

A Stagnaro's restaurant will reappear on wharf

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SANTA CRUZ — Skip Tara, the manager of a landmark Italian seafood establishment on the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, is not Italian.

But he talks with his hands and he's married to one of the Stagnaros — Theresa Stagnaro, a member of the city's noted pioneer Italian fishing family.

The 51-year-old Tara has worked half his life in the Santa Cruz seafood industry. That means he has had time to come to terms with one of the wharf's most pervasive constituents — the gulls.

That's why the new Stagnaro's restaurant building is going to be painted grey and white.

"The sea gulls are a very active part of the wharf. You have to deal with them on their own level," Tara says matter-of-factly, with a slight smile on his suntanned face.

Tara is the president and general manager of Stagnaro Bros. Seafood Inc., owned by John and Ernie Stagnaro. John is Tara's father-in-law. Ernie is John's brother. This is obviously a family affair.

If it looks like there's something missing on the outer end of the wharf these days, it's because there is.

THERE'S a big hole in the wharf decking at the spot where Stagnaro's restaurant and open-air fish market are supposed to be.

The restaurant had been there in various forms since 1946, but last month it was demolished so that city crews could replace the wharf's deteriorated skeleton underneath Stagnaro's.

Once the city is finished building the new pilings and decking, Stagnaro's will take charge of the restaurant reconstruction at an estimated cost of \$600,000 to \$650,000. The reopening is planned for next May, in time for the start of the 1987 tourist season.

Stagnaro's will be paying rent to the city at the rate of \$55,000 annually, or a percentage of gross sales, whichever is higher.

The percentage has been set at 4.8 percent of restaurant sales up to \$750,000 and 3 percent on sales above that and on fish-market sales.

There are going to be some changes to the building design — rounded, nautical corners, port holes and a new refrigeration unit to replace the old concrete one with the 12-inch walls that was built in the 1920s. There will be a larger dining area — 90 instead of 52 seats, and better restrooms to replace the ones upstairs "that you had to be short to get into," Tara says.

But Stagnaro's is keeping the changes to a minimum because the restaurant operators believe their customers would cold-shoulder major changes. "Our

customers tell us, 'Don't change,' " says Tara.

MEANWHILE, Stagnaro's has made some changes of a different kind at the opposite end of the wharf by opening an indoor fish-market and cafe in December at a city-built building.

Stagnaro's has taken over the space that was occupied by an Italian delicatessen and espresso cafe owned by Ray Parodi, a former city policeman who had left the force to open the wharf restaurant.

Parodi's pasta and Parmesan have been replaced by Stagnaro's bulging-eyed red snappers, tentacled squid and complacent clams.

There's a tank for live lobsters and crabs in the doorway.

The beady-eyed crustaceans eyeball their potential devourers through the aquarium glass as customers file into the fish market.

The other fish-for-sale are all dead and on ice, but guaranteed fresh, Tara vows.

"The name of the game is fresh," he says.

The "game" involves shipments of fresh and frozen fish from all over the world — from the East Coast, Hawaii, Pacific Northwest, Bodega Bay and Moss Landing. Stagnaro's is also a fish wholesaler.

LESS than 8 percent of Stagnaro's fish comes from Monterey Bay, Tara says.

The fish themselves are more than just a food commodity. They are a wharf attraction, a sightseers' delight, a part of the color on the wharf. Children can't resist touching their cloudy, bulbous, motionless eyes.

He remembers the days when Stagnaro's restaurant was just a "cocktail room."

"We still have a sign that says 'shrimp cocktails and beer — two bits' but we're not going to use it, obviously."

GRADUALLY, steamed clams, salads and sandwiches were added to the menu.

But it was a change at another landmark wharf restaurant that prompted Stagnaro's to expand into a full hot-food service, Tara says.

The change came about when the Miramar fish grotto, owned by Charles Marcenaro, remodeled into a fancier restaurant in the early 1970s.

The new Miramar was less casual than the old grotto. It emphasized view windows on the Lighthouse Point side of the wharf. No longer was its dining room highly visible to hungry people walking by the restaurant.

The result, according to Tara, was "there were a lot of people walking around looking for a place to eat." He feels Stagnaro's filled the void.

Unlike other new buildings on the Municipal Wharf, the new Stagnaro's will be owner-built. It



Stagnaro's Skip Tara keeps watch on his fishy friends and wharf happenings.

won't be built by the city, the owner of the wharf.

"It took five years to convince the city that our style of building is the best," he says.

TARA feels the city agreed to let him build his own building because of all the construction problems and delays that plagued the city's wharf restoration project in 1983-85.

Three new building shells were completed more than two years beyond schedule, and some of the work had to be redone.

Tara notes that one gift-shop owner finally moved into her business last year.

"She opened up in 1985. But she had '84 T-shirts to sell, because the city said her building would be finished in '83."

Standing next to the live lobster tank in the new indoor fish market, Tara scans the construction work. "It took the city two years to build this, and it's still not right," he concludes.

All the windows and hinges had to be replaced because the movement of the wharf wasn't taken into account when the first set of windows were installed, he says.

"I told the city, 'You're trying to build a mall on stilts,'" he says.

WHEN it comes to city politics, he speaks candidly about his landlords.

He doesn't think the City Council majority is very interested in commerce at the wharf or

anywhere else in the city for that matter.

"They're more interested in Nicaragua, parks, social services and housing people that are passing through," he says.

"When I was a kid, most of the City Council members were doctors and lawyers or business people. You didn't pick a housewife."

Tara also thinks it's somewhat "in poor taste" for council members to announce that they're socialists or "one of those (homosexuals)."

"The council should be working for the city as a community," he concludes.

THE GULLS are still coming on strong, but one well-known wharf pelican passed away five years ago.

The pelican — a notorious fish stealer — had flown into Stagnaro's in 1981 and grabbed a fish from the counter. A Stagnaro's employee hit the pelican over the head with a broom handle. The bird staggered away and fell over dead.

The District Attorney filed a charge against the employee for killing an endangered species.

The charge was dropped because it was found that the assailant had not intended to kill the pelican — he just wanted to scare it away.