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Vacaville

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Community, Non-Profits, Local Shopping...

That's Vacaville Magazine!



Celebrating Thirty Years



by: Daniel R. Austin

Vacaville Commons has graced the I-80 corridor for 30 years. We celebrate this year and reflect on the past.

You know how some people never seem to age? (Consider Rob Lowe or Nicole Kidman). Could the same be said of a shopping center? It could if you are talking about Vacaville Commons, a community shopping center that turns 30 this fall and still looks as vibrant as it did when it opened in 1992. "The architecture is fresh and interesting to this day," said Diane Power Zimmerman, limited partner of the center's ownership group. "It doesn't look like the cookie-cutter centers that you see everywhere else."

Turns out the Commons' verve and vitality are no accident. The Power family, founders of the famed Nut Tree just across the I-80 corridor, wanted to control the environment around their beloved family enterprise and spent nearly 50 years buying property that went up for sale nearby. In 1989, the family entered a joint venture with shopping center developer The Rodde Company which still manages the property today. Nadel Architects, the firm which designed the center, worked with Don Birrell, the Nut Tree's in-house designer responsible for the famous restaurant's mid-century, modern image. Zimmerman recalls how in the mid-1950s, along with Birrell,

her family traveled to the Tivoli Gardens, an amusement park in Copenhagen that also inspired the design at Disneyland. Shoppers can easily spot the amusement park's influence in the castle crenellations and sweeping curves of the façade, and the whimsical endcap of spires and flags on Nut Tree Parkway that could have come out of a Robert Jordan fantasy novel. "I will always remember our grand opening weekend. I thought the towers looked whimsical and fun, and I knew the community would enjoy this landmark that stood proudly from a distance," said Linda Rusin, vice president of The Rodde Company.

The Nut Tree ethos crossed the corridor to the Vacaville Commons in more ways than design. Community outreach matters here, and a great deal of thought goes into the retailers which The Rodde Company secured as tenants. "We were thrilled to bring the first Target with a super-sized Safeway to the market," said Bob Rodde, president of The Rodde Company. Tenant mix was very important, and the selection and placement of the tenants were carefully planned. "Vacaville Commons has more community businesses than other centers including banking, the health and education services, and the family run eateries," said Zimmerman. Zimmerman says that stores like the newly opened Crumbl, which features

a new cookie every week and frosts their sweets only after a customer orders, remind her of the hospitality and food experience she learned as a child. "If my father, Robert (Bob) Power, were alive today, he would be first in line for a Crumbl Cookie." She is also proud of the international flair which several other restaurants offer. "My family's history is embedded with the immigrants who helped to shape Nut Tree's eclectic menu; and we love the variety of food that's there in the Commons."

Zimmerman's life story is deeply connected to Vacaville and its history. She grew up working at the Nut Tree and the Coffee Tree before going into education, eventually taking her doctoral degree and becoming superintendent of the Old Adobe Union School District in Petaluma. She recently self-published a book called *Nut Tree: From California Ranch to Design, Food and Hospitality Icon*, available at Amazon and some local bookstores, and takes joy in how each of her experiences intersect. "My early experiences working at Nut Tree shaped my successful career as a school leader and informed a doctorate in organizational development. In writing the book, I gained a deeper appreciation for my family's innovation in design and attention to hospitality. I was blessed to grow up in that environment," she said. Zimmerman is also involved with the Vacaville Museum, and Vacaville Commons was the presenting sponsor of the museum's Nut Tree Centennial exhibit.

Family and food, hospitality and design—after 30 years, it's all there at Vacaville Commons. ■

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