

# Watsonville's newest building is fit for a shah

By TRACY L. BARNETT  
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Rising over the landscape of the northern Pajaro Valley like some nouveau Moorish castle, the brand-new headquarters of Monterey Mushrooms features a single word on the hand-painted tiles over the door: Kimia.

The ancient Persian word for "alchemy" evokes both the spirit of the opulent building and the vision of its mastermind, Shah Kazemi, president of Monterey Mushrooms.

Two years in the making, the Kimia Building off Highway 1 near the Airport Road exit is a business venture separate from the mushroom company. Monterey Mushrooms will rent space from the Southern California investors who bankrolled the building. The company hopes to fill other office space in the building with local tenants.

The Iranian-born Kazemi grew up in Seattle. He worked for the previous owner of Monterey Mushrooms, and bought the company in 1979. He doubled its yields the next year. The company's size has quadrupled over the past 26 years, and Kazemi has nurtured it to its position as the largest mushroom producer in the country.

Kazemi will open the Kimia Building's doors officially today at a black-tie fund-raiser for area youth programs. The \$100-a-head event will feature Persian dancers, live music, dinner and a casino and silent auction. The event was sold out weeks ago.

Those who were lucky enough to score a ticket will get an architect-led tour of the edifice. Surrounded by some 50 palm trees of assorted varieties and a lush Mediterranean landscape, the building is topped by two copper domes. Depictions of two Persian guards from the ancient city of Perisopolis, hand-painted on tiles that adorn each side of the tall cherrywood doors, greet callers with a taste of what lies inside.

More than a dozen such hand-painted tile murals decorate the walls of the building, depicting themes ranging from festive traditional dancers to ancient mythical birds. A limestone and marble staircase dominates the enormous sunlit lobby, which looks out onto a tile-lined fountain, a patio and gardens, and the new Watsonville hospital, under con-

struction in the distance.

"Nobody is crazy enough to build buildings like this anymore," said Kazemi Thursday. "I'm more of a classical than a modern thinker. To me, modern buildings have no character; they're just glass and steel."

His involvement in the building is a departure for Kazemi, who came up with the concept, persuaded The Kimia Group to invest in the structure and worked with a team in its design and construction. It was perhaps the first project that allowed him to fully use the knowledge he gained 30 years earlier when he earned an engineering degree from the University of Washington, where he also earned a masters in business administration.

Seated behind his cherrywood desk, flanked by crystal mushrooms and a window engraved with mushroom designs, Kazemi would much rather talk about people than about mushrooms.

"This building is a symbol of our faith and our confidence in the city of Watsonville, in our employees and in our company," said Kazemi.

"We'd like to try to be a positive role model, to say, 'Look what you can achieve by working hard. You just have to push the envelope.'"

He hopes the enterprise will encourage others to invest in the economically depressed city.

"Watsonville needed a shot in the arm," he said. "A lot of businesses are leaving now. ... Watsonville has not had a chance to live up to its potential."

The potential of Watsonville, its youth and its dreams are a recurring theme with Kazemi, who has invested thousands of dollars in scholarships for the children of Monterey Mushrooms workers — \$42,000 this year alone.

"I believe charity starts at home," he said. "Of course you'd like to help everyone, but you can't; so you help the people you know."

Today's fund-raiser brought in \$15,000 to bolster the coffers of several youth programs: Project Pride, Pros for Youth and Pajartots.

"A lot of our employees have been affected by the gang warfare," said Kazemi. Family members of three workers have been killed or severely injured in the ongoing conflict.

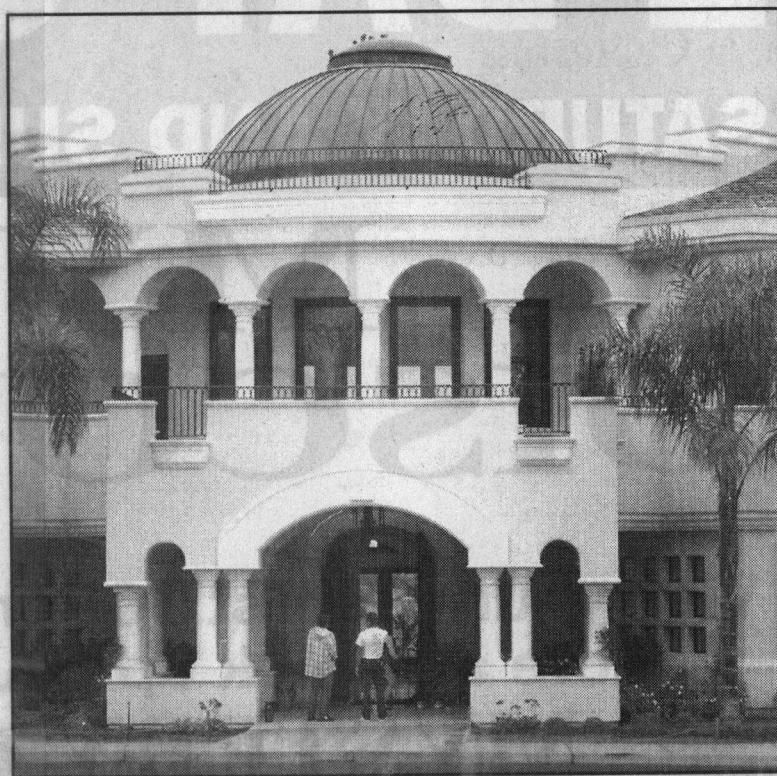
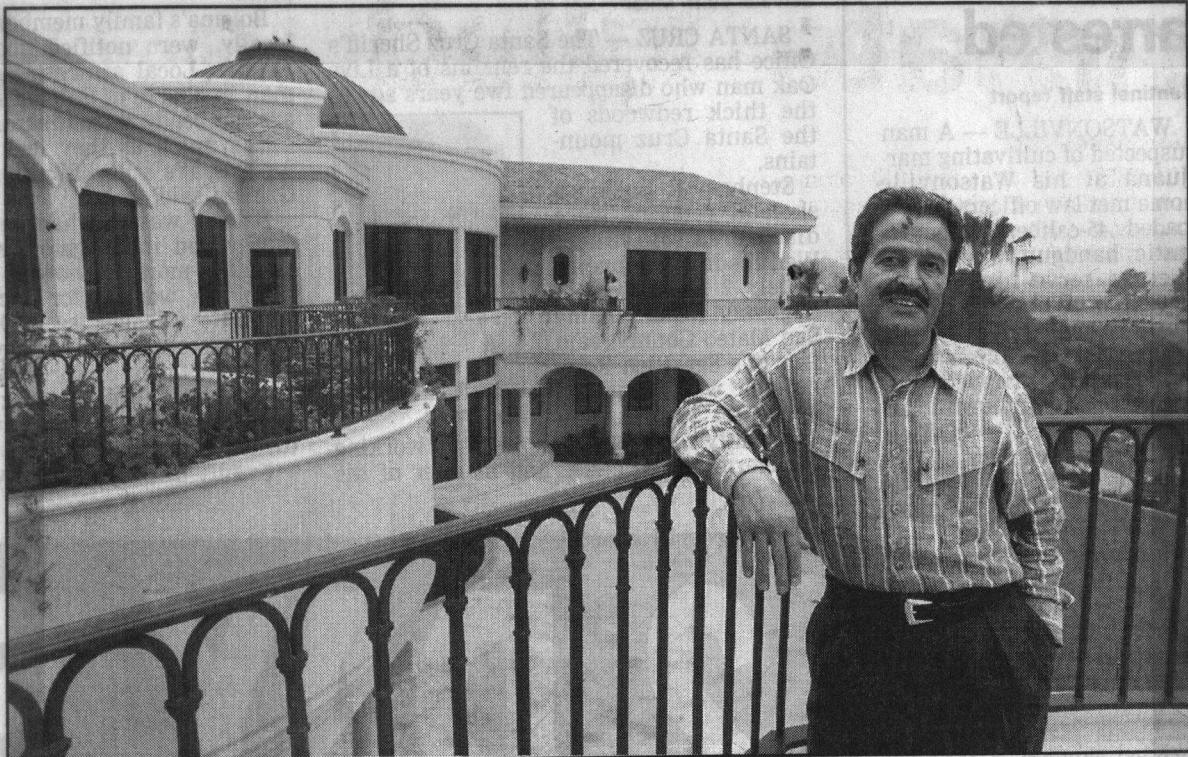
Kazemi, who was a friend of Cesar Chavez, weathered the UFW elections of 1994, and now the company is completely under contract. He describes his relations with the union as amicable, but prefers not to talk about the

subject in the face of current organizing efforts.

"I do believe you need to treat workers with respect and dignity," he said. But he goes much further than most corporate presidents. The 51-year-old frequently

joins his workers in soccer games, and an employee describes him as "a great soccer player."

"Yes, it means a lot to them," said Kazemi simply. "It means a lot to me, too."



Photos by  
Shmuel Thaler

**WATSONVILLE** — Shah Kazemi, above, president of Monterey Mushrooms, doesn't like the look of modern office buildings. So when it came time to build a new headquarters, he helped design a building that harks back to the ancient days of his native Iran. His company leases some of the office space, and tenants are being sought for the rest.