

Drag-queen shows draw crowds to Castroville hotel

By LARAMIE TREVINO
STAFF WRITER

CASTROVILLE, which has long held a reputation as the artichoke center of the world, is gaining another reputation — as the drag-queen capital of the Monterey Bay area.

Once a month, and on special occasions such as the artichoke festival, Cinco de Mayo and St. Patrick's Day, patrons of Norma Jean's Bar in the Franco Restaurant crown their own queen, in drag-show competitions in the showroom near the bar.

Last week, a San Jose couple, accompanied by a retinue of attendants that included men clad in pastel finery any bridesmaid would envy, exchanged vows and waltzed across the floor for their first dance.

Then the white-tuxedo-clad "bride" tossed the bouquet to the boisterous horde of women and crossed-dressed men clamoring for the prize.

Among those hovering around the newly joined couple was "Francine," the reigning Miss Franco, who achieved the title by beating all the 1990 monthly

drag queens at the bar's year-end competition.

A Salinas office worker by day, the 29-year-old 6-footer ("6-6 with my hair") also serves as the gay-night host and drag show "mistress" of ceremonies. On one particular evening, Francine is dressed in a beaded silk top, patent-leather pumps with spiked heels, and rhinestone earrings that fall to the shoulder.

Francine works up the crowd with a furious lip-synch rendition of Aretha Franklin's "Free-way of Love."

A one-time popular stop for Italian food aficionados from all over the Monterey and San Francisco bay areas, the hotel-restaurant built by Lucia Franco in 1926 took on a new image when Ernie Sanchez, 34, bought it four years ago and named the lounge the Norma Jean Bar after Marilyn Monroe's given name.

Previously whitewashed in staid institutional tones, the two-story stucco and tile structure is now done up in pink with turquoise trim.

The bar catered to a diverse

clientele when Sanchez bought it, and still does five nights a week. A year ago, Sanchez, who is gay, started the drag-queen shows and gay Latino men became the primary customers.

To serve those patrons, Sanchez has the dance-hall disc jockey play Latin music. For Mexican holidays, Sanchez brings in mariachis. The shows generally start at 10 p.m., after the restaurant closes.

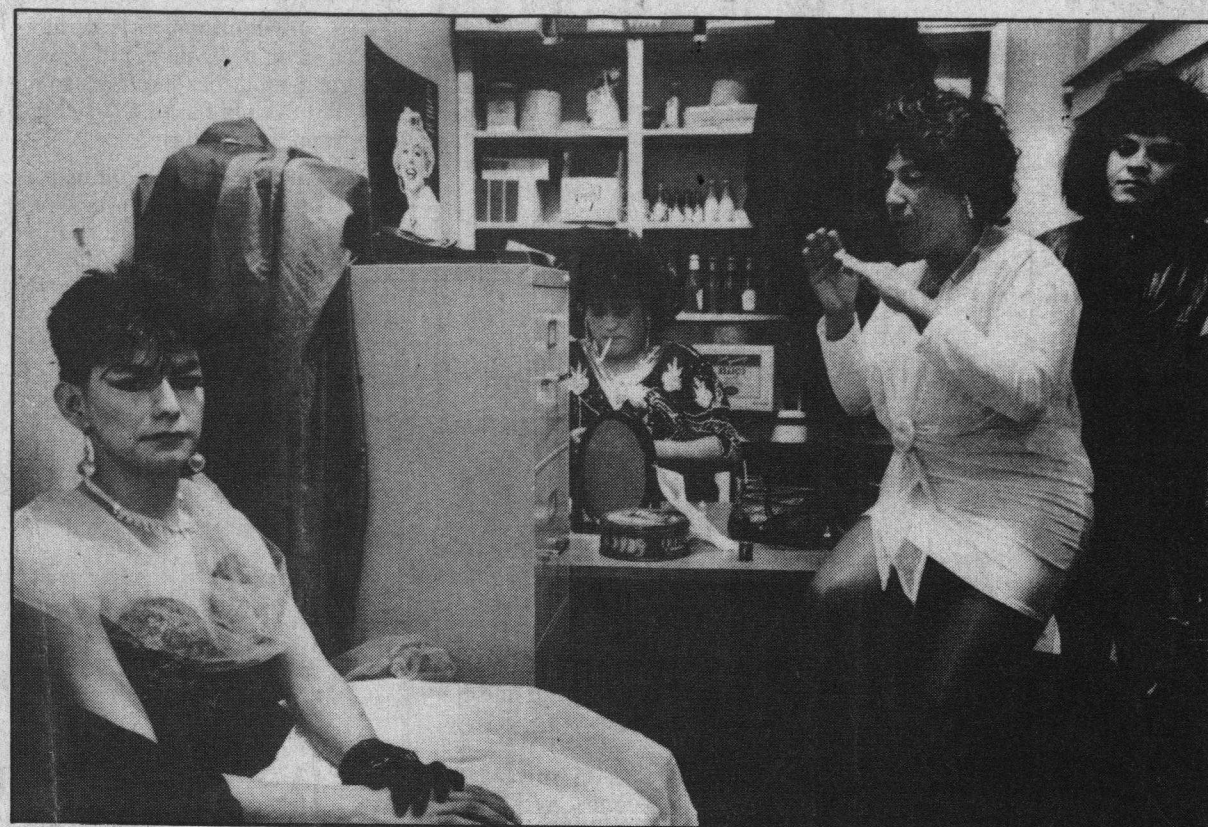
There are no problems on gay nights, Sanchez said.

"I can have 200 people here and not have a fight," he said, recalling the altercations that often occurred on weekend nights when it was a straight bar.

Some 200 patrons came to the showroom last week for the drag show and "wedding" ceremony.

In the musical performance, "Mona de Watsonville" tossed a wavy, waist-length mane while striking exaggerated poses in a red petticoat, with one bare shoulder shaking to a ballad about horses and guns.

Throughout the night, customers joined participants on



Kurt Ellison

Female impersonators wait backstage for the lip-synch contest.

the stage, tipping them with dollar bills and good-luck kisses.

Even a male stripper, who peeled off one G-string after another, and the sole lesbian act received loud applause from the merry crowd.

Meanwhile, an orderly gathering whiled away the night in the bar, where Spanish is the preferred tongue.

Few farm workers show up.

A pompadoured Paul Martinez, who counts the Franco as a frequent stop, introduced his companion, Steve, who wore a red mermaid-style dress the two own together.

"It's mine when I do drag,"

Martinez said.

One bar stool occupant, Maria Elena Garza, 26, of Watsonville, is among the straight women regulars who say the Franco provides a haven from male pressures encountered elsewhere.

"I love the freedom here — it's such an accepting atmosphere," she said.

Not much has been heard from Castroville's business community over the goings on at the Franco. Chamber of Commerce president Linden Ishii and vice president Anna Cortopassi said they didn't know about the situation.

"No kidding," Ishii said when

told of the business's activities.

One nearby merchant shared an stream of criticisms about the Franco's gay clientele until he realized he might be quoted by name and hung up the telephone.

Roy Borelli, grandson of the hotel's founder, has been out of touch with current events at the place where he spent much of his adolescence. Now in his 60s, the Salinas resident reflected on the home-country menu Lucia Franco, a woman of traditional values, set out for customers.

A gay bar wouldn't have figured in her plans.

"She'd turn over in her grave if she found out," Borelli said.



Kurt Ellison

Evan Delaveaga, known as 'Mona de Watsonville,' worked up the crowd during the lip-synch contest.

Hotel a shrine to Marilyn Monroe

From every angle of the Franco Hotel, photographs of sex symbol Marilyn Monroe keep watch over the action.

Proprietor Ernie Sanchez sponsors a Marilyn Monroe look-alike contest every June 1 — Monroe's birthday as well as his.

Monroe was Castroville's first artichoke queen, in 1947, although a ceremony in Salinas was as close as she got to Castroville. Monroe was an aspiring actress at the time.

Sanchez has erected a shrine of sorts in the tiny gift shop devoted to Monroe memorabilia

at the east end of the building where collection items abound.

At the restaurant Monroe appears on the menu as a hamburger and breakfast special. In the bar, a sweet drink made with liqueurs and 7-up is named after her.

—Laramie Trevino