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Tradewinds Inn owner Susan Stilwell and interior designer Charles Gruwell stand outside the Carmel landmark.

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD

A \$4-million renovation of the family-owned Tradewinds Inn unveils a distinctly Asian presence

Now & Zen

By **ROBERT MURKIN**
PHOTOS

Illustration courtesy of the author

Stacy Nilwell and the Tradewinds Inn came late being within a few years of each other, and decades later, they're still a package deal.

New proprietor of the Carmel hotel by parents built, Nilwell has a habit of hovering over each room after others, arranging the objects of art just so and tugging on bedspreads for that perfect effect.

"Every time I come into a room, I have to do them the way I want," said Nilwell.

And she's been able to do that — in a really big way — with the year-long renovation of the 44-year-old Inn. A \$4-million project.

Locals will get to take a gander at the new look of the Tradewinds this Sunday, since it's one of the stops on the annual Inn of Distinction Tour, a food-cruise for the

Carmel Heritage Society.

The Tradewinds, built in 1918, last year was stripped down to bare bones for a complete redo, and now has new insulation, electrical and plumbing systems. All that is under the surface, of course. What guests do get to see is

"Bing Crosby and his family used to stay here during every Crosby tournament. We still get a lot of repeat customers from the old days."

Stacy Nilwell
owner

the 28 rooms and beyond in new decor with a distinctly Asian presence, created by well-known interior designer Charles Grawell.

Coating guests at the lobby entrance are a pair of "fox dog" statues, which according to Chinese folklore, guard against evil spirits. (You might also catch a glimpse of Mikes, the Inn's resident cat, who walked in five years ago

and never left. "She's our longest-staying guest," says Nilwell fondly.)

The lobby also holds Asian antiques — some of which were collected by Nilwell's father during his travels in Japan — as well as a small fountain and its canisters that release fragrances behind the counter.

The place smells repeat these elements. Each has a table-top fountain and fresh cocktails, as well as specially made furniture that holds trees from India and China, along with

condorers on the beds, kimonos robes and slippers for guests, and stone lanterns in the stair. Floors and granite counter tops.

The intent is to fill several

rooms at once; each tries to touch, beautiful sights to see, a glowing appeal to hear.

It's a Zen-like approach to

(Start on Tradewinds page 88)



Photos by Mary Harris

A Zen-like water fountain.



The Asian aura of one of the rooms.

Tradewinds

From page D1

hospitality.

Stilwell said the transformation would have pleased her father, Richard Catlin, who built the hotel in 1959 and ran it for many years. Her father passed away in 1998. Stilwell's mother, Patricia, still lives on the Monterey Peninsula and continues to be involved with the business.

Today, the inn is only one of two in Carmel that is still family-owned, Stilwell notes.

"I wish my dad could see this," said Stilwell as she strolled the rejuvenated outdoor patios, which now are embellished with water features and Far East plants like ginger, bamboo and hibiscus.

The hotel was built with an Asian concept to begin with, Stilwell said. Her father lived in Japan for seven years. When he returned to Carmel in 1962, decided to put some of that ambience into a hotel.

An ad from a 1959 *Game & Gossip* magazine boasts of the Tradewinds' heated swimming pool, television and telephones in every room, and "thermostatic steam heat." The priciest room at the time was the Bridal Suite with private lanai — \$34 a night. The least expensive was \$12.

The inn became known as a little refuge from the world, and it gained a certain following among celebrities who wanted a place to stay without attracting attention.

"Bing Crosby and his family used to stay here during every Crosby tournament," recalls Stilwell. "We still get a lot of repeat customers from the old days."

Stilwell literally grew up in the business, helping out at the hotel from a young age. She did take a break, leaving Carmel for 14 years, but came back to help her parents run the inn.

Part of the reason for the



Photo by Mary Nichols

The Tradewinds Inn first opened in 1959.

If you go

- What: Carmel's Inns of Distinction
- When: Sunday, Dec. 7, 2-5 p.m.
- Where: Various inns in Carmel, including the Tradewinds Inn at Mission and Third
- Cost: \$20 in advance or \$25 on the day of the tour
- Information/tickets: 624-4447 or First Murphy House, Carmel

renovation was bringing everything up to code, and to modern standards. The other was enhancing Richard Catlin's original vision.

In fact, Stilwell said, her father was considering a remodel during the 1980s, and wanted to engage Charles Gruwell at that time.

So last year, when she made up her mind to plunge into the

project, it was Gruwell she called upon.

The Pacific Grove-raised interior designer has gone on to grander projects in recent years, particularly in Las Vegas, where he created interiors for the Seasons Las Vegas and Mandalay Bay resorts. His redesign of Seattle's historic Sorrento Hotel was recently featured in *Architectural Digest*. Gruwell's heart is still on the Central Coast, however, and he likes taking design projects here when he can.

Stilwell said it was a happy meeting of the minds.

"Asian tropical, that's his specialty," she notes of Gruwell, who regularly spends time in Bali.

With landscape designer Bruce Anderson, they set out to create an atmosphere not only of the Far East, but also a

peaceful, meditative place.

"Susan set the stage for how I approached it," said Gruwell. "We wanted to bring (the inn) into the millennium with Asian flair and style."

Gruwell put a contemporary spin on the theme with such elements as slate floors, granite countertops and mood lighting.

He worked with Kim Mascheroni-Kiefer, who owns the elegant Kim3 stores, to supply the custom furnishings. Each room, for instance, has a custom-made platform Bali-style bed, and red lacquer nightstands from China.

Stilwell looked to employ environmentally correct materials whenever possible, such as the Brazilian cherry wood in the lobby — grown specially for that purpose, and not taken from the rain forest — and the hypoallergenic, hand-picked down in the rooms' pillows and comforters, which comes from small, humane farms in China.

Outside, guests can be lulled by the sound of a large waterfall/fountain and the sight of several lush patio areas. One, of which the focal point is a large stone Buddha, is surrounded by bamboo and ferns. Elsewhere can be found agave, palm trees and flowering plants.

Response, so far, has been enthusiastic, Stilwell said people are already booking rooms for the Concours d'Elegance — next August.

She is also planning to market that Zen-like atmosphere with a line of products. People will be able to buy any of the furniture pieces featured in the rooms, as well as the linens, kimono robes and decorative items.

The long-standing tradition of the Tradewinds Inn as a quiet refuge has been taken to a new level.

"The whole goal is to let guests escape from their regular lives," said Stilwell.

For information about the inn, visit www.carmeltradewinds.com.