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HARBOR HAVEN. Across from the Four Points by Sheraton Ventura Harbor

Stephen Shafer | Schaf Photo

Ventura's Next Wave

The revitalized central coast town is making a splash as a foodie vacation destination

WRITTEN BY // SOPHIA KERCHER

TALK TO A LOCAL IN VENTURA AND THEY'LL SAY THAT ROUGHLY TEN YEARS AGO YOU COULD WALK DOWNTOWN, FIRE A CANNON INTO THE CITY CENTER AND IT WOULDN'T HIT ANYONE. THE TOWN WAS RULED BY AGRICULTURE, AND THE FEW VISITORS WHO STOPPED CAME FOR THE ECLECTIC THRIFT STORES WHILE EN ROUTE TO SANTA BARBARA. NOW, A BUSTLING MAIN STREET IS SPRINKLED WITH DESIGNER

boutiques, wine bars, upscale restaurants, and cafes serving locally roasted coffee. Native Seth Michael Nathan, a chef at the Wine Rack in downtown Ventura, says that the small town vibe remains but even he is astonished by the change. "I'm still discovering something new in Ventura every week, whether it's a gallery opening or store opening."

Perhaps of particular interest to Pasadenans, our former Mayor Rick Cole (who served from '92-'94) is now Ventura's City Manager. Integral to the revitalization of Old Pasadena, Cole is contributing to the new face of Ventura's historic downtown. "Ventura has some great artistic and culinary magnets," Cole says, "It takes a little bit more effort to define them than on the well-beaten Santa Barbara track, but they are here."

After an hour-and-twenty-minute drive from

Pasadena, check in at the popular **Four Points by Sheraton Ventura Harbor**, located along a charming small-boat harbor, home to houseboats, weekend sailors and friendly fishermen. The laid-back 106-room hotel is just a few miles from downtown, near harbor shopping and eateries, and it's dog- and kid-friendly. It's also next door to Olivas Park Link Golf Course and Buenaventura Golf Course, widely recognized as two of the most beautiful public golf courses on the Pacific Coast.

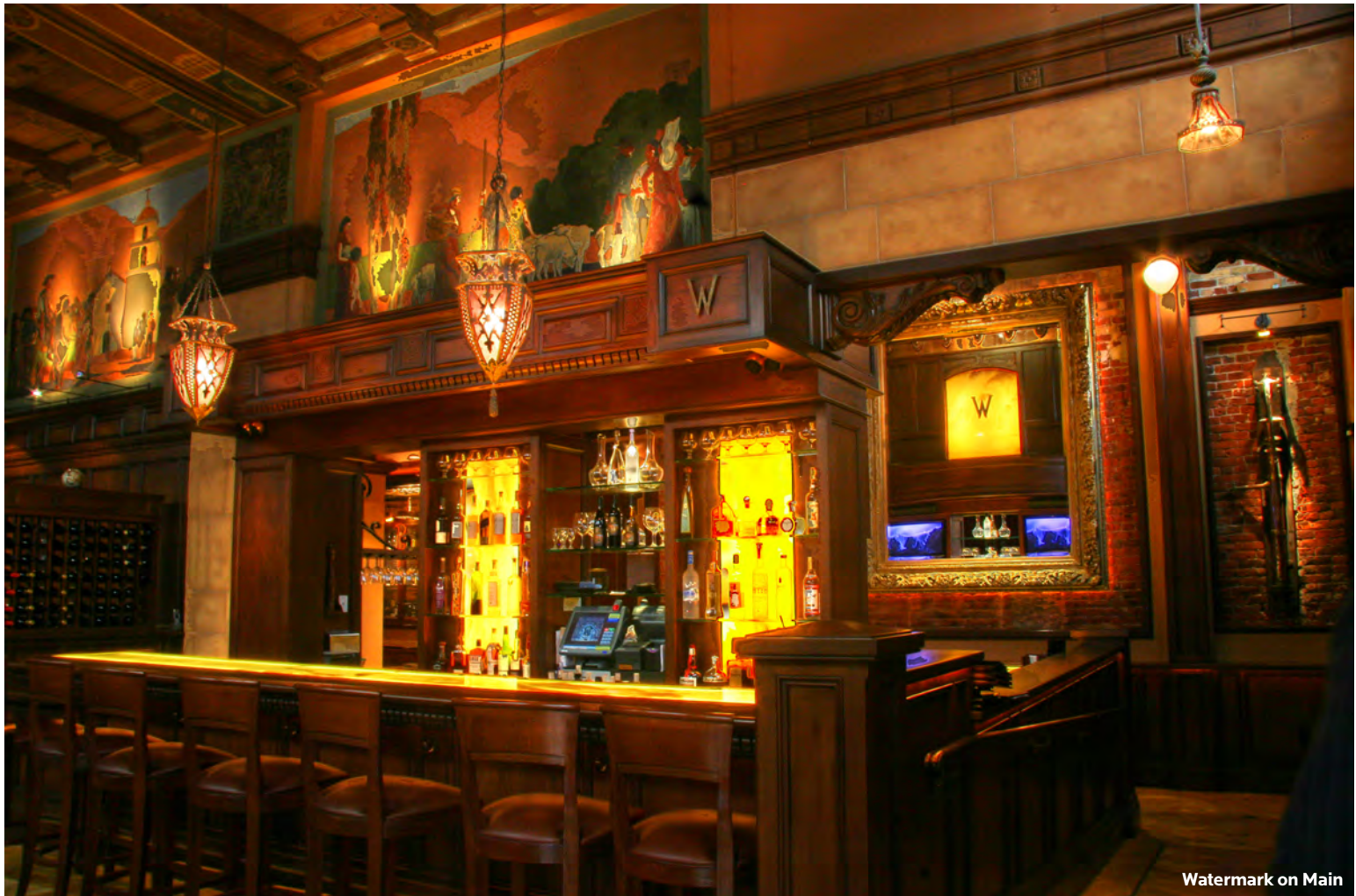
Get your vacation started right with a massage at the Sheraton's **SPA by Diane Loring, Inc.** which specializes in couples and hot stone massage. It's not every day that you can get rubbed down by a U.S. Taekwondo champion, a body guard, and award-winning baker, but Loring is all three. With a radiant smile, she carefully attends to each muscle and sends you



off with her signature chocolate chip cookies.

With your body pleasantly humming, cruise downtown. For stylish, well-curated women's clothing there's **Le Monde Emporium**, and the charming **Cara Mia** is equal parts custom cosmetics shop and spa. **Fusion Home** features locally crafted wood furniture. Stop to admire the lavish, neoclassic city hall built in 1910 by Albert C. Martin Sr., and gaze at the blue Pacific below.

Those looking for a fresh meal in an intimate setting should hit **Peirano's**, on the corner of Main and Figueroa, which opened its doors in



Watermark on Main

April. Menu staples include farmer's market vegetables and seafood, but equally exciting is the brick building's history. It was the Peirano family's grocery for nearly a century, and the restaurant is built over the original aqueducts that flow across the street to Ventura's most treasured relic, its 18th Century Mission. Be sure to ask the manager for a brief tour.

If you'd rather experience what is quickly becoming a Ventura classic, walk to the dim, elegant **Watermark on Main**, where live cello and piano music is the soundtrack to decadent meals featuring specialties like the rich lobster pot pie and tender filet mignon. Here, you might find yourself sitting next to a captain who 30 hours prior caught the fish that is now in front of you. Before leaving, sip on the Limoncello Lemondrop cocktail, whose key ingredient is made down the road by the Ventura Limoncello Company.

To continue the party, go down the street to **The Tavern**, a new spot housed in a two-story home from 1912. The atmosphere is hip, the live music is beachy, and the outdoor fire pits

reflect the sparkle of the indoor chandeliers. It's easy to hang out amidst the novels, whiskey, and good company until the wee hours, but make sure to save some energy for the morning.

Wake early to have the locally roasted Beacon Coffee at downtown's **Palermo**. Don't be misled by the dizzying array of tchotchkes for sale; the staff knows their espresso and coffee beans. There's also a wide selection of pastries, including cake balls with flavors like French toast-maple-and-bacon. For a bigger breakfast, cross the street to the cozy **Westside Cellar**. The joint recently expanded its lunch and dinner menus to include pancakes, omelets, and steak and eggs.

After a short ferry ride to the otherworldly Channel Islands, home to a new visitors' center and Humpback whales (see sidebar), or a trip to the swimmer-friendly waters at Harbor Cove Beach, chill with a Chardonnay at California Street's **The Wine Rack**. The wine bar, which has hosted pop-ups with chefs like Ventura local Adrienne Nieto (a contestant on MasterChefs), is slated



The Tavern

to complete a sleek redesign in mid-June. Spanish-trained chef Seth Michael Nathan provides pairings with seasonally-inspired tapas, and both expert and novice wine drinkers are invited to taste up to six wines until they find one that fits their mood.

The adventurous shouldn't miss a lunch-time picnic on the beach at Buenaventura State Beach Park's **The Jolly Oyster**, a bright blue shack bookended by the park's BBQ grills. The Jolly Oyster landed in Ventura last August, and it doesn't have



Fusion Home



Cara Mia



The Jolly Oyster

CREDIT: LISA MCKINNON

knives, charcoals, plates, or bread—you bring your own. It takes a bit of planning and culinary courage, but shucking your own oysters by the Pacific is empowering, and you might find yourself borrowing garlic from an engineer who lives in Thousand Oaks, or exchanging stories with a Florida businessman. Mark Reynolds, the owner/founder of the Jolly Oyster, sustainably farms the oysters in Baja California, and he talks about his sea creatures like they are heaven sent. After slurping down the sweet Kumomoto and briny Pacific oysters you, too, will be convinced of their divine origin.

The British-born Reynolds says he's surprised at how much he loves this Ventura location. "You have the feel of getting out near the Pacific where people can escape," he says. "It's not Santa Monica or Huntington Beach, it's something a little bit special."

CONTACT INFO

- Four Points by Sheraton Ventura Harbor.** 1050 Schooner Dr., 805.658.1212 or starwoodhotels.com.
- SPA by Diane Loring, Inc. at Four Points by Sheraton Ventura Harbor.** 1050 Schooner Dr. 805.641.0022 or spaventura.com.
- Le Monde Emporium.** 542 E. Main St., 805.648.7463.
- Cara Mia,** 424 E. Main St. 805.641.2556 or caramiamakeup.com.
- Fusion Home,** 418 E. Main St. 805.652.7017 or fusionhomestore.com.
- Peirano's Restaurant,** 204 E. Main St., 805.648.4853 or peiranos.com.
- Watermark on Main,** 598 E. Main St., 805.643.6800 or watermarkonmain.com.
- The Tavern,** 211 E. Santa Clara St., 805.643.3264 or thetaverventura.com.
- Palermo,** 321 East Main St., 805.643.3070 or palermoveventura.com.
- Westside Cellar,** 222 E. Main St. 805.641.3500 or westsidecellar.com.
- The Wine Rack,** 14 S. California St. 805.653.9463.
- The Jolly Oyster,** 911 San Pedro St., 805.798.4944 or thejollyoyster.com.

VENTURA SUMMER HAPPENINGS



Tim Hauf/timhaufphotography.com

Blue & Humpback Whale Watching/Channel Island Kayaking, June-Sept.

Take an all day trip through the Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary and gaze slack-jawed at sites of the Humpback whale. Weather permitting, take a kayak tour around the stunning Santa Cruz Island. Ventura Harbor Main Office, 1691 Spinnaker Dr., #105B, Ventura. 805.642.1393 or IslandPackers.com.

A Tribute To The Music Of Johnny Cash, June 16

Walk the line to the Fourth Annual Roadshow Revival, featuring the likes of rockabilly legend Wanda Jackson, plus vintage cars, pin-up contests and motorcycles inspired by the man in black. 10:30 a.m. Ventura County Fairgrounds, 10 W. Harbor Blvd., Ventura. 805.558.1618 or roadshowrevival.com.

Vans Warped Tour 2012, June 24

With over 90 bands announced, this year's Warped Tour promises to be epic for all rockers. Doors Open at 11:30 a.m. Ventura County Fairgrounds, 10 W. Harbor Blvd., Ventura. vanswarpedtour.com.

4Th Of July Street Fair, July 4

Nine blocks of downtown's Main Street will feature six live entertainment stages, over 250 artisans, a children's Pushem-Pullem Parade and plenty of food to make your Independence Day memorable. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Main St., Ventura. 805.654.7749 or venturastreetfair.com.

-STEPHANIE ASHLEY