemakers," confesses Avant, "where I grew up, in the Sonoma coast region, we made wine and that craft always stayed with me." It had not been the first idea when he and his team renovated the building. Canyon Construction rebuilt the Barn as close to its original design as possible, incorporating all the elements necessary to get a platinum Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

LEED is a certification of the U.S. Green building council that has defined sustainable practices in building and remodeling and rates projects at different level from LEED certified to the highest LEED platinum. "Every material we have

used is either renewable or re-used," explained Avant, "we have minimized our energy consumption by installing insulation, solar tiles and a geothermal heating and cooling system." But the road to platinum can be expensive and this time has been hard for construction companies.

In his search for diversification, Avant looked to his roots and decided to open a wine bar. On December 15th, he presented to the Moraga Planning Commission an application to open the ground floor as an upscale wine and cheese tasting bar. Seating would be provided for 43 people, with chairs at the bar, tables and sofas.

"We want to provide a wine bar featuring local vintners and micro wineries from around the world," said Avant, "a variety of cheeses will be served along with the wines." The regular hours of operation are listed as 4 p.m. to 12 a.m. The establishment would be available for special private and community events that could begin as early as 9 a.m. and close as late as 2 a.m. In front of the building a sign reading "The Barn" will be installed.

In his report, Moraga Senior Planner Richard Chamberlain indicated that the intended use was appropriate to the specific location and was consistent with the general land use and programs specified in the General Plan. The Commission approved the project presented on the 15th, and granted a parking modification since the site offers only seven parking spaces. At its January 12th meeting, the Design Review Board will examine this modification.

In the meantime Avant is moving toward the final phases of his project, contacting investors to join in the venture, either from the Lamorinda area or from Sonoma County where his family comes from. His vision includes the development of the back area of the property to invite musicians to perform; he wants to offer the place to select visual artists and even envisions that The Barn could become a hub for tours of the different wine sub-regions around us. His target opening date is mid March 2009.

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