

# MONTECITO IS READY FOR ITS GLOW UP

by *Tiana Molony*

While driving through Montecito on a recent Tuesday afternoon, my sister, who sat beside me in the passenger seat, gestured to what was formerly Oliver's Montecito. "I wonder what that's going to be," she said as the vacant building streaked by, her head with it. Then, just a few seconds later, the former Cava restaurant location appeared, and, noting the construction there, she asked, "And what's going on around here?"

Montecito is experiencing something of a rebirth. Going back to the 2017-2018 Thomas Fire and ensuing debris torrent—which followed multiple years of drought—Montecito has been in an attenuated rebuild mode with a robust local economy. To put things in perspective, in 2024 Santa Barbara rose to #5 in PropertyShark's ranking of Most Expensive U.S. Zip Codes by Median Sale Price. While the previous #5, Beverly Hills, dropped out of the Top 10 after an \$800K median sales drop. And we still have more to look forward to...



The Post. (Courtesy of KAP Studio)

# Nobu at the Biltmore, Thomas Keller at the Coral Casino

In March 2020, Montecito resident Ty Warner closed the Four Seasons Biltmore to renovate guest rooms, add new restaurants, and install a pool. However, Sean Lavelle, the Biltmore's Director of Development, told me that the closure was never a matter of changing the hotel's iconic look, but rather a reaction to changing times.

Maintaining the Biltmore's historical significance took precedence, ensuring that intrinsic elements remained unchanged. The less sacred parts, however, are indeed evolving. The everyday traveler has changed, and so have the hotels that accommodate them.

For starters, the hotel's La Marina Restaurant will soon become a Nobu, the renowned Japanese restaurant with over 56 locations worldwide. Montecito will become the latest hotspot for the enduring restaurant, joining the ranks of Dubai, Monte Carlo, and Malibu.

The Ty Cocktail Lounge will return as before, albeit with a facelift. American chef Thomas Keller of French Laundry fame will be at the helm of the Coral Casino's new Tydes Restaurant. Keller's also transforming the hotel's former hair salon into a Bouchon Bakery, adding to its original location in Yountville (and another in Las Vegas). "The intent is to give two of the finest dining experiences in Santa Barbara County, here in Montecito," says Lavelle. We'll take it. Slated for re-opening in the summer of 2025, Montecito residents and visitors can once again explore the resort that's been dearly missed.



# Other New Places To Eat

So to answer my sister's question, shortly after the popular-among-vegans restaurant Oliver's Montecito closed its doors in 2023, its replacement, Bar Lou, moved in. The restaurant, owned by Warner Ebbink and Brandon Boudet (both of Little Dom's), aims to be an all-encompassing gathering spot where the experience extends beyond food and drink. It's a French-inspired restaurant that highlights ingredients from local farmers. As Gabrielle Badawy, the chef's consultant for Bar Lou, says, "It feels like a place that you want to hang out at more than a place where you get a bite and run off."

A few months ago, a sign appeared on the building of the former Mexican restaurant Cava—which reigned for 24 years—announcing its replacement: Clark's Oyster Bar, with the anticipatory statement "Docking Soon" underneath. The restaurant has locations in Austin, Houston, Aspen, and now Montecito. It offers seafood dishes alongside a raw bar featuring a selection of oysters and other accoutrements.

"We want people to feel like they're someplace timeless, where the details are cared about, and the hospitality is warm and genuine," says Larry McGuire, a partner of McGuire Moorman Hospitality.

This desire to create an inviting atmosphere is a hallmark of the area's evolving dining scene. Brandon Ristaino and Misty Orman, owners of Good Lion Hospitality, recognized the area's potential and chose the Montecito Inn as the site of their next cocktail lounge—Lion's Tale. "We noticed years ago that there



Clark's Oyster Bar



Bar Lou. (Photo by Blake Bronstad)



wasn't a dedicated cocktail bar where the primary offering was that of cocktails," says Ristaino. The couple enjoys spending their nights out visiting multiple establishments. They envision Lion's Tale as the perfect place to begin or conclude a memorable evening in Montecito.

Hopefully, with a martini. "People are drinking so many martinis, it's shocking," says Orman, who also takes the temperature of their martinis *very* seriously. "There's nothing worse to me than a martini that's not cold." Not only are they better ice-cold, but to suggest any other way is preposterous.

# A Little Bit Country Mart, a Little Bit Rock and Roll

Latte in hand, I also perused the Montecito Country Mart, as one does, and learned that the British luxury clothing store, Sunspel, will be making its Central Coast debut here. The brand is women's and men's basics designed to last a lifetime. And as we all know, Montecitans can live a *very* long time.

Alma Fonda Fina, a new Mexican restaurant, took over the space once home to Little Alex's (which featured moderately priced Mexican food). In its stead, chef Ramon Velazquez, a 2024 Michelin Bib Gourmand winner, heads the new eatery where they have Mexican dishes made with locally-sourced ingredients that explore novel takes on the classics. "We never want to do another just Mexican cuisine, another taqueria, another taco spot, for the sake of it," says Andres Velasco, the restaurant's manager of operations. "We just want to be a little bit more involved."

The restaurant also adopts a nascent design concept including a hot pink sofa and refurbished chairs from Cate School. The chairs are a nice touch. They say something about how our community handles change—by offering something new, nodding at something old, and paying close attention to the community's needs.



(Photos by Meg Sandu)

# Revamp by the Bird Refuge

That much is the case for the Runyon Group, headed by developers David Fishbein and Joseph Miller, who purchased the Las Aves complex across from the Andree Clark Bird Refuge. With the change they envisioned, they also had to consider the property's history, which meant preserving and restoring the six historic buildings. "It was as if these buildings, with their lived-in elegance, were calling for a revival," says Fishbein. When they brainstormed how they would transform the property on the corner of East Cabrillo Boulevard and Los Patos Way, they first asked themselves what the Montecito and Santa Barbara communities needed—what businesses were missing that they could bring?

The result is The Post: a gathering where 13 hand-selected retailers and restaurants will reside, including, but not limited to lifestyle clothing brand The Great, hair salon Providence Salon, and, coming in early 2025, Italian restaurant Jemma Montecito, a modern Italian concept from husband-and-wife team Jackson and Melissa Kalb (Jackson, formerly of Alinea, Joël Robuchon, and *Top Chef* fame) with pastas, pizzas, and craft cocktails.

The Post will open in mid-December; however, design renderings provide a sneak peek into what we can expect. Fishbein and Miller recognize that retail shopping is alive and well, and at this little corner of Montecito, it certainly will be. "Montecito already has incredible places to gather, but we're excited to add a fresh dimension—a place where people can start their morning over coffee or unwind with a special evening out," shares Miller.



URNOKOS BY MEG SANDAU

(Courtesy of KAP Studio)

# New Neighbors in the Upper Village

The Old Firehouse building on East Valley Road was most recently home to Lucca Antiques. But its newest resident will be the furniture and homewares juggernaut Restoration Hardware (RH), or as my mom likes to call it, “Resto.” At first glance, a big-box furniture store in a place like Montecito seems unusual. But, I say, it makes perfect sense. A Restoration Hardware in Montecito is as natural as an armadillo in Texas, especially since this new location will have a café and wine bar. Moreover, the RH CEO and largest shareholder Gary Friedman has articulated a desire to turn Restoration Hardware into an American LVMH, so is the 93108 really such an unnatural fit for such a flagship?

Just across the street, the Wine Bistro is poised for a revival. It will soon be home to Little Mountain restaurant, led by chef Joel Viehland (formerly of Noma), who was named Best Small Town Chef in America by *Cooking Light*, and two husband-and-wife duos Graham Duncan and Courtney Smith and Bryan and Eve Schreier. Expect an opening sometime in spring or early summer.



# A Roundabout Way of Saying How Much I Love This Town



**T**hese shifts, large and small, are part of the ongoing evolution of Montecito, a testament to its adaptability and resilience. I'd be remiss if I didn't discuss the new roundabouts in all their glory. Not everyone's a fan, but the truth is they're safer and reduce traffic (ask anyone from Carmel, Indiana, famous for having over 150 roundabouts). I remember what it was like before to stop and wait for the people who stopped before you, only to be cut off by the person who stopped after you. All that stopping, and for what? These roundabouts will reduce the madness. They're symbols of our progress, of our willingness to improve.

These thoughts crossed my mind after I dropped my sister at her destination. Traveling along Coast Village Road, I made my way to the roundabout where Coast Village connects with Olive Mill, connects with Jameson, connects with the 101 freeway—so many possibilities, so many options to choose from. I took the first exit and went to Butterfly Beach, parked on Channel Drive, and watched the waves crash on the shore. Maybe after my respite, I'll grab an iced mocha from Caffe Luxxe and wander the Country Mart. Or, perhaps I'll grab a loaf of that delectable lemon bread from Pierre Lafond. That's the thing about this beguiling little town with just eight and a half thousand residents: you find yourself wanting to hang around. 