

# MOSS LANDING/ An eclectic mix

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"I've noticed more people are attracted to coming here and finding out what it's all about," Werner said. "It's a neat getaway that doesn't take long to go to, but is a whole different world."

## An enchilada empire

Other business owners, who each share a large piece of the town's pie say Moss Landing is just coming into its potential.

In 1978, Ray and Jan Retez took a chance on a run down garage and fisherman's bar that quickly expanded into a Mexican coastal cuisine restaurant that's now a local landmark called The Whole Enchilada.

Today, nearly three decades later, they own a constellation of three restaurants, a bar and a newly opened produce marketplace at the corner of Highway 1 and Moss Landing Road.

No surprise, they say.

"Moss Landing is the lasting oasis of the California coast," Ray Retez said. "It had this flair about it — plus we looked at the highway. The thing about it is at any time of the year there are people from all over using it."

Ray Retez's business acumen last month won him one of the inaugural Monterey County "Salute to Small Business" awards from Union Bank of California and KSBW-TV in Salinas. He was honored for his contributions to hospitality and tourism.

Along with Roy Blanco, owner of Blanco Construction, and their son-in-law, Luis Solano, a chef, the Retezes' latest venture is The Whole Enchilada Marketplace.

Opened a couple of months ago on Highway 1 near the couple's Lighthouse Grill restaurant, the store offers a variety of fresh, locally grown organic foods.

The Retezes also own the Moss Landing Inn, a bar that draws people from all walks of life with its laid-back atmosphere and live music on weekends.

Retez said Moss Landing is a place wealthy in possibilities, particularly in agriculture.

"To me, it's been the most exciting time in my life," he said. "I've gotten to meet the cross section of America."

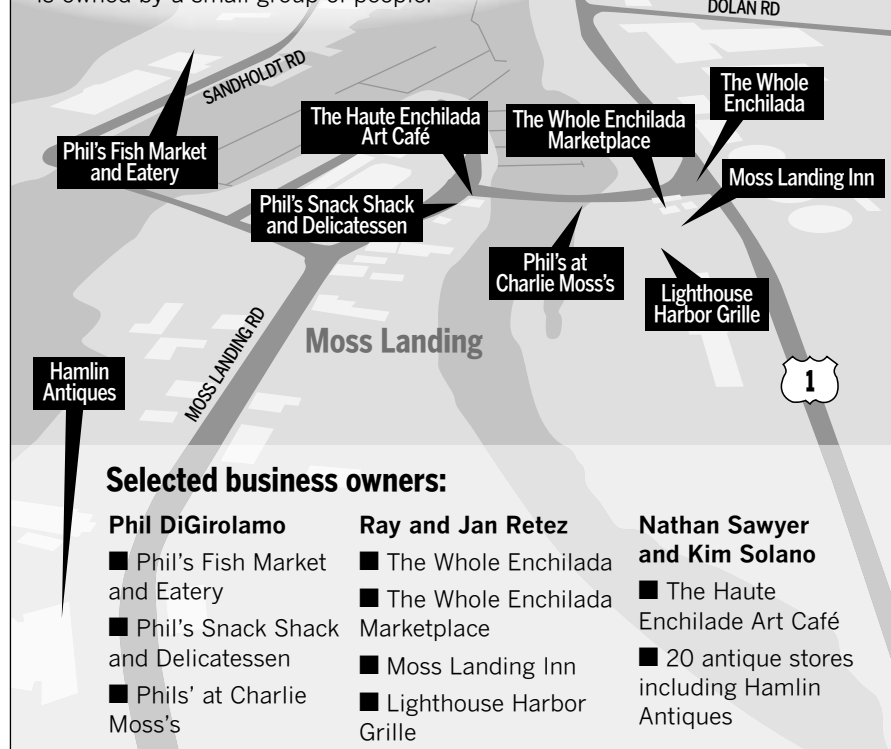
## 'Reason to get off highway'

Moss Landing is home to dozens of antique stores, 20 of which share Nathan Sawyer — owner of Hamlin Antiques — and Kim Solano, the Retezes' daughter, as landlords. Sawyer and Solano are also co-partners in the Haute Enchilada Art Café located near the enclave of antique stores clustered in the heart of Moss Landing.

Sawyer and his former business partner, Roy Hamlin, who died two

## Concentrated ownership

Much of Moss Landing's business community is owned by a small group of people:



RICHARD GREEN/BUSINESS 101

Kim Solano and Nathan Sawyer, seen Oct. 18, are co-partners in Moss Landing's Haute Enchilada Art Café.

years ago, founded the antiques "village."

A self-educated antiques expert, Sawyer said the business faces a double challenge from online shopping. Not only does the Internet cut down on foot traffic to local shops, it's raising prices throughout the market.

"It's getting harder and harder to get

high-quality goods, because prices keep going up and we try to keep things affordable," Sawyer said. "After all, we are a tourist place and not a big city."

Moss Landing will remain that way, he said, because of its designation as a highly protected coastal area. Situated at the mouth of Elkhorn Slough,

the community is home to the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories and the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute.

"We're at the center of marine ecological preservation," Sawyer said. "There isn't much room to grow; there's only two vacant lots left on Moss Landing Road, and the sewer system is almost reaching its capacity."

Within limited space, Sawyer said, the town has an eclectic mix of people from fishermen to "working class America."

"It's a very unique place," he said. "There's nothing quite like it in our area, and that's why it's a great reason to get off the highway."

## A fishy story

Those who do stop have plenty to tempt the palate. Besides the Retez restaurants and various farm stands, former dock-worker Phil DiGirolamo has carved out a lucrative niche in the Moss Landing dining market.

DiGirolamo's three restaurants — Phil's Fish Market & Eatery, Phil's Snack Shack and Delicatessen, and Phil's at Charlie Moss's — have become local hot spots.

The Food Network Channel's "Road Tasted" show featured his Market & Eatery in July.

DiGirolamo came to town in 1968, working for his father loading boats at the fishing docks until a stroke of good fortune in the mid-1970s.

Desperate to sell a batch of California king salmon, he and his father ran ads for a week in newspapers from Monterey County to Sacramento.

Finally, DiGirolamo said, "We placed the fish in bins of ice and all kinds of people showed up from all over to buy."

Drawing on his background cooking for his family's restaurant in Monterey, he decided to open a fish market in Moss Landing, which later expanded to the now widely known Market & Eatery at 7600 Sandholdt Road.

But the working port that launched his career is dealing with strict government fishing regulations, such as the near-ban on this year's salmon harvest.

"The fishing industry has taken a really hard hit," DiGirolamo said. "I don't know how long it will sustain."

That could mean even more former fish workers turning to new careers, including in restaurants. So far, he said, competition hasn't been a problem.

"We have a lot of harmony here, which is important," DiGirolamo said. "We (restaurateurs) all get along, and if we can help each other, we do."

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