

Carneros Inn plans expansion



PHOTOS BY SCOTT MANCHESTER / The Press Democrat

Dan Philbin, director of facilities, walks in front of the Carneros Inn's major expansion project at the entrance on Highway 12/121. Photo at top shows some of the luxury resort's cottages.

Luxury resort's \$30 million project to include conference center, public plaza

By MICHAEL COIT
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Carneros Inn, a luxury resort that rose on the grounds of a former trailer park in the rolling hills between Sonoma and Napa, is undertaking a \$30 million expansion.

The sprawling complex on Highway 12 is gaining a conference center and outdoor spaces designed to serve large groups and events.

The inn's owners also are creating a public plaza that will form a town center of sorts for the Carneros region, where vineyards and ranches spread over the hillsides above San Pablo Bay.

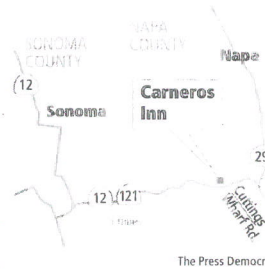
The expansion is designed to add to the allure of a luxurious getaway — nightly room rates range from \$435 to \$1,200 a night. Yet it will also create an informal gathering spot for locals.

"This is really our attempt to connect the hotel with the community and kind of create a downtown Carneros," said Rob Goldberg, president and chief executive of the PlumpJack

Group, the inn's operator. "Many Napa luxury hotels put up walls. They really sequester themselves. We're trying to open up our gates to Wine Country and the locals. We're really trying to embrace it and connect our guests with the growers and the community."

The design elements that open the inn to the community are critical, said Phyllis Gillis, executive director of the Carneros Wine Alliance, a vintners and growers group promoting the region.

"Carneros doesn't have a town center and the community needs a place where they can have meetings, where they have a sense of place," she said.



TURN TO INN, BACK PAGE

INN: Restaurant, general store will flank plaza

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The Carneros Inn opened in November 2003 and the PlumpJack Group took over management in January 2005. The group, founded by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, owns PlumpJack Winery in Napa Valley, the Squaw Valley Inn, restaurants, wine stores and clothing stores. The Carneros Inn is the one property the group does not own.

The inn quickly drew national attention, including spots in Architectural Digest and Interior Design magazines. In 2004, Esquire magazine tabbed the inn as the "Best Hotel for Sex," noting its outdoor showers for two.

Since its opening, The Carneros Inn's lone public space has been the Boon Fly Café, drawing motorists off Sonoma Highway for comfort food.

That will change this summer. The inn's plaza, scheduled for completion in August, will be open to the public and was designed to host farmers markets and other community events.

Flanking the plaza will be a 100-seat restaurant, post office and general store, bocce courts and an outdoor pavilion.

"If you're here a few days, you won't really need to go anywhere," said Brian Gipson, director of sales and marketing.

A 5,000-square-foot conference center frames an outdoor event space with a massive outdoor fireplace.

"We've been missing a key component, which is the conference space. We've just had to turn away so much business be-

cause we didn't have an adequate conference space," Goldberg said.

The barn-like buildings continue the inn's agricultural-industrial design theme. On the outside, wood siding, tin roofs and multi-paned windows evoke a rural impression. On the inside, exposed steel trusses, barrel vaulted skylights and high bands of windows suggest a warehouse look.

Next door, a lap pool and kids' pool with cabanas, fitness barn and yoga studio are scheduled for completion in October.

The project also includes 17 two-bedroom cottages, each the size of a small home with full kitchens. The first six should be ready by Christmas with the remainder done in about a year, but prices have not been set.

To be sure, this is foremost a high-end inn.

Tucked against a low ridge, The Carneros Inn features 86 cottages grouped into a dozen cozy, landscaped settings.

On the outside, they appear like ranch houses with tin roofs. On the inside, they feature modern furnishings, wood-burning fireplaces and oversize bathrooms with heated slate floors, deep soaking tubs and outdoor showers.

Guests walk along gravel paths to a hilltop area where there is a private restaurant and lounge, spa and a pool that appears to pour down a slope beyond.

The site was an RV park when Carneros Partners, a group of investors led by Keith Rogal, purchased it for \$5 mil-

CARNEROS INN

Opened: Fall 2003

Existing: There are 86 cottages, a private restaurant and lounge, spa and pool, fruit tree orchards and expansive landscaped grounds. Cost \$70 million.

Additions: Another 17 cottages, a 5,000-square-foot conference center, 100-seat restaurant, town plaza, post office and general store, lap pool and kids' pool, fitness barn and yoga studio, bocce courts and outdoor pavilion. Cost \$30 million.

lion in 1998. The original plans generated some opposition and the total number of cottages was reduced.

Because the trailer park land-use designation remains, the cottages are prefabricated buildings put on concrete foundations. Also on the site are two dozen resort homes of modular construction selling for upwards of \$1 million, Gipson said.

Two years after its debut, The Carneros Inn boasts a 60 percent annual occupancy rate — comparable with 62 percent occupancy rates last year for Napa and Sonoma county innkeepers. Those are solid numbers for a management group that operates only one other hotel, the Squaw Valley Inn.

"We've learned a lot about what our particular guests love and don't love," Goldberg said.

You can reach Staff Writer Michael Coit at 521-5470 or mcoit@pressdemocrat.com.