

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Riviera Hotel had transformative majesty

Glamour and romance were associated with it

Tracy Conrad

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“Palm Springs goes Continental tonight with the opening of (the) Riviera Hotel’s palatial Riviera Dining Room. General Manger Ted Ratcliff announced that the premiere of Palm Springs’ most elegant dining and dancing spot will be musically saluted by Harold Stern, his \$100,000 Stradivarius and his string orchestra. Stern, who opens a limited engagement of nightly appearances, is expected to add glamour and romance to Riviera’s after-dark hours.”

The notice of Stern’s appearance ran in *The Desert Sun* in November 1959 to mark the start of the season at the Riviera Hotel. Glamour and romance were indeed associated with the Riviera from its inception. Created by Irwin Schulman, at the height of the popularity of his ChiChi club in downtown Palm Springs, the Riviera copied the name of the Las Vegas club opened in 1955. The two desert destinations also had a “Desert Inn” after Vegas copied Palm Springs. Both Riviera resorts would become hangouts for Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and the Rat Pack. Both would host Elvis Presley.

“Excitingly styled by Architect Homer A. Rissman, the Riviera Room is a masterpiece of design and boasts a décor true to its name. The Riviera feeling that pervades the luxurious room, spacious enough to seat 250 persons for dinner, is majestically captured by a large wall mural. Spanning 75 feet of wall space, the mural depicts the picturesque coastline of the Riviera.”

“The gay life of leading Riviera resorts is represented along with replicas of famed landmarks of the area. A realistic effect is achieved through use of third dimensional technique. The mural decorations are a combination of metal,



Aerial view of the Riviera Hotel showing its pinwheel design of buildings surrounding the massive pool, and surrounding golf course.

plastic, wood and mosaics that have been enriched to vivid colors and illumination. They face the glassed area overlooking the swimming pool...”

Conjuring the best of southern Europe, “Architect Rissman has achieved a unique free-flowing pattern in enjoining the Riviera Dining Room, Lido Lounge and Capri Coffee Shop.” Importantly the article continues, “Rissman has so designed the service facilities of the hotel, including its spacious and ultramodern kitchen, that guests are spared contact with service traffic at all times.” Lack of contact with service traffic is always key to good hotel design.

The Riviera Hotel was instantly successful and its commodious Riviera Room became the site for many charity events and shows. It was an evening spot where formal wear was almost always appropriate, even if most nights featured swinging jazz rather than Stradivarius and strings.

Events emphasized the continental theme, with costumes for cocktail waitresses reminiscent of those found in the south of France, gourmet dinner-danc-



The Riviera Hotel advertises the appearance of Harold Stern and his \$100,000 Stradivarius violin. PHOTOS FROM PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

es featuring cuisine from Italy, or Spain or some other exotic, seashore place.

By the middle of the 1960s, the Riviera underwent a \$2,500,000 expansion that added 155 rooms and a convention center. “According to Mark and Irwin Schulman of Beverly Hills, owners, the Riviera now offers more than 500 luxurious accommodations” and the additional private ballrooms provided the hotel with “the most extensive convention facilities” in town. The biggest room sat 3200 people now, providing space for exhibition booths for trade shows and other large events.

The new grand ballroom was also designed by Rissman and went further south in Europe for its inspiration presenting “a Grecian exterior design effect with use of floor-to-ceiling window panels interspersed with gold ‘columns.’”

Presaging sentiments still discussed in Palm Springs, Schulman mused, “In adding the Riviera’s elegant new ballroom, we believe that the facility will serve as a convention showcase for the

area in a setting that is beyond compare.” Pointing out the ability of the Riviera to handle major events, the Schulmans “now look forward to attraction of theatrical, sporting and political events of national stature.”

The Riviera has had multiple incarnations in the decades since, and tens of millions of dollars of further improvements over that time. (Sonny Bono famously opened his restaurant in the 1980s adjacent.)

The hotel will have another life this fall when it reopens as Margaritaville, a themed hotel that caters to followers of singer/songwriter Jimmy Buffet. Buffet’s songs concentrate on the Caribbean and Mexico, rather than the Riviera of southern Europe, but both are meant to make the visitor imagine a beautiful beach here in the sand of the desert.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.