

# There's new life in the old Cavern

By ANN CONY

Greg Dunn has a problem that most other restaurateurs would love to have: He's being swamped with business.

Dunn owns a majority interest in Deer Park Tavern, which opened its doors to diners last week for the first time in nearly four years.

Concerned about making it through his first weekend, Dunn graciously ducked the press when the latter sought a pre-opening story two weeks ago. Nonetheless, word of mouth travels fast and Deer Park Tavern opened last week to a full house.

Not many restaurants start business in such an impressive manner. But not many restaurants have Deer Park's colorful and lengthy history.

Dunn and his partner Frank Capriotti, owner of the Courtyard Restaurant in Soquel, where Dunn himself worked for over five years, were interested in Deer Park three years ago, after the

Swenson Company bought the Rio del Mar property that they developed into the Deer Park Shopping Center. They couldn't work out a deal with Swenson, but managed to do business with Al and Bob Castignola, who bought the restaurant from Swenson.

Dunn and Capriotti signed a lease with the Castignolas in August of 1978 and began renovating the building last April.

The restaurant, once considered "the" place to eat in Santa Cruz County, had been empty for years. The roof leaked and the interior had sustained rain damage. Dust and cobwebs were the least of the troubles with the aged building that once stood where the freeway is today.

The electricity and the plumbing were completely redone; the walls and ceiling were sandblasted; 1,000 square feet were added to the kitchen. (In the old days, Dunn explained, the vegetable preparation area and the

walk-in refrigerator were actually located outdoors.)

Dunn and Capriotti hired interior decorator Richard Elmore of Palo Alto, who had done work for the Crow's Nest and Shadowbrook restaurants. And they advertised extensively before deciding on a chef — Alfred Cominotto of Carmel.

Inside and outside, Deer Pak Tavern is essentially unchanged. The structural interior changes were minor and unquestionably artful.

The barroom atmosphere is as it was (complete with original bar, mirror & mural), but the dining area has taken on a simple, striking elegance. The large maple booths were refurbished, rich carpeting was put down, and the furnishings and other decorative touches emanate good taste.

The banquet room, which is nearing completion, has already been booked for every Friday and Saturday night in December. A portion of that

room will be partitioned off and used as a dance floor adjacent to the barroom, where a trio plays "a lot of standards and light jazz" Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights.

Rejuvenating Deer Park Tavern has been a challenge, Dunn admitted, because many people have sentimental attachments to the way it was back in the days when "Shorty" Butriza and Paul Arnerich put on the famous deer feeds, one aspect of the old tavern Dunn and Capriotti will not attempt to revive.

The new proprietors did their best to preserve the basic atmosphere and other aspects of the restaurant that were worth preserving, but, "We knew we weren't going to please everybody," Dunn said.

The menu is not far different from what it used to be, still featuring what Dunn calls "traditional American food done with a flair." Dinner entrees include calamari (\$6.50), roast duckling with orange sauce (\$10.50), broiled swordfish (\$8.50), New York Steak (\$12.50), abalone and a dozen other selections. The wine list is extensive.

The first dinners were served last Thursday night when, according to Dunn, things went "real smooth. Everybody loved it."

A "private" invitation-only cocktail party was held Saturday, Nov. 3. Some 1,000 people showed up for the special preview, according to Dunn and his brother Jeff, manager of the restaurant.

Some of the partygoers were old-timers, some were friends of the new proprietors. All were curious.

Dunn expects the new Deer Park Tavern to draw a diverse clientele of all ages. "We think everybody will like the place," he said.

Open seven nights a week starting at 5 p.m., reservations are recommended for dinner. The restaurant will open for lunches soon, probably two weeks from today.

The history of Deer Park Tavern is a flamboyant one that is not very well documented and subject to interpretation, as Dunn has found out.

Many of its old-time patrons are now dead, but there are still a couple of generations left who remember the deer feeds, the New Year's Eve celebrations and the restaurant's landmark status.

The name can be traced back to the late 19th century when Adolph Spreckels, the sugar magnate, kept a herd of deer inside the fenced acres in the vicinity of today's shopping center and freeway.

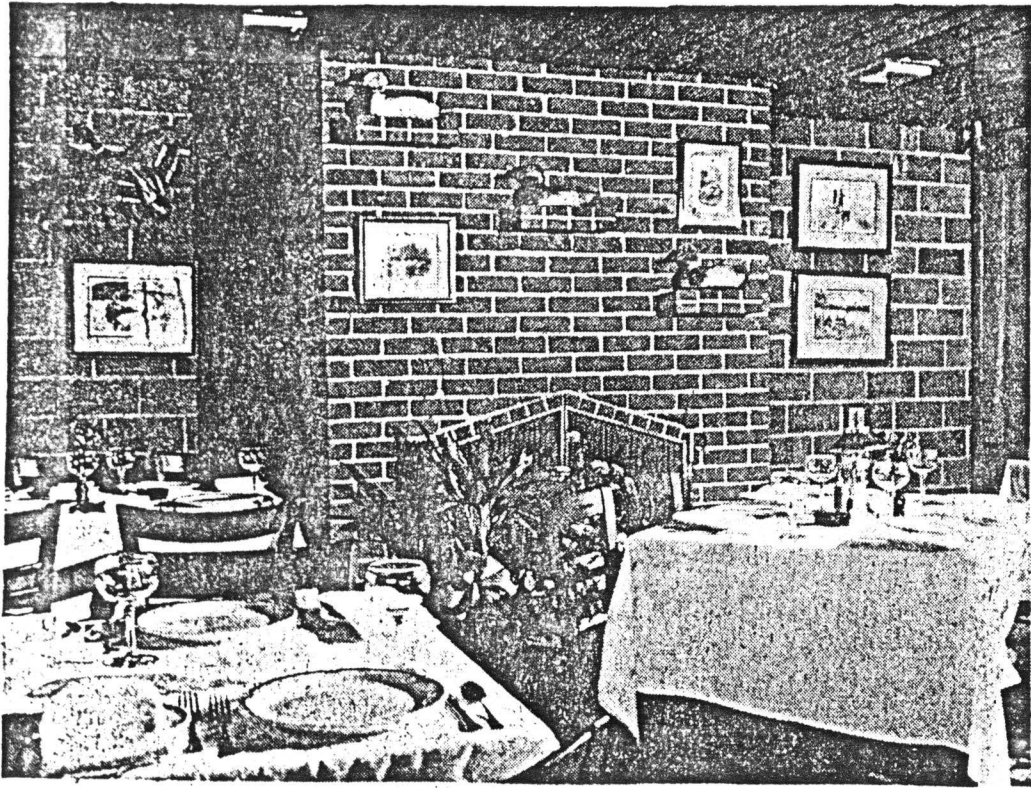
In the days of Prohibition, "One could get a libation with a bit more pizzazz than a cup of oolong, some recall." (Bill Akers, December, 1975.) And it was, faint memories recollect, in the late 1920s that the restaurant was destroyed by fire. A new one was constructed in the same location.

Nick "Shorty" Butriza and Martin "Fat" Butier were the owners in the early days when the place was known as Deer Park Cavern. (Liquor laws then forbade the use of tavern, bar or saloon in bar and restaurant names.)

In 1938 Paul Arnerich bought out Butier and it was about that time that the famous deer feeds began. Literally thousands are said to have lined up for the feeds, which didn't die out until the late 1960s. Butriza was an avid hunter and his friends helped provide game for the feeds.

The restaurant was popular with soldiers during the war days. But after the war ended, a modern highway was built from Santa Cruz to Watsonville and the tavern stood in its path.

So the building was moved, over the course of many weeks, from the lowlands to its current site on the hill off Rio del Mar Boulevard. It was replanted on land owned by Pete Copriviza, whom Butriza, when he died in March of 1975, named principal beneficiary.



Inside and out, Deer Park Tavern has been given a bright new look.