

PHILIPPINE GARDENS CAFE

It's more than just a card room

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WATSONVILLE — Long before there were senior centers, long before bingo parlors became popular places to hang out, there was the Filipino Card and Social Club, otherwise known as the Philippine Gardens Cafe.

Every day for the past 45 years, in varying locations throughout this city, members of the Filipino community have convened in a small room in the back of the cafe.

The only rules seem to be that you enjoy playing cards, have a story to tell and memories to relive.

In between stories there is the television to watch, which very few do even though it is always on, and three card tables to use in the back room.

"It's been the same since the beginning," says Rosita Tabasa, the owner the cafe since 1938. "This is just a social club, a recreation for the folks to pass the time. I don't even worry much about the restaurant anymore. I think I just keep it open in case someone wants a cup of coffee or something."

She is the first to admit that one reason she keeps the business open is partly to keep herself feeling young and active, but mainly to give the cardplayers, people in their 70s and 80s, a place to go at night.

"Our hours are flexible," says Jess Tabasa, her son. "If the people want to stay here, we stay open."

While wagering on cards is legal at the cafe, as it is in other licensed halls in the city, the stakes at the Philippine Gardens run to two bits on the average.

"You can't really call it gambling because of the (low) stakes involved," says Ludovico

Estrada, one of the numerous relatives working for Tabasa.

"It's about the same as getting out the checker board and playing," adds her son. "It's not as if we are playing for big bucks like the other places."

If it is serious, high-stake, life-and-death card playing you want, try La Frontera, or Ceasar's, or El Tenampa, Watsonville bars where winning too much can often be dangerous because you might be robbed later by local youth gangs looking for an easy mark.

The biggest danger in the card room at the Philippine Gardens may be the constant smoke cloud caused by dozens of men incessantly smoking.

"If someone gets out of hand I call (police) right away. If someone raises their voice I just have to go there and stand like this," said Tabasa, pointing at the doorway leading to the cardroom and striking a pose of arms across her chest and a stern, motherly look on her face.

She can hold that look only for a second before she breaks out into laughter at her own exaggeration.

Over the years, the cafe has experienced several changes. It has moved three or four times, changed its name once, all caused by dwindling fortunes as Watsonville's reputation as a wild gambling center diminished.

The two constants throughout those five decades have been the cards and Tabasa.

Tabasa said she was given the cafe as a wedding present by her in-laws. It soon became popular with migrant Filipino field workers who sought to escape the boredom of the dreary camps they lived in as they followed the crops along the coast.

Then other Filipinos also began to con-

gregate there, mainly because they had no place else to go for a good time.

The success of the place allowed Tabasa and her late husband to own a bar, pool hall and the cafe. Now the holdings are down to the cafe, located off lower Main Street, near high-stake poker bars and in what police describe as the most dangerous part of town.

Tabasa says she can remember when "Watsonville was an open city," when people all over Northern California would come to gambling halls for Keno and poker, and to the opium dens for a good time.

The cafe, like the other gambling halls, was crowded. Tabasa said that at one time her place could, and did, accommodate about 300 people. But that was a different time and a different place.

"Now we are lucky to fit in two dozen into the restaurant," she says laughing and without the maudlin tendencies which come from living in the past.

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Now, even with the creation of a senior center in Watsonville and other attractions, Filipinos still come to the cafe, arriving early and staying late.

The need for such a place is most evident when the weather is bad, as it was a few weeks ago in early March. At that time, the card room at the Philippine Gardens Cafe was near capacity.

Outside, in the restaurant, Tabasa was busy talking with friends and filling requests from various customers ordering from the cafe's Philippine-cuisine menu.

Probably just getting nourishment before having another go at the card tables.



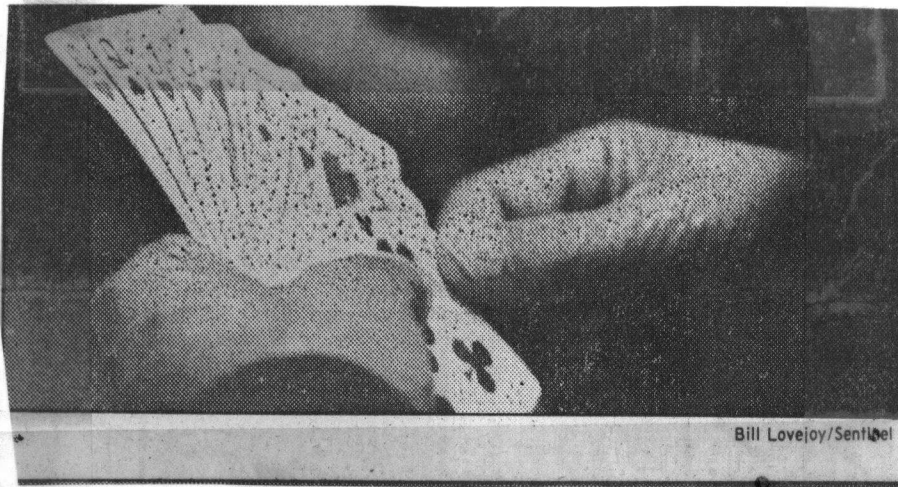
The cafe has served Watsonville's patrons since 1938.

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Philippine Gardens Cafe owner Rosita Tabasa.

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Alejandro Dihito surveys his hand.

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