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**Jimmy Nelson**  
**« Before they pass away »**

# SANTA BARBARA'S FUNK ZONE

by Christine Davis

Santa Barbara's Funk Zone, an old industrial neighborhood that has risen from fishy to fashionable within just the last few years, buzzes and fizzes with energy. Blooming with pizzazz and booming with life, it's now the happening place, with vibrant bars, cafes and restaurants as well as a hip art scene.

Often called the American Riviera, Santa Barbara offers a paradise for hikers, sports enthusiasts, shoppers, foodies, and wine aficionados. It has perfect weather and unbelievable natural beauty with a picturesque beachfront rimmed by the Santa Inez Mountains. High-end

boutiques, galleries, bars and restaurants line State Street, and visitors delight in Santa Barbara's landmark County Courthouse, resplendent with Andalusian architectural elements, as well as its 18th century Mission, one of the most beautiful on the California coastline.

With its brawny commercial vibe, the Funk Zone contrasts vividly with Santa Barbara's mainstays; it's like walking into a different world. Historically, the 12-block district, just off State Street and steps away from the ocean and Stearns Wharf, was filled with bustling workshops, processing plants and markets that served the



Couple\_at\_Mission\_Looking\_Forward, courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara, photographer Ron Berg

fishing industry and the waterfront. Artists and surfboard shapers also set up their studios in the area, because of its low rents.

"In the early days, ships were offloaded there, and it was more of a working-class neighborhood with lumberyards and welding shops. Bits and pieces still exist," says Santa Barbara Arts Commissioner Ginny Brush. "Also, it had always been arts related.

"From our perspective, with our very regimented downtown with wrought iron and stucco, we tried to keep this particular area more contemporary and we encouraged more arts-related activities."

It was all fairly low-key until the Urban Wine Trail got going. That's when the Funk Zone's spirit (or spirits, if you will) lifted, thanks to a cluster of wine tasting rooms that were also attracted by the district's affordable rents.

The Urban Wine Trail trend evolved naturally, says winemaker, Seth Kunin. "Santa Barbara is a tourist destination and corporate retreat. Visitors can take the 40-mile winding-road drive to the wineries in Santa Inez Valley, but now they have the option to experience Santa Barbara wine quick and conveniently in town.

"It's simple logistics and geography. We just expanded what we already offered."

Santa Barbara Winery, which opened in 1962, was joined by two more wineries in 2001. In 2006, a half-dozen more opened. "They produced a little



"American Riviera, Photo courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara, Jim Corwin, photographer



Photo courtesy of Christine Davis



Valley Project courtesy of Ciro Coelho



Photo courtesy of Kunin Wines

map card for hotels as a marketing thing; it was not a formal association," Kunin says. "We opened in 2008, and were part of the second trough.

"People saw our success and the group got bigger." Since then, Santa Barbara's Urban Wine Trail has grown to include 26 establishments; half are clustered in the Funk Zone, and two are his:



Photo, Seth courtesy of Kunin Wines

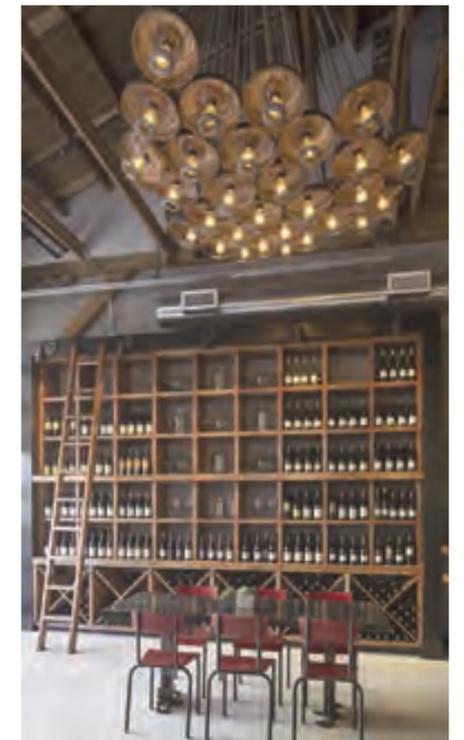


Photo courtesy of Erin Feinblatt Photography

Kunin Wines and the Valley Project.

"Kunin Wines focuses on more rustic Syrah and Zinfandel, and kind of evolved into brands for Rhone-style wine," Kunin says. "Then three years ago, we realized that Santa Barbara's new vineyards were growing leaps and bounds and we wanted to try new varietals and vineyards, so we started the Valley Project, totally focused on regions of American Viticulture Areas. The little microclimates of Santa Barbara is what makes the wine unique, and our idea is to get people to think of wine in the sense of space."

The Arts Fund's, which has served as an emerging-artist incubator since 1988, became a community gallery at about the same time that the Urban Wine Trail blossomed. "We used to give a stipend and a show to an individual artist every year, but we wanted to broaden our reach," says Marcello Ricci, The Arts Fund's program director. "Now we showcase Santa Barbara artists throughout the year; we also have group shows and a teen arts mentorship program."

Fifteen years ago, artist and The Art Fund's executive director, Brad Nack, used to keep his works-in-progress in one of the containers in a fenced-in yard a block down the street. "I'd put up a sheet for shade, and I'd like to have about 20 canvases going at once. Then I'd cram them all back in the container and leave. I never thought of it as an artists' area. I'd just go there to work."

Nothing much was happening at that time, he recalls. "It was sort of arbitrary. Artists did have studios here, but they weren't thriving and it wasn't a community.

"Then a few years ago, some artists thought we should make this area more viable as an artists' destination. And now people are buying art here."



Photo courtesy of Erin Feinblatt Photography

That's good news for artists, but as the Funk Zone gains popularity, will artists be able to afford to stay?

"We'll have to adapt, but thanks to the Castagnola brothers (their families still own the property in the area), they rent reasonably," Nack says.

New Funk Zone ventures have remained loyal to the area's humble origins; they rebuild or reuse rather than tear down. For example, The Art Fund gallery used to be an old fish market. Nack points to an unusual bump in the floor. "See that? That used to be a drain that connected to the dishwasher," he says.

"Galleries are hidden away in weird little spaces," he adds. Down the alley, his neighbors, assemblage artists Philip Koplin and Dan Levin, share a space in a repurposed refrigerator unit that once served as a wine cave, and across the street, Erika Carter, Donna Ayscough, Liz Brady and Virginia McCracken share Green House Studios, a vintage cottage that had belonged to Mary Castagnola Acquistapace for 70 years. Carter's acrylics are



Cabana Home, Photo courtesy of Christine Davis

the main thrust of Ayscough's work.

"The Funk Zone has always been an area where artists hid out, and rent has always been cheaper, but now the light is shining," says Erika Carter, who lives in a nearby condo. "I'm not opposed to the tasting rooms, but the vibe has changed and it's pushing out the artists. A proposed development behind us has promised to include 20 affordable art studios, so there is support. Hopefully, we'll be part of that influence. We are thinking about ways to stay."

"Rather than worry, it's best to take advantage of what we have right now," Philip Koplin says. "We have a great community of galleries and artists, and the Funk Zone has not been completely taken over by developers. There are still interesting corners where people can explore art and artists -- my studio is a former refrigeration unit by the dumpsters. Visitors stumble around; turn here; go



Photo:patio: LesMarchands, courtesy of Erin Feinblatt Photography

influenced by 19th-century Mexican retablos. McCracken does assemblages and the subjects of Brady's oil paintings are swimming animals. Color is

there; go upstairs; and they're sure to find something interesting."

Artists and wineries got a buzz going, so to



Painting by Erika Carter, Green House Studios, photo courtesy of Christine Davis



Photo courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara, photographer Mark Weber



Photo courtesy of Erin Feinblatt Photography

speak. Crista Dix's Wall-Space, a bona fide gallery moved in, as well as the family-owned Cutler's Artisan Spirits, which hailed from bootlegging days. A microbrewery and tasting room, Figueroa Mountain Brewery, opened; it currently has a two-year waiting list for spots to hang patrons' personal steins. A car dealership building from the 1920s now houses an antiques collective, The Blue Door.

Then, just a year ago, the popular farm-to-table restaurant with a family-style shared-plate menu, The Lark, was launched, along with its owners' other enterprises: the Lucky Penny pizzeria/coffee house/public art installation, Les Marchands Wine Bar, and the Santa Barbara Wine Collective. "We are located at Ground Zero, smack dab in the middle of the Funk Zone," says co-owner Sherry Villanueva.

"Previously on the site was the Castagnola



Photo courtesy of Christine Davis



courtesy of Ron Berg, photographer Ron Berg

brothers' commercial fish-processing plant, which they built in the 1920s," she says. "They were fisherman and had brought in huge catches off the channel, processed them, cleaned them, packed them, and shipped them out by railroad. They also had a fish market and little restaurant."

Keeping the ambiance and restoring Castagnolas' original buildings add to the charm. Along with its busy dining room and terrace, The Lark features a large communal dining table, where casual/elegant diners wait in line to be seated. "Everything we serve is meant to share, and the communal table is my favorite place to sit for sure. People have fun meeting each other and eating together," Villanueva says.

"The Funk Zone is original, eclectic and fun. I can't imagine being in any other neighborhood."

And while new endeavors are expensive to put in place, local businesses work hard to keep the artists as neighbors, through mural programs, art projects and art shows, she adds.

"I have high hopes for the area," Nack says. "It's really exciting right now because we are on the verge of having a lot of things happen, and visitors will be witnessing the transformation." ♦

#### SIDEBAR

Hotel Indigo, 121 State Street, features a satellite exhibition space for the Museum of Contemporary Art with openings, artists' talks and rotating art exhibitions. The European-style boutique hotel offers 41 rooms, some with private outdoor gardens and mountain views. Amenities include art library, business center and fitness room. 805-966-6586

The Harbor View Inn, offering rooms and suites with private patios or balconies, is a four-diamond resort on the beachfront located at 28 W. Cabrillo Boulevard. 800-755-0222

Funk Zone tour: Eat This, Shoot That! features a food and photo tour of Funk Zone establishments. Enjoy bites and drinks while learning about local history as well as receiving photography tips. 805-699-6719



Photo courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara, Photographer Ron Berg