

From the Racetrack to Restaurant

The History of The Tack Room

In 1940, Robinson Carr (Bob) Locke built "Hacienda Moltacqua" for just \$22,000 as the party home overlooking his new "Moltacqua Racetrack" north of the present restaurant site. The track had both quarter horse and sulky racing. An historic marker was placed by the east entrance in 1995 to commemorate the nation's first championship quarter horse racing at the track. Moltacqua is an adaptation of the Italian (his wife's heritage), Molta Acqua, "Lots of Water." The Tanque Verde River which flowed through the 200 acre property had an abundance of water in those days and flooded regularly.

The largest of the four fireplaces is built of stone from Tucson's second territorial courthouse. The main dining room, which was for many years the cocktail lounge, was originally a "Zaguan," a Spanish architectural term for breezeway or passageway. The three bedrooms and two baths were on the south side while the main entrance has been moved back very close to its original location.

The current bar and entry hall area was originally an open air front porch with no roof or walls. It was enclosed in the late forties to make a dining room, which it remained until 2000. One would approach from the north, and enter through the archway and the large door that is still there. The small dining room to the east of the hall was the formal living room or parlor while the Board Room is located in the formal dining room with its door to the kitchen and maid's quarters.

Van Grant bought the property in 1943. Van had eight children and developed the patio rooms, south of the main building, so the children would have their own rooms. He turned the old racetrack into a cotton farm, improving the old hand-dug well for irrigation. The main building had its own well for potable water. Today our well is still an important part of our daily lives.

In 1946, the property was sold to a syndicate of investors, that included the current owners, to be developed into a "Dude Ranch" (Guest Ranch) called Rancho Del Rio. The main dining room was enclosed and rooms were added to the west, eventually bringing the total number of guest rooms to 28. Fan and Marvin Kane eventually bought out their partners, handing the reins to their 22 year old son, Jud in 1952. Jud called the finest cook he knew, his sister, Alma Vactor, to ask her if she would come from her home in Cleveland, Ohio, for a few months each year to run the food service.

The Vactors and their three children eventually made the building their home with Alma's husband, David, becoming operations/business manager. Alma created menus and often cooked three hot meals a day for up to 100 people at a time. The fine dining reputation began in those days for guests staying at the ranch. The "Dudes" enjoyed twice daily horseback riding, swimming and tennis. Evening entertainment included Bingo, Native American dances, square dancing, movies, and moonlight cookouts on horseback followed by cowboy songs.

In the 1950s, with no air conditioning, the guest ranch was only open from Thanksgiving to May first. The other seven months each year, the Vactors grew alfalfa on the old cotton farm, allowing their cattle to graze half while the other half was bailed for winter feed. David also flew his Cessna Skymaster from a private strip on the property for the Forest Service as a fire reconnaissance pilot.

By 1965, five months business would no longer pay 12 months of taxes. The restaurant bankruptcy rate was higher in Tucson (due to its seasonality) than New York City, but there was no fine dining in the entire state. Posh resorts in Phoenix had hotel dining rooms, but no gourmet facilities. The Tack Room opened to the public January 27, 1965, as Arizona's first restaurant for fine dining. The early days were a little more rustic than today, but the food was haute cuisine and the service was superb.

In 1973, The Tack Room became Arizona's first Mobil Travel Guide Four Star Award winning restaurant. In 1974, Jud died and Drew Vactor, a University of Arizona Marketing/Management graduate who had been working in the east, returned to join the family business as its General Manager. For ten years, David and Drew, father and son, shared an office and operating duties until David's death in 1984. Alma Vactor continued regularly working on new recipes with the Chef until 2000.

Founder Fan Kane died in December, 1990. The Fan Club in the awards hall, in her honor, recognizes staff who have invested over ten years making The Tack Room special. General Manager Richard Tyler became a stockholder in 1992.

In 1977, The Tack Room became the Southwest's first Mobil Travel Guide Five Star Award winning restaurant. The Tack Room has been inducted into the Fine Dining Hall of Fame and received the DIRoNA award for fine dining. In 1996, Drew Vactor was named Independent Restaurant Operator of the Year. In 2000, The Tack Room received its eighth consecutive AAA Five Diamond Award .

Separate ratings are given for hotels, resorts, inns and restaurants. While the criteria requires similar quality, the emphasis in each type facility is different. For restaurants, food quality is of critical importance. Service is equally important where Fan Club member, Maitre d' Scott Reeder's expert training and supervision sets the tone.

Other requirements include ambiance and a knowledgeable and friendly staff. Each year unannounced inspectors rate over 20,000 facilities checking for space between tables and chairs, fresh plants and flowers, highest quality fresh food properly held and prepared, creative menus, large and properly maintained wine cellar, cleanliness, appropriate art and pleasing decor. The inspectors also ask technical questions to make the guides accurate.

The Tack Room sits on almost 4 acres of original property. In 1996, ContraVest bought the remainder of the surrounding land to develop 107 single family residential homes, leaving the restaurant essentially, unchanged. The entry, however, is much more attractive. It is called Vactor Ranch.

On March 1, 2000, Drew Vactor retired after 26 years. The Tack Room affiliated with Bob McMahon's Metro Restaurants, Tucson's largest group of upscale independent restaurants. Richard Tyler remains as General Manager and President of the operating company. Over \$1 Million Dollars was invested in the property to give it a new look, while preserving its historical past.

On May 17, 2003, The Tack Room was closed.