

Ferns give way to Korean restaurant

Santa Cruz Bar and Grill transformed

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A WOMAN WHO moved to town when the Santa Cruz Bar and Grill was "the" happening fern bar has turned the place into what she says is the area's only Korean restaurant.

Suki Kang owns the Emi restaurant, upstairs in the historic Santa Cruz Hotel building at Cedar and Locust streets.

Kang moved to town with her husband, dentist Dari Vogel, 10 years ago when future yuppies thronged shoulder-to-shoulder to the grill's oakwood bar for Friday happy hours.

Meanwhile, downstairs, old-timers played liar's dice at the bar or ate Italian food in a dining room decorated with pictures of former Miss Californias.

The downstairs decor hasn't changed.

But upstairs, leased by Kang and extensively remodeled, is another story. The walls and ceiling are midnight blue, contrasting with crisp white tablecloths and ricepaper shades.

The silverware, vases, tablecloths, dolls and other decorations are authentically Korean, as is the *dan chung* — the wooden roof decorated with colorful Korean flags.

The last remnants of the old restaurant can be seen in the words "Bar and Grill," which appear in a brass plate over the bar and one of the stained glass windows.

"Lots of people like it — so I guess I'll keep that one piece of the old restaurant, for now," Kang said.

THE RESTAURANT'S name, pronounced "emmy," is a Korean term of endearment for in-laws, Kang said.

She chose that word, she said, "because it's a word that is disappearing... only the old generation remembers it. And it's a very beautiful word."

Kang, 32, was one class shy of receiving her degree in nursing in Seoul when she came to the states. She took a trip to Los Angeles in hopes of meeting a man in the Air Force whom she



Hard work and long hours have been routine for Emi's Suki Kang.

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had dated previously. The two had corresponded for three years, and they married soon after they met again. Kang moved to Santa Cruz, where her husband lived.

Kang has worked in local restaurants as a waitress and a cook, including the Crow's Nest, the Coconut Grove, the Acapulco and the New Riverside Szechuan, where she worked for three years.

Her first job was at the China Cafe. "I could barely speak English," she recalled.

Hard work and long hours have been routine for Kang, who has always worked one job, and usually two or three.

The restaurant is partly financed by her husband, who does carpentry in his spare time. He recently sold a house he built by himself, and the money went toward starting the Emi.

KANG EMPLOYS about 10, most of Korean background. The restaurant serves lunch and dinner. The chef is Kim Tong.

Because of the lack of available Korean workers in Santa Cruz, Kang says she has hired from Santa Clara County, where they make the reverse commute faced by Santa Cruzans.

She estimated the size of the local Korean community at 1,000, compared to 30,000 in Santa Clara County. She gets her figures from a Korean business journal published in San Jose.

"I need people who grew up with the food," she says. "It's almost impossible to train someone to understand the taste. It would take a long time."

Korean food differs from other Asian cuisines in that it uses less stir-frying, according to Kang. Instead, the food is marinated, barbecued and pickled. Vegetables are steamed, not fried. "It's not as heavy as Chinese food," she said. "We try to prepare it so it's fresh."

Next year the menu may boast authentic sashimi — meaning, the fish is served not only raw but also live.

In Korea, Kang said, res-

taurants have large tanks and customers can pick which fish they want. "Like, if you pick octopus, they cut it up, and put in on your plate, and it's still moving when you get it," she said.

Although many businesses are owned by Korean immigrants in Santa Cruz, Kang's is one of the few to capitalize on that fact.

Korean people own several convenience markets, corner grocery stores, dry cleaners and motels in the county, she said.

Unlike those businesses, Kang's is not family-run. "No, I'm this on my own," she said.

THE EMI IS the latest venture for the upstairs restaurant. The landmark Santa Cruz Hotel and the Bar and Grill has changed owners four times since 1975.

It opened in 1877 as a hotel, when meals were served family-style on long table. It was originally called the Germania Hotel, according to Sentinel files, and served the large German-American community.

Although called a "hotel,"

rooms have not been available to rent since the 1950s.

The Bar and Grill opened in 1976, after the building was sold by Annie Righetti and Friend "Amigo" Arevalo to four San Jose businessmen.

Before that, Righetti made ravioli in a kitchen upstairs.

In 1983 the Hotel and the Bar and Grill were sold to Western Dining Inc., a company owned by restaurateur Frank Cardinale. The business went bankrupt and was sold to a new partnership consisting of Joel Marini, Joseph Appenrodt, Gino Panelli, Peter Whiting, and Arnold Ramos in July 1985.

Marini owns several candy and clothing stores on the Boardwalk. Appenrodt is vice president of Eric's Deli Corp. Panelli and Whiting work for Ledyard's, a restaurant supply company, and Ramos is a San Jose businessman.

The partnership has no plans to change the downstairs hotel from an Italian restaurant, Marini said.