

A Whale of a Return

La Jolla's La Valencia Hotel answers the call for a classic to rise again

BY DEANNA MURPHY | PHOTO BY VINCENT KNAKAL

La Valencia General Manager Summer Shoemaker, SDCM Beverage Director Eric Johnson, SDCM Executive Chef and Managing Partner Brian Redzikowski, and SDCM Owner/Operator Matt Spencer



WHEN YOU'RE AN ICON, sometimes change can be a bumpy ride. And when you're the historic and revered La Valencia Hotel, with a public who's deeply invested in your role within the community, there's more than yourself to consider. So when the venerated pink La Jolla landmark made the decision to close its beloved but aging Whaling Bar in 2013 and merged the space with the adjacent Café la Rue, surely it wasn't made without careful and extensive research. But still.

The public response to the transition was swift and not entirely favorable. "From a public perception, the love affair was and remains the Whaling Bar," says La Valencia General Manager Summer Shoemaker, who joined the hotel in 2019, well after the change took place. "It's been consistently a question of 'When is the Whaling Bar coming back?' I think probably even since the day that Café la Rue opened, to some degree."

So, after a decade, La V has announced an about-face: the return of the Whaling Bar and the resumption of its rightful position on Prospect Street. According to Shoemaker, though public opinion was only softly solicited via a survey, people were more than eager to share their thoughts on what they'd like to see in its new form. "We didn't even broadcast or advertise it," says Shoemaker. "It was just lightly pushed out there, and we got over 600 comments and completed surveys back."

In addition to the consensus on the need for the Whaling Bar's return, there was agreement on a few key elements that stood out to the La V team. "It was really surprising how many people consistently said over and over that they wanted it to be dark [inside] and that was of utmost importance, and how much they really cherished the booths," recalls Shoemaker, who says that the feedback was influential in design decisions for the new Whaling Bar. Of course, paramount to many was that the mural that graced the original Whaling Bar's walls — one

for which it was ultimately named, in fact — also returned. Shoemaker confirms that yes, the work, *The Whale's Last Stand* by Wing Howard, will be there, but not exactly as it once hung. When its removal in 2013 proved challenging, it was divided into sections and thus, no longer a single piece, will find new glory as a triptych in its reprise.

Though this particular change was necessary, the modification is in line with the broader vision for an updated Whaling Bar that blends old and new. "The space is different. It's not going to be identical. We think of it as a new iteration in honor of the history of this beloved bar," says Shoemaker.

Another unique twist is the onboarding of restaurant group SDCM, whose collection includes a spectrum of establishments throughout the county from the edgy donut shop Devil's Dozen to downtown destination Kettner Exchange to Cardiff's acclaimed Waverly, to manage daily operations at the Whaling Bar. Shoemaker says the decision to tap SDCM stemmed from anticipation that this will be a high volume concept that a seasoned third party could assist with and help to meet the site's lofty goals and expectations, both internal and external.

It's a sensitive endeavor, but SDCM Owner/Operator Matt Spencer is up to the task. "SDCM has a deep respect for the history of the Whaling Bar, the La Valencia team, and the locals who have supported the establishment over the years," he says. "We're taking careful consideration and working closely with Summer [Shoemaker] at La Valencia to review past surveys and menus dating back decades to honor and preserve favorite items while complementing older menus with updated twists."

Brian Redzikowski, SDCM's executive chef and managing partner, also embraces the role with eyes wide open. "Being part of the historic hotel is exciting for us," he says, adding sagely, "I think we go in not trying to reinvent the wheel." Redzikowski has equal enthusiasm for expanding his repertoire to align with La Valencia's Mediterranean DNA, noting that he'll lean into Basque flavors that pull from Southern France and Northern Spain influences as well. The desired result? "Keep the cuisine simple and classic, using as much local and sustainable product possible," he says. Seasoned pro Eric Johnson, SDCM's beverage director, will showcase his expertise in crafting the Whaling Bar's cocktail menu.

Those eagerly anticipating Whaling Bar's renaissance will have to wait just a bit longer, however. Plans for a grand reopening are projected for year's end. But, while no festivities are firmly in place as of yet, Shoemaker is already guessing there'll be a need for far more than just one event to accommodate the devoted legions of fans who, undoubtedly, can't wait to resume their love affair with the Whaling Bar. lavalencia.com

HISTORICAL PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LA VALENCIA HOTEL



Mid-century-era images capture the timeless glory of La Valencia and its beloved Whaling Bar, including its famed booths, while an ad campaign slogan encapsulates its position as the neighborhood hotspot