

Storming the Castle

This month, the U.S. Navy will transfer a historic winery to a Bay Area city with dreams of developing the waterfront site, but an oil refinery could block public access.

Story by David Weinstein / July 25, 2003

Wine lovers whizzing home from Napa often spot a medieval fortress in the working class city of Richmond, seven miles northeast of San Francisco.

But the view from a bridge over San Francisco Bay quickly disappears. Few suspect that Winehaven, as the 96-year-old sprawling brick-and-concrete building is known, once produced more wine than any of its competitors in Napa. Between 1900 and 1919, the Historic American Building Survey reports, Winehaven "was the largest wine producer in America," making up to 12 million gallons a year and employing 400 people.

Yet Winehaven is so obscure that longtime resident Lucretia Edwards never saw it until the mid-1970s, even though she lived two miles away and had spent two decades fighting for public access to the shoreline.

"I fell in love with the buildings," Edwards says. "They are so astonishing, those great red-brick castles. They're so out of place, it just made me laugh!"

The U.S. Navy, which turned the winery into its Point Molate Naval Fuel Depot during World War II, ceased operations in 1995 and plans to transfer it to the city in a few months. Richmond hopes to select a developer later this year for the 320-acre site, which includes other historic and non-historic buildings, warehouses, and a charming company town of 29 bungalows.

Seven developers have expressed interest in the site, according to architect Tom Butt, the city council's leading preservationist, and the council will interview them in September. Proposals vary widely, he says, but several have suggested residential use of the site.

A handful of preservationists and environmentalists hope to save what they can of Point Molate's heritage and ensure public access to the site, which has views of San Francisco Bay, the mountains of Marin County, and the undulating ribbon of the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. However, some worry that Winehaven's nearest neighbor, the Richmond Chevron Refinery, owned and operated by ChevronTexaco Corp., may succeed in blocking public access to the site.

The refinery, the largest in Northern California and the city's largest employer, is separated from Point Molate by a 500-foot-tall forested ridge. ChevronTexaco opposes any use of Point Molate other than industrial and "restricted open space,"

Gary Fisher, a Chevron external affairs manager wrote to the city. Fisher noted that wildfires could spread to the refinery and said security concerns have heightened since Sept. 11. "The opportunity for trespassing and vandalism, including an avoidable increased risk for a potential terrorist act directed towards the refinery, increases with public access," Fisher wrote.

Edwards, who helped list the Winehaven Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, is worried that Chevron's opinions may overrule all others. "We're a company town," she says, "and we pretty much do as we're told."

Despite its charms, few people find the winding road to Point Molate to see Winehaven, its piers, the charred remains of a whaling station, and East Brother Light Station, an 1870s National-Register-listed lighthouse that is now a B&B. Beneath Point Molate are remains of four Chinese shrimp camps from the 1870s and prehistoric Indian middens.

But under a plan being spearheaded by a local park district, much of the Point Molate area around Winehaven would turn into open space.

Richmond, a city of 102,000 residents across the bay from San Francisco, has 32 miles of shoreline—more than any other city in the Bay Area. Though Richmond isn't a tourist attraction, most of its neighborhoods are well kept, and some are historic. It is also home to Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Park, which recognizes Richmond's importance as a wartime shipbuilding center.

After the 1906 Earthquake destroyed its San Francisco plant, the California Wine Association moved to Richmond, attracted by deep water and easy rail connections to San Joaquin Valley growers. The following year it built the castle, with its medieval turrets and crenellated battlements, a superb example of post-San Francisco Earthquake reinforced concrete construction. Several other buildings, including a steam plant, follow the Gothic theme.

Workers lived in bungalows that were built between 1908 and 1917; some workers lived on a large ferry. A quarry was in business nearby, fishing boats came through, and herders grazed goats on the hillsides. Tourists came by ferry to swim, picnic, and dance at a Craftsman-style hotel, demolished in the 1960s after a fire.

"There was the fishy, salty odor of the bay, the smells of the oil refinery, the pleasant odors of wine and vinegar and ripe grapes that were brought in on gondola cars," said Allene Gordon Stearns, who lived in Winehaven as a girl from 1912-1917, in a 1959 interview on file at the Richmond Museum of History. Her mother, Stearns said, was the only person in town to vote for Prohibition, when Winehaven hung on producing sacramental wine. Production dried up by the mid-1930s.

Although the Navy occupied the site for more than 60 years, its tenure left few visible traces—but very expensive invisible ones. Dozens of buried tanks stored

bunker and jet fuel. The Navy will pay for the cleanup even after ownership changes.

The cost of maintaining the site almost convinced the city council to let the Navy keep it. But last month, the council told the Navy it would accept Point Molate, pending negotiations and council approval. Butt expects the transfer to be approved by the end of July.

In 1997, a citizens' committee envisioned tourists browsing through shops, bed-and-breakfasters staying in the cottages, conferences, restaurants, perhaps one or more wineries moving into the castle. One alternative called for 500 homes. The plan still serves as the city's vision, Butt says.

Some members of the council are dismayed by the Navy's environmental report, which suggested that the area is too close to the refinery to allow housing, says Tom Butt, who helped get Point Molate and East Brother Light Station on the National Register.

High-end waterfront homes on a non-historic part of the site would be the best use Winehaven and would bring in enough money to make the rest of it fly, says Don Gosney, co-chair of the Navy's Point Molate Restoration Advisory Board. Gosney, who worked as a refinery steamfitter and foreman for 33 years and serves as a technical advisor with the county's Hazardous Materials Program, says the 500-foot ridge separating the refinery from Point Molate would ensure residents' safety in case of a chemical leak.

Butt points out that many Richmonders already live near the refinery. "Places that are highly inhabited, including where I live in Point Richmond, would be more affected by an ammonia leak" than Point Molate, he says.

Butt remains undeterred by Chevron's opposition to developing the site. The next step for the city council, he says, is to reach an agreement with the Navy about site cleanup. He says that the council could prepare an amended environmental report showing that people could indeed live at Winehaven.

"Chevron will fight any use but industry—even recreation," Butt says. "It remains to be seen whether the city council wants to stand up to them."

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