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Gold River Messenger

Written by the people, for the people

Volume 2 • Issue 3

Serving Gold River and Sacramento County

March, 2014

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*****ECRWSS*****

Cordova Business Pride

GOLD RIVER, CA (MPG) - The Grapevine Independent and the Gold River Messenger are rolling out this year's "Cordova Choice Awards", giving the people a voice to vote for their favorite local businesses.

Voters can show their support for where they work, shop and play by sending in their vote from the advertised form in this newspaper or by going online to www.CordovaChoiceAwards.com and completing the online form.

The awards will be presented at this year's "Cork & Fork" event to be held at the Sacramento Marriott Rancho Cordova on March 14th from 6:30pm - 9pm. The event will highlight an evening of gourmet delights from some of your favorite restaurants, breweries and wineries.

Goals of "Cork & Fork" event include; Raising money to support the mission of the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership, to generate awareness about the programs and resources the Partnership provides, to support the Partnership's goal to build a strong community of children, youth, and families, and to bring together like minded community members and socially conscious businesses.

There will be randomly chosen prize winners from the many



voters of the Choice Awards. Two people will win two passes each to the event. Two other voters will win two game day passes each to a regular season home game at the Sacramento River Cats at Raley Field.

The Choice Awards are given to businesses located in Rancho Cordova, Gold River, Mather, Anatolia, or Sacramento zip code 95827. Local businesses take great pride in being the top vote getters in their category.

All votes must be received no later than March 12th at 6:00 pm at the office of Messenger Publishing Group. Only one vote per person. All voting entries must have complete information or the votes will not be counted.

To purchase tickets for the Cork and Fork event please contact Chris Clark at the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership, 916.361.8684 ext 281 or via the website www.CorkFork.org.

Breakfast for the Birds

Story and Photo by Susan Maxwell Skinner

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG)

- If omelets and ornithologists seem odd pairings, all eggs dished up Effie Yeaw Nature Center's Bird and Breakfast event are unfertilized. No chick will be injured in the making of this breakfast.

Just as well, because fundraiser's patrons are -- from beginner to experts -- true bird lovers. And the March 22 and 23 events will incorporate their most peckish dream: all you can view; all you can eat. On a crisp morning in Effie Yeaw's 80-acre preserve, binoculars will likely zoom in on nesting hummingbirds, broody hawks and migratory species returning from winter vacations. Given the season, mating displays are inevitable and Audubon Society guides will lead voyeurs to view the anything-goes program. An hour-plus trek rambles through the preserve and along river banks. Though deer and piscine views are likely, flighted species are this event's gee-whiz material. Few observers could spot a thumb-nail size hummingbird nest. To view it through a telephoto scope -- bulging with microscopic babies -- is beyond cute. "Audubon people research our preserve and the riverside in advance," says Effie Yeaw staffer Betty Cooper. "They know where the cool stuff is and will lead small groups from spot to spot, explaining what they see."



Black crested herons are among species likely to be viewed at Effie Yeaw's March 23 and 24 avian safaris. The weekend fundraiser includes guided walks and bang-up breakfasts.

A 24-year spring tradition for many Effie Yeaw supporters, the \$40 (\$35 for American River natural History Association or Audubon members) safari is followed by a gourmet breakfast on Saturday. "It has always sold out and we've hated turning people away," says Cooper. "Last year we expanded it to two days. Both sold out. On Sunday, Carmichael Kiwanis will serve a pancake breakfast." Saturday's foray does not accommodate children. Family-friendly Sunday includes kids for \$10 (\$8 for ARNHA or Audubon tykes).

A silent auction of bird-related goodies accompanies breakfast. Proceeds assist the Nature Center's survival. Promises Cooper. "It's a rare opportunity to experience animal lifecycles and study the things you often pass by without seeing." Bird and Breakfast is not recommended for very young children. Participants should wear comfortable shoes and bring binoculars.

"Bird and Breakfast" begins at 8 a.m., both days. Bookings are essential and numbers are limited. To learn more about the fundraiser, call (916) 489-4918.

www.GoldRiverMessenger.com

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Congressman Bera Tours Sacramento County Farms and Businesses Impacted by Drought

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG) - Congressman Ami Bera recently toured local dairy and cattle farms in Elk Grove and Rancho Murieta, as well as companies in Folsom that rely on the local clean water supply, to survey and bring attention to the local impacts of California's drought. Bera brought a representative from the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service along for the farm tours so that the federal agency could learn more about the drought's impact on Sacramento County. "California's historic drought is hurting many Sacramento County small businesses and farmers, which impacts not only individuals, but our entire local economy," said Bera. "I'm doing everything I can to both help those being affected in the short term, and to find long-term solutions for securing water access and storage that add to our water supply rather than taking from it."



Bera visited Walter Hardesty Beef, Van Steyn Dairy, and Van Vleck Ranch. The ranchers raised concerns about having to

cull their herds to stay afloat as production costs rise. Though ranchers are no strangers to drought, the current drought

conditions are worsened, the say, by several dry years in a row. The Sacramento County Farm Bureau helped arrange the tours.

Bera also visited Kikkoman Soy Sauce manufacturing plant and Gekkeikan Sake factory in the City of Folsom. Both companies located in the area because of its direct access to clean surface water and agricultural products in the valley. Both companies are conserving water in ways that have yet to impact production, but have concerns if the drought situation does not improve. The drought is anticipated to cause price increases for the agricultural products that are essential to the production of soy sauce and sake, such as rice, soy, and wheat. In addition to the tours this week, Bera held a Drought Resources Workshop Tuesday with representatives from the USDA and Small Business Administration to inform local famers and small business owners about the resources available to them from the federal government. Those who were unable to attend the workshop

but need help can call Bera's office at (916) 635-0505 or visit his Drought Relief Resources page at bera.house.gov/drought-relief for more information. Bera is also working in Congress to preserve Sacramento County's water supply. He has helped lead the fight against the misguided Bay Delta Conservation Plan to build tunnels under the Delta, and a recent partisan water grab bill. Both would take already-scarce water from Sacramento County and send it to other parts of the state. He also voted in January to reauthorize the Emergency Drought Relief Act and helped secure funding for upgrades to the Folsom Dam that will increase its water storage capacity to help during future dry periods and give us greater flood protection. ★
Congressman Ami Bera, M.D. represents Sacramento County. For more updates on Rep. Bera visit <http://www.bera.house.gov>.

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To submit your articles, information, announcements or letters to the editor, please email a Microsoft Word file to: Publisher@CarmichaelTimes.com. Be sure to place in the subject field "Attention to Publisher". If you do not have email access, please call us at 916-773-1111.

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To All You 30-Somethings



By Gold River Resident
Jodie Barringer Myers

(Men are welcome to read this too. Some of these topics will apply to you; some, not so much. But to all, this is a cautionary tale.)

If you're in your 30's or 40's, let me guess, you're thinking: Oh, I won't age. I work out, eat healthily, drink plenty of water, blah-blah-blah. It won't happen to me. Well, trust me, my friend, the Aging Train is coming fast, and it's heading right for you.

Go put on your bikini, however skimpy. Now go parade around in it...on a busy street...in a bustling metropolis if you feel like it. Because nothing will jiggle, sway or droop. And you will gross out nobody.

Then go take a gander in the mirror, under that horrid and cruel fluorescent lighting. Your face will look dewy and smooth and creamy and tight. Because it is.

Do you have like a big ol', thick, full head of hair? A fat ponytail? Rejoice in it. Because there will be a day when your hair thins and your pony becomes puny and pithy.

I know, I know...you think gray hair only happens to Grandma. Well, gray does happen, and it will happen to you. One day soon you'll have to spend an extra-exorbitant, ridiculous amount of money to try to cover it all up.

And feel free to put on those extra skinny, low-cut jeans. Prance around in them if you wish.

Goodness knows the only muffin-top you have to worry about right now is whether to eat

the top off that third banana nut muffin you just enjoyed.

Which reminds me...after eating that third muffin, feel free to indulge in a rather large bowl of ice cream... or cherry pie... or massive hunk of sourdough bread -- or whatever your edible guilty pleasure is. Because we both know that your metabolism hasn't even begun to think about slowing down. (Yes, you are a brat.)

Do you like to jump rope ? Go for it! Jump high, energetically and often. Also, enjoy hearty laughing and profuse sneezing now. Because one day your bladder will leak, a little or a lot.

Either way, it's annoying.

Did you not get enough sleep last night? Poor dear. Out too late? Did your child keep you up all night? Not to worry. You still look bright-eyed and well-rested this morning.

And don't worry your pretty (or handsome) little head about consuming too much salt or soy sauce, or drinking that extra glass of wine. Your eyes will not look puffy and swollen in the

Go to J Crew! Today. Buy the cutest, shortest skirt on the rack. Because with each passing year, your thighs will get flabbier and mushier, and your skirts will get longer and longer.

After you go to J Crew, stop by Lululemon. Buy one of those darling headbands – you know the kind that pulls your hair back really tight and exposes every acre of your forehead?

Wear it! Wear it often and proudly and tightly! Because there will come a day when you will not want to flaunt your forehead in public. Or in private.

As for your currently bright, white teeth, show 'em off. Smile, a lot. Eat a lot of spinach. In other words, don't fret about certain foods sticking to your tartar-covered teeth. One day – sooner than you think is humanly possible – your teeth will become yellowish and/or discolored. And some teeth will be more gross looking than others.

Got menstrual cramps? Don't complain to me. Instead, revel in them. Because, sadly, one day you won't have them anymore.

Do you have your annual gynecological examination next

week? Be grateful for those doctor visits, and stirrups, and all that stuff. Because, woefully, your eggs will one day become all shriveled up, and you'll need those exams only once every three years.

And if you think hot flashes and night sweats only apply to out-of-shape ladies like your great-aunt Edna, you'd be wrong. So very wrong.

Do you like deep-V or scoop necklines? You go, Girl! The lower, the scoopier, the better. The decade will come soon enough when it becomes imperative that you creatively yet effectively hide your once-flawless décolletage.

And are you tired of having to shave your legs, like, every day? Do not complain. Because when you get to be circa 50, the hair on your legs will grow at less than a snail's pace, if at all. But alas, you'll still need your razor — to shave your newly-acquired beard and mustache.

Speaking of legs, love and nurture those long, tanned appendages right now. Just don't freak out when several years from now you get little white spots/dots on your limbs. They'll be there to stay. (It's called "hypopigmentation." Comes with age.) You've been warned.

And look lovingly upon your lithe, long, nubile fingers. Because for whatever reason, they will turn pudgy some day. Pinky-swear.

And lastly, don't forget to — um — shoot. I forgot. Oh, yeah. Appreciate your ability to multi task and remember the myriad things you have to do and places you have to go. Because some day you will become forgetful, and you will have to make lists for absolutely everything.

Perhaps most importantly, and what applies to us all, no matter what our age: Live today to the fullest. Because these are the good old days.

Jodie Barringer Myers can be reached at jbthinmint@hotmail.com. Her blog is cottagecheeseandcrepepaper.com ★

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By Kay Burton

Sophie is an elegant, loving & loyal chocolate Standard Poodle. Owner Warren Anapolsky and his late wife Morissa wanted a big dog that was non-shedding and intelligent. Named Sophie because of her French heritage, she became a member of the family immediately. Sophie has been showered with love, kisses and lots of doggie treats. Morissa primarily walked Sophie in Pioneer Village and on the many paths of Gold River. Most of their long-time neighbors recognize Sophie because of her friendly nature (mostly towards humans much to their dismay) and her regal appearance. When Morissa was killed in a car accident on December 1, 2010 Sophie was grief stricken. She spent weeks waiting for Morissa to come home and adjusting to life without her best friend. Warren immediately took over the responsibilities of walking, feeding, and entertaining Sophie on a daily basis. He felt so fortunate that he had Sophie waiting for him when he would return home from work. Being greeted by her helped Warren to soften the loss of Morissa, a devoted dog owner and quintessential wife. After his tragic loss a neighbor, Laurie Cronin



Photo courtesy of Kay Burton.

offered to help with Sophie. Warren works long hours and the thought of Sophie being home all day alone was heart-breaking. Now Warren walks Sophie in the morning and evening, along with Laurie, her husband Kelly, son Jack, and daughter Mary Lou, walk and play with Sophie during the day. Their dedication and love for Sophie has been instrumental in Sophie's continued health and happiness, especially in the wake of Morissa's death. Without the help of Laurie especially, Sophie may not have been able to adjust to life without Morissa. Morissa and Sophie loved to walk on the paths behind Pioneer Village. In April 2011, Warren contacted the Gold River Community Association and asked if he could donate a bench to honor Morissa's unique bond with Sophie. The bench would be constructed on a portion of the path frequented by Morissa and Sophie, located on the north side of Gold Strike where the late Robert Powell lived. Warren chose a quiet and serene spot and commemorated the bench with a plaque dedicating it to the memory of Morissa, who loved to walk Sophia along the peaceful paths of Gold River. If you see Sophie and Warren walking along these paths, please stop and say hello. Just be careful if you have a dog with you, as Sophie is quite certain she is a human and still seems confused about interacting with her fellow canines.★

Kay Burton is a longtime columnist and supporter of the SSPCA and other rescue groups.
To share your family pet story with our readers, Email: Kay Burton1@comcast.net

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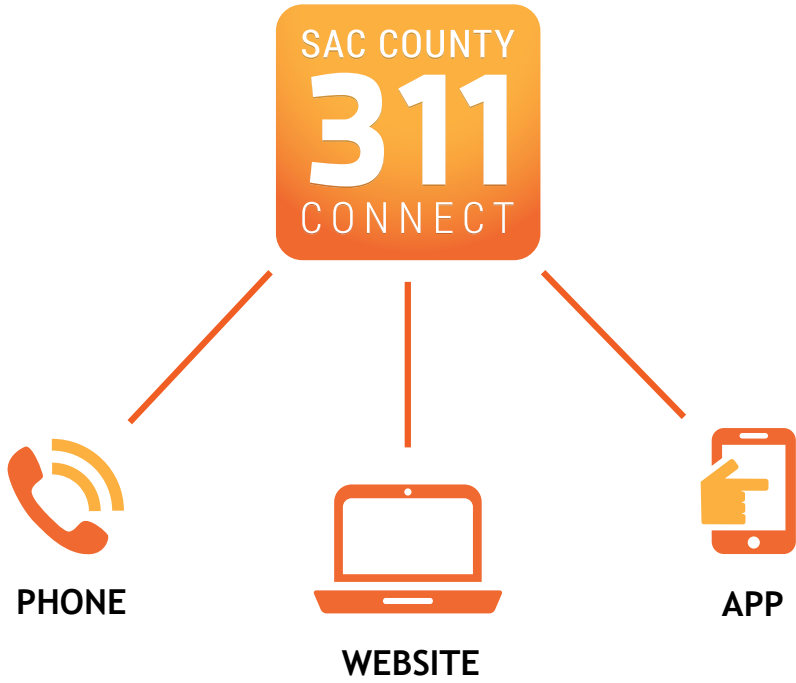
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Solutions for the Local Water Crisis Requires Action



Whether it's government shutdowns or droughts, Congress tends to wait until a crisis to act — and often it's too late. This is why who you elect matters.

By Doug Ose, Republican Candidate for Congress

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG) - We know that government has no control over Mother Nature, but if there was a plan to store more water for dry years, we would not be experiencing such a water crisis today. Whether it's government shutdowns or droughts, Congress tends to wait until a crisis to act - and often it's too late. This is why who you elect matters. This may be the most severe drought in history, but it is not the first, and it won't be the last. To date, Congressman Ami Bera has not introduced a single piece of legislation to help the region's immediate and long-term shortage of water. Instead it's been nothing but

speeches and roundtable discussions - everything short of real leadership. Underscoring his inaction, after voting against a California drought bill, Bera told the Sacramento Bee, 'We all agree there's a problem. Let's sit down and talk about a solution.' Talk is cheap. Action is required now. Congressman Bera should call for an immediate reduction in water released from Folsom Dam — with less water flowing to the ocean, more of our local needs would be served. He has refused to call for legislation denying Federal funding for the Governor's \$25 billion pipe dream that will send what little water we have south. For the long-term, let's build new water supply facilities so we

have enough affordable water to protect our community, jobs, and food supply in the coming years. Water is not a partisan issue. It is essential to protecting our quality of life. That's why finding real and lasting solutions to protecting our local water supply is simply common sense. I worked with both Republicans and Democrats to secure funding for water projects, like increasing the water capacity of Folsom Lake. We got things done, and we can do it again. Now, more than ever before, action is required. *When in Congress, Doug Ose helped secure funding for the Folsom Dam and public water projects to increase water supply. For more information, www.DougOse.com.*

SMUD Appoints Customer Services Director

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG) - The Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) has named Nicole Howard as director of Customer Services. Howard will oversee all customer-related operations, programs and services, including energy efficiency and renewable energy programs. She succeeds Frankie McDermott who was appointed SMUD Chief Customer Officer last month. Since June 2011, Howard has managed Customer Operations, with services that include the Contact Center, billing and credit, field services, and revenue protection (power theft prevention). She was also responsible for implementing operational opportunities made available by SMUD's smart grid initiative. As a 12-year veteran of SMUD, Howard has served the community-owned electric utility in many capacities: as a supervisor in Supply Chain Services; as a cost-scheduling



Nicole Howard

specialist and supplier diversity representative; and as a customer service representative. "Nicole brings a wealth of experience and the leadership skills we need as we continue to move forward into a challenging utility environment," said McDermott. She holds a bachelor's degree in legal studies from UC Berkeley and a master's

degree in public administration from CSU, Dominguez Hills. In addition, she is a graduating Fellow of the Nehemiah Emerging Leaders Program and the Catalyst Leadership Program. She currently sits on the Cosumnes River College Foundation Board. As the nation's sixth-largest community-owned electric service provider, SMUD has been providing low-cost, reliable electricity for more than 65 years to Sacramento County (and a small portion of Placer County). SMUD is a recognized industry leader and award winner for its innovative energy efficiency programs, renewable power technologies, and for its sustainable solutions for a healthier environment. SMUD is the first large California utility to receive more than 20 percent of its energy from renewable resources. For more information, visit smud.org. ★

Hollywood Glitz and Glamour Galore

Ballet Presents Sacramento's Premier Social Event Hollywood Glitz and Glamour Galore

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG) - On March 15th, 2014, from 7 to 11pm, the Memorial Auditorium will be transformed into a glamorous Hollywood supper club, circa the 1930s. While Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire will not be in attendance, the dancers of the Sacramento Ballet will be there, teaching the Continental and leading the Conga Line. It's all part of Sacramento Ballet's Glitz and Glamour Gala! Guests will be treated to a champagne reception, 3-course dinner and live music by the Peter Petty Orchestra. The fabulous supper club will expand into a casino and dance floor, where guests will roll the dice and dancers will harken back to the big band era. Also, Giggle and Riot will bring their photo booth with 30s accessories to glam up photo keepsakes. Excitement builds to the



Guests will be treated to a champagne reception, 3-course dinner and live music by the Peter Petty Orchestra.

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Special Guests: Sacramento Children's Chorus
Lynn Stevens, Conductor

PROJECTED SUPERTITLE TRANSLATIONS

Saturday, May 17, 2014 at 8:00 PM
7:00 PM – Pre-concert talk by Donald Kendrick

Sacramento Community Center Theater
1301 L Street, Sacramento

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Three of My Favorite Things



Lovers Weekend: filled with new experiences, learning and treasuring our local bounty.

Story and Photos
by Alona Thomas

They be, CHOCOLATE, PORT AND LOVERS and not necessarily in that order. When I heard about an event with this theme, I couldn't purchase my ticket fast enough. It took place at the Old Sugar Mill in Clarksburg on Valentines week-end. This was an adventure, a first time visit to the area.

It was a glorious drive along the levy with the Sacramento River on one side, with fishermen in boats, and on the other side cherry/plum trees in blossom. The farms along the way were varied, some were citrus orchards, other grain fields and through the trees, you could see vineyards. The mill was a huge brick structure and very glad I got there at the opening as the parking lot was filling up fast with all those lovers.

HISTORY – Due to blight and draught in 1933, the refining of sugar beets was in danger in Utah. The original sugar company dismantled one of the factories and shipped it piece by piece to Clarksburg via railroad. It began operation in 1935



Chocolate Architect: a true favorite.

and was closed in 1992. The Old Sugar Mill now houses ten winery tasting rooms. It certainly has the feel of a winery with the red brick, wine barrels and sense of nostalgia.

With glass in hand I began my tasting starting with Due Vigne. They did not have a port, but they were paired with one of my true favorites, the Chocolate Architect from Fair Oaks. This chocolate silk is so luxurious; I just had to indulge with the 2010 Russo. The Heringer Estates Winery was pouring a late harvest Petite Sirah Port, definitely yummy. Their port is used by Capital Confections to make a signature truffle. This was a discovery and will definitely visit their shop in Town & Country Village.

To my delight, my Gold River neighbor, Jennifer Kaye was here with her terrific About a Bite goodies. These bite size confections are hand made with the best ingredients. Carvalho Family winery poured Portuguese varietal ports. They suggested substituting port for water in your brownie recipe. Just may have to give that a try.

In an adjacent building there were more chocolates and a glass blower doing demonstrations. Also, had an opportunity to purchase and fill my own personal bottle directly from a port barrel. I met Tylar Peters, Operations Manager & Chef, of the Rendezvous Winery. He is working on developing gourmet finishing sea salts and herb mixtures. I am trying the Sun Ripened Tomato Sea Salt suggested for soups or mixed with herbs for a spice rub. This will require a return visit. Listening to blue grass music on the lawn in the sun, I had a delicious duck taco from the Tomato Truck. It was a day filled with new experiences, learning and treasuring our local bounty. ★

Alona's hobby is food and all the fun it brings. This includes discovering foodie gems in our area, sharing travel adventures and fun times. Contact grcommunityfoodie@gmail.com



The Old Sugar Mill now houses ten winery tasting rooms.

COMING MARCH 15TH

The Dennis Swanberg Show

Dr. Dennis Swanberg, affectionately known as “The Swan”, is a seasoned and solid communicator whose sly wit delivers life-enriching truths to the heart on the wings of laughter.

The Swan has been called “America’s Minister of Encouragement” because of his constant work at lifting hearts and leading people to a richer life through his “one of a kind” humor.



When:

7:00 pm March 15, 2014

Where:

First Baptist Church
of Rancho Cordova
10720 Coloma Road,
Rancho Cordova, CA

Cost \$15
Limited
Seating

Contact
website: fbcrancho.org
Office: (916) 635-4672

Dennis Swanberg is a well qualified teacher, speaker, author, counselor, preacher and TV host. He is happily married to his wife Lauree and is the proud father of two grown sons, Chad and Dusty.

With his down-home charm and heaping helping of hospitality, this Austin, Texas born pastor-turned-comedian has won the hearts of audiences across the country.

This year Swanberg will appear at over 150 churches, conferences, businesses and concert events. He has also authored seven books and an additional book on men's ministry has re-cently hit the marketplace. He has recorded a radio show. And as always, he'll be bringing a note of encouragement, a pocketful of hilarious stories and a great big bag of joy and laughter wherever he goes.

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Cordova Choice Awards 2014



www.CordovaChoiceAwards.com

Cordova Choice Awards 2014 will be held during the “Cork & Fork 2014” event to be held March 14th 6:30-8PM at the Sacramento Marriot Rancho Cordova

Instructions and rules for Cordova Choice Awards 2014
Business must be located in Rancho Cordova, Gold River, Mather, Anatolia, or Sacramento zip code 95827. All votes must be received no later than March 12th at 6:00 pm at the office of Messenger Publishing Group. Votes can be made either by mailing this form to MPG at 7144 Fair Oaks Blvd, Suite 5, Carmichael, CA 95608, or by completing the online form at www.CordovaChoiceAwards.com. Only one vote per person. All voting entries must have complete information or the votes will not be counted. Cordova Choice Awards will be presented at this year’s “Cork & Fork” event. This year’s event will be held at the Sacramento Marriott Rancho Cordova on March 14, 2014 from 6:30pm - 9pm. "Cork & Fork" will highlight an evening of gourmet delights from some of your favorite restaurants, breweries and wineries. Please come out and support this event while giving back to the community.

Goals of “Cork & Fork”
Support the Partnership's goal to build a strong community of children, youth, and families Bring together like minded community members and socially conscious businesses Generate awareness about the programs and resources the Partnership provides Raise money to support the mission of the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership. To purchase tickets for this event please contact Chris Clark at 916.361.8684 ext 281 or via email cclark@thefccp.org. Mail your vote to The Grapevine Independent, 7144 Fair Oaks Blvd., Suite 5, Carmichael, Ca 95608. You can also vote online at www.CordovaChoiceAwards.com



Best Place To Start Your Day _____

Best Lunch Spot _____

Best Dinner Destination _____

Best Burger In Town _____

Best Pizza In Town _____

Best International Cuisine _____

Best Night On The Town _____

Best Family Fun Spot _____

Best Grocery Market _____

Best Hair Salon _____

Best Health And Fitness Spot _____

Best Auto Repair Service _____

Best Veterinarian Service _____

Best Dental Office _____

Best Physician’s Office _____

Best Photographer _____

Best Workplace (50 employees) _____

Best Workplace (200 employees) _____

Best Workplace (200+ employees) _____

Top Vote Getter will be announced at the Awards

Name _____	Telephone _____
Address _____	Email _____

Carnival's Upgraded Inspiration Ship-Shape



atrium is the centerpiece of Carnival's ships, including this one on the Inspiration, which sails out of Long Beach. Photo by David Dickstein.

By David Dickstein

SACRAMENTO REGION, CA (MPG)

I won't lie – some of Carnival Cruise Line's "Fun Ship 2.0" upgrades enjoyed aboard the Conquest last summer in the Caribbean were missing on a recent winter cruise to Ensenada, Mexico on the Inspiration.

OK, so I need fat calories as much as the Sacramento Kings need another loss, but it was a bummer that none of celebrity chef Guy Fieri's signature cheeseburgers ended up in my belly over the course of the 3-day sail in and out of Long Beach. As far as another sense, my eyes were never dazzled by huge LED screens that are part of many of the fresh lineup of production shows. And while dancing ranks No. 100 on my top 100 ways to have fun, sad that had I packed my boogie shoes they wouldn't have stepped foot in Carnival's new dance club concept.

The 2,052-passenger Inspiration and its year-older Fantasy Class sister, the Carnival Imagination, also sailing out of Long Beach, are two ships among Carnival's fleet of 23 that didn't get the full pack of new 2.0 features when they were dry-docked for refurbishment last fall. There's just not enough deck space for Guy's Burger Joint, DJ Irie's Spin'iversity, the Blue Iguana Tequila Bar and Cantina, the Red Frog Rum Bar, the Alchemy Bar and the line's other new ways to eat, drink and be merry on the high seas.

But now having experienced the total 2.0 package and one of scant proportions, I'm actually glad a few ships not festooned in razzle dazzle and branded grub and grog concepts are still with us. It's like Las Vegas. Sure, those behemoth hotel-casinos on the Strip are magnificent, but downtown offers decent-enough properties with reasonable accommodations and minimum bets away from

the dancing waters, pirate battles and erupting volcanos. So let Carnival have its Breeze, Magic, Conquest and the other ships with all the bells and whistles. We're just fine with two floating versions of downtown Las Vegas' Golden Nugget – the Inspiration and Imagination – sailing out of Long Beach, our closest Carnival port.

The recent 3-day Ensenada sail, my 13th cruise in a 10-year span, served two purposes. It allowed me a before-and-after experience as I had taken the Inspiration last March, before it was upgraded. The trip also made for a short and affordable family reunion made up the first cousins. Of the eight of us, half had never sailed with Carnival before and three were cruise virgins. The countless hours of planning were worth it just from the look of amazement on their faces as we boarded the vessel and their responses to the question, "what was your most pleasant surprise," asked as we disembarked three days later.

"The overall quality of the ship, entertainment and food," was Cousin Dawn's answer. "That we had plenty of room in our cabin, even in the bathroom, and the overall value," said Cousin Paul, who, like the rest of us, doubled up to enjoy a fare of just \$397 for a mid-ship, Upper Deck, ocean view cabin.

With nothing to compare the Carnival Inspiration to, the three blood relatives who had never cruised before probably would have been thrilled with just mediocre food, entertainment and accommodations. Napa Valley's French Laundry, a Broadway musical and the Peninsula Beverly Hills it isn't, and even Carnival would admit the 18-year-old ship is in the fleet's bottom third for luxury, but the Inspiration holds its own and then some – even more so since being dry-docked last fall.

The production shows in

the Paris Lounge are new and improved. Goodbye lame attempts for audience participation and even lamer choreography, hello vivacity and an all-round talented cast. The much-needed transformation actually lends freshness to decades-old songs, be they Motown in "Motor City" or disco in "Studio VIP." The Inspiration doesn't have room for the gigantic LED panels that are featured on most of Carnival's other upgraded ships, and as noted, that's not a bad thing. Let the singer-dancers shine, not the millions of digitally programmed pixels. Both shows, refreshing for cruise veterans, mind-blowing for first-timers ("This is on a ship?!" remarked Cousin Karis), will play the Inspiration through 2015, according to cruise director Jeff Bronson.

Another new element brought to the ship is Hasbro, The Game Show, also appearing in the Paris Lounge. These are larger-than-life versions of Connect 4, Yahtzee and other popular family games played by guests plucked from the audience. Sadly, the only time it was offered during the entire cruise conflicted with early-seating dinner. Bronson needs to figure that one out, starting with looking at an afternoon slot. It's too much fun to miss, as this former contestant on the Carnival Conquest knows first-hand, and since the ship features only a fraction of Fun Ship 2.0 upgrades anyway, inhibiting nearly half of the passengers from seeing Hasbro is inexcusable.

Ample, however, is the number of opportunities to laugh in the Candlelight Lounge. A family show is offered each evening along with two adults-only sets in the lounge, which for these shows is renamed the Punchliner Comedy Club. The only change between then and now is that comedian George Lopez now welcomes the audience with a videotaped message. This gets old fast.

What is a breath of fresh air are, well, breaths of fresh air – not on the outside decks where smoking is prohibited, but in the stateroom bathrooms and hallways. The dishrag smell that in March was permeating from shower drains and detectable in some hallway areas was not noticeable on my return cruise. Carnival officials promised that the odorous issue would be addressed when the ship was dry-docked and they delivered. Just like the waiter did on formal night when I ordered seven additional lobster tails with my dinner. Talk about an upgrade. ★



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