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Three local businesses given East Bay Leadership Council awards

The East Bay Leadership Council recently honored three Lamorinda businesses selected by their local Chambers of Commerce as Small Business of the Year at a luncheon held during National Small Business Week.

Moraga

Penninis/Michael's Ristorante

Chef Patrick Vahey has owned Penninis Pizza and Pasta and Michaels Ristorante in Moraga Shopping Center for just over 10 years. Pennini's Pizza & Pasta was founded in 1998 by Michael Pennini, with the vision of becoming a true neighborhood destination. Vahey joined the Pennini's team in 2002 and helped to launch Moraga's Michael's Ristorante for fine dining. Vahey took over when Pennini retired.

The closest thing Moraga has to a "sports bar," Pennini's is a favorite Moraga hangout spot for Saint Mary's students and the community. Michaels continues to offer Italian-inspired cuisine prepared simply and properly, with fresh ingredients and "served with joy," the owner says. Vahey is known for generously supporting the community with donations and fundraisers.

Penninis Pizza & Pasta

- 1375 Moraga Way Suite D, Moraga, CA 94556
- 925.376.1515

Michael's Ristorante

- 1375 Moraga Way Suite A, Moraga, CA 94556
- 925.376.4300
- Penninis@sbcglobal.net

Lafayette

Lamorinda Theatre Academy

If you visit Lamorinda Music on Lafayette Circle, you will find a door tucked in the back of the parking lot that leads upstairs to a space that most kids think is magical. Over the last five years Renee DeWeese and Rena Wilson have been teaching technique-based acting, singing and dancing, and cultivating confidence in their students.

Lamorinda Theatre Academy opened in Lafayette in 2012. DeWeese and Wilson are no strangers to the stage. DeWeese studied musical theatre at New York University's Tisch School of Arts. She has been teaching, directing, choreographing and running children's theater programs since 2004. She is a recipient of two Shellie awards and a Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle Award.

Wilson currently performs with "Beach Blanket Babylon." A two-time Bay Area Critics Circle Award winner, she received a Bachelor's degree in Vocal Performance from San Jose State University.

Kids of all ages attend programs, classes and camps throughout the year to become what DeWeese and Wilson call a "triple threat," which includes acting, singing and dancing.

- 83 Lafayette Cir, Lafayette, CA 94549
- (925) 385-0354
- www.lamorindatheatreacademy.com

Orinda

Land Home Financial Services, Inc.

Land Home Financial Services Inc. is a private mortgage banker headquartered in Concord, comprised of six divisions, 80-plus branches nationwide and licensed in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Land Home opened its Theatre Square location



Patrick Vahey

Photo provided



Rena Wilson receiving the award

Photo provided



Land Home Financial Services Inc. Photo Sophie Braccini

in early 2013 to much acclaim. Bridging the chasm between business and community, Land Home's lending model is driven by local relationships, community prosperity and disconnectedness.

Led by Angela Erves, Land Home Orinda annually hosts two chamber of commerce events, provides its space to the Orinda Action Day committee, and sponsors Orinda's July Fourth Parade, Action Day, and the NorCal Kids Triathlon.

With resources geared for home buyers, real estate agents, mortgage brokers and builders, its services span the spectrum of commercial and retail lending, offering specialized products to meet the unique needs of the community of Orinda.

"They have been very active in the community, and so welcoming to all chamber members!" says chamber board member Holly Henkel.

- 2 Orinda Theatre Square #146, Orinda, CA 94563
- (925) 885-6760
- www.lhfs.com or www.facebook.com/Land-HomeFinancialServices.

—Peggy Spear

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Lafayette to mark 70 years of bean dip and margaritas at El Charro restaurant

... continued from page A1

They added an outdoor patio and have worked to improve the restaurant while maintaining its charm and character.

This particular Tuesday night is representative of all 70 years worth of business. Bartender Jocelyn Monroy is a figure in constant motion. El Charro is her "second family," she says, estimating she makes between 200-300 margaritas a night. She has been working here for 15 years -- the first five fulltime while she went to school, but now that she works as a medical assistant at a cancer facility in Pleasant Hill, the owners give her two nights a week where she happily toils behind the bar.

Ron Adams moved to Lafayette four-and-a-half years ago and calls El Charro his favorite spot in town. "The food is good and everyone who works here is super nice. The prices and the atmosphere are really good. It's laid back." He says he comes here about two to three times per week.

At the other end of the bar, a customer who declined to be named said that he's been coming at least twice a week to El Charro for 50 years. His dad was in the liquor business and claimed that the restaurant was one of his

best clients. The Acalanes grad remembers the happy hour that included free bean dip by the pay phone next to the bar. His favorite part of the restaurant? "The parking lot! There's always room for one more car...and the bean dip."

Asked what the secret is for lasting so long in a business where restaurants tend to come and go, Dave Shields responds, "We strive to create the perfect place for friends and family to meet and eat. Everything we do has to answer the question: What does it look like to the customer?"

Laura added, "We want our customers to feel welcome, like we've invited them into our home." She pointed out that they are now serving the third and fourth generation of families in the restaurant.

In 1974, Garcia loaned money to Shield's brother Jim -- an employee in the restaurant at that time -- in order to sell him the business. That same year Laura was hired as the first female hostess. Dave worked for his brother until buying the restaurant from him in 1993. The Garcia family still owns the land and has control of the outside of the building. "When we took over the busi-

ness we had 22 employees," said Dave. "Now we have 75!" When Dave worked for his brother he would open in the morning, work as a prep cook for lunch, run the bar at night, close the restaurant and do janitorial work. "I always remember where I came from and try to treat my employees well," he said.

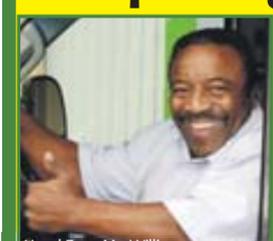
It truly is a family business. One of Dave's favorite memories is of his mom and dad working for them. "My father tended bar and my mom served as a hostess for a 10-year span." The Shields also fondly remember their wedding: "After the ceremony at Hacienda de las Flores the wedding party came to El Charro afterwards for dinner and dancing," recalled Laura.

When Dave was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease about four years ago, Laura took a more active roll in the restaurant after having the luxury of staying at home and helping to raise a grandson. Asked what the future holds, she says, "I'll hang in there as long I can, but when the time comes I'll probably sell the business to one or more of my employees."

We imagine Frank Garcia would applaud the move.

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