

Watsonville milestone: Mansion eatery reopens

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WATSONVILLE — In the 10 years since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Watsonville has seen several milestones in the recovery of its devastated downtown: the rebuilding of the former Ford's department store, the first Mass at the new St. Patrick's Church.

On Wednesday, hundreds of residents celebrated another.

Elena Tufo, owner of the Mansion House Restaurant, reopened the 19th century landmark at 420 Main St., reviving a sense of elegance downtown that many longtime residents felt had been missing.

Bob Dwyer, Chamber of Commerce president, called the 1871 French-influenced building a "psychological icon." He hopes its renewal as a social center will draw more people downtown and take the city a step closer to economic vitality.

"If any place can do it, this place can, because people still have a connection to the positive things they enjoyed when it was open before," Dwyer said.

The new restaurant will help restore Watsonville's "heart and soul," said Dana Sales, incoming

president of the Watsonville Association of Realtors, whose family has long had downtown business connections.

"It's great," said Pagecraft Copy Center owner Jose Flores, a downtown booster. "The total ambiance, the food, Elena's personality — it makes a perfect triangle. It's what Watsonville has needed for a very long time."

Tufo herself overcame last-minute details — "At 10 minutes before the opening, they told me there was no change for the bar" — to don an old-fashioned burgundy satin-and-lace dress and greet flower-laden guests.

"I thought I had to wear something that goes with the house," Tufo said with characteristic, down-to-earth charm. "Now I'm happy. Before I was nervous."

Executive chef Andres Nuno had three other chefs working in the kitchen to serve up plate after plate of the regional and local specialties that he plans to serve to customers and at catered events.

Guests enjoyed escargot wrapped in triangles of filo, smoked Monterey Bay salmon with capers, cheese melted inside pastry loaves, jumbo shrimp in horseradish sauce, pastry spirals spread with chipotle

pepper, mousse of pate de foie gras, honeydew melon and red grapes.

Ray Freitas of Novato-based distributor Redwood Vintners poured bottles of Bargetto's Coastal Cellars line, which will be Tufo's house

wines. He also poured Bargetto's Chardonnay from the Regan Vineyard of the Santa Cruz Mountains and a 1998 Mendoza Chardonnay that Bargetto bottles from Chile.

Jesus Arellano, sales representa-

tive for Watsonville-based Couch Distributing, said the bar will feature Gordon Biersch and micro-brewed Red Hook beer.

"We've also got Bud Light on tap. I'm real proud of that," Arellano

said, nodding to the handmade wooden bar that evokes saloon days gone by.

Tufo said she expects to open for lunch and dinner by early next week.