



Monique Schoenfeld

R.C. Johnston's La Selva Beach surf shop is the only one in South County.

LSB surf shop keeps it simple

R.C. Johnston is small-time businessman by design

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

THERE WAS a time when R.C. Johnston had the opportunity to expand his tiny La Selva Beach shop, by knocking down the wall between it and the place next door. What he ultimately decided was that small is better, all the way around.

Johnston has been selling surfboards, wetsuits and beach-inspired clothing out of the 200-square foot store on Playa Boulevard for seven years.

The shop is open on weekends only, but Johnston will meet people whose surf-gear

needs are pressing, at the shop during the week. It's not the road to riches, but Johnston, who teaches high school science in Morgan Hill, thinks he'll keep it that way.

"I was going to double the size," he said, "but then you'd be strapped into doing so much (business) a month...In order to really make it, you've got to have a lot of money behind you, you've got to work 50-60 hours a week. It takes all the fun out of it," he said.

Besides, Johnston, who, in the '60s, was one of the first to surf the area, wants to keep La Selva, and its waves, from being overrun.

Unlike other surf spots in the area, which, on weekends, can resemble an L.A. freeway, La Selva is still the kind of place where, Johnston said, "if you're willing to walk a couple 100 yards, you can have a peak to yourself." And the community is still the kind of place where everyone pretty much knows everyone else.

"I really didn't want La Selva to be 'discovered,'" he said. "You want to make a little money...but I don't want all the surfers coming here."

As it is now, Johnston estimates about 60 percent of his

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business is La Selva residents. The rest is from Watsonville, Gilroy and Morgan Hill, with a few tourists "who are just driving around" and stumble upon the shop. It's the only surf shop in South County.

Johnston tries to keep the help local, too, hiring mostly teen-agers from the neighborhood. It's a nice, low-stress job, and the first for many of them. Johnston said he encourages his young employees to bring their school books for the slow periods and not to feel guilty if they're not working every minute.

"It's just perfect for, like, if you've got a school assignment to do," said Scott Beale, a La Selva resident who worked at the store for two years.

"You hardly ever get five people in here all at once," said Sara Weir, a college student who is managing the store for the summer. "The best part is you can just hang out and talk to people."

Johnston's laid-back attitude towards the business shouldn't be confused with sloppiness, however. Like most surfers, he's very disciplined about the things that really matter.

Each morning, just before 6 a.m., Johnston walks down to the end of La Playa to check the surf. He then composes a surf report, including wave size, swell direction, tides, wind and overall surf conditions, which he puts on the shop's answering machine by 6. If he's out of town, Johnston has one of his employees do the report.

Other surf shops have similar reports, but Johnston's is the first each day, and the most reliable.

"I don't exaggerate," he said. "If it's three feet (in wave size), I say it's three feet."

It's hard to say how many people rely on the shop's surf report. But Johnston said he's been at the shop weekday mornings and listened to the machine taking calls every minute for hours. Even people who don't plan to surf La Selva call to get an idea of what might be happening elsewhere around the bay.

Waves at La Selva never get to the size and quality of those at Steamer Lane, and surfers can't expect the long rides they might get at Pleasure Point, but, Johnston said, the stretch of beaches around La Selva are uniquely centered in the bay to catch both north and south swells, so there's almost always

something to surf. And for locals who have the time to wait and watch the weather and the surf, there are some days of uncrowded, perfect, glassy, sizable waves.

Because the shop is small, it doesn't have a wide selection of gear. Johnston sells two local wetsuit lines — O'Neills and Hotline — and carries fins for surfboards and boogieboards, wax and stickers.

He's one of the few California carriers of boards produced by a shaper in San Miguel, Baja California. Johnston, who owns a second home in San Miguel, developed a friendship with the boardmakers there, and likes to carry the boards because they are well-made and reasonably priced.

The shop features ding repair by local surfer Marco Perez and Johnston is planning to begin work with local shaper Doug Banks for custom-made boards that can be ordered through the shop.

The shop also sells quite a few T-shirts and sweatshirts designed by Johnston with the shop's name and ocean-inspired designs. Weir said the clothing is a favorite Christmas gift for locals who want to send a bit of their hometown to friends and relatives elsewhere.

Johnston said surfing's popularity has waxed and waned during the 30 years he's been surfing. When he first began, all the local high schools, including Watsonville, had surf clubs — unofficially.

"In those days, surfers were the burnis, the gangs," he said.

When the shop first opened, surfwear was in, even for non-surfers, and the shop's business boomed. Then the fad faded somewhat.

Johnston said he thinks surfing's popularity is on the rise again. Parents now generally view the sport as healthy and wholesome and encourage their children to do it.

He expects beach wear to become popular again also, once the non-surfing kids realize that "all the cool people surf" and want to adopt the image for themselves.

Johnston bought the shop from Gary Cocroft, another local surfer, whose job demands were making it hard to run the shop. Johnston moved back to La Selva from Mt. Madonna with his wife, Gail. They now have a 3-year-old son, Ross.

Despite the longer drive to Morgan Hill, Johnston said he's glad to come home to La Selva Beach.

"I'm a lot happier having my free time here," he said.