

Recipe for success found on Prospect Street

Georges celebrates 25 years

BY JONATHAN HORN
Contributor

Like many La Jollans, Georges at the Cove has had a few facelifts over the years.

But unlike many restaurants that have tried to succeed in this affluent village, after a quarter-century its doors remain wide open.

"The reason that we are

still around is that we have a restless curiosity about business and are constantly evolving and changing and investing in people and facility," founder and owner George Hauer said. "And I can say unequivocally, you can go to restaurants all over the country and you would find that we are certainly at the leading edge."

The triple-decker building offers formal dining on its bottom floor, a bar in the middle and a casual, rooftop terrace. All three have views of the Cove and ocean and

have been remodeled and updated to fit the times. The bottom floor, which opened in 2007, is now called California Modern.

"From a marketing point of view, Georges at the Cove is the whole place, and there are three dining experiences," Hauer said.

But the 25-year celebration is somewhat bitter-sweet, given a nationwide recession that has hurt nearly the entire restaurant business.

"Nobody has ever seen anything like this — this is unprecedented," Hauer said. "The only people bullet-proof these days are fast food and Mexican."

Hauer, originally from the Bay Area, moved to San Diego in 1963 and graduated from San Diego State with degrees in psychology and political science. He said neither major helped him learn to run a restaurant.

Before founding Georges, Hauer spent 12 years as director of operations at a system of restaurants. He said



George Hauer chats with a regular customer. KATHY DAY

the work required him to travel all over and he felt too detached from the actual dining experience.

"I was removed from the guests and the product, and those were the things I had the most passion about," Hauer said. "It made sense to be out on my own."

And after moving to La Jolla in 1968, he decided to open his restaurant in the place he lived. In 1991, he added the rooftop Ocean Terrace.

"It was just sort of a dream

of Georges," said architect Mark Steele, who designed and remodeled the top-floor eatery. "It was just a roof at the time, so we figured how to make it all work and get the access to it, make it a wonderful place."

And it's a place that has rewarded Hauer with success, both from locals and tourists. With three separate restaurants, each offering a different dining experience, Hauer found the recipe to keep the customers coming back.

"He recognizes he's in the entertainment business," Steele said. "You have to really give him credit for that. He understands the customer and what they need."

Each time there may be something new to try, and despite 25 years in the business, Georges still finds a way to keep things fresh.

One of those ways is introducing a new vegetarian menu. As they have for the past 10 years, they use produce from Chino Farms in Rancho Santa Fe.

"Our chef goes there or somebody from the restaurant goes there six days a week," Hauer said. "We base our vegetarian menu on what's freshest there, and there's a tremendous difference between vegetables picked when ready to be consumed versus ready to be shipped."

Looking at the restaurant's success over the years, Hauer said, "I never would have dreamed it. I really wouldn't have."