



Out with the brass, in with the new

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By Frank Sabatini Jr.

Hillcrest's oldest LGBT bar enters the modern age

What stands today as The Rail on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and Robinson Street in Hillcrest has made two previous moves from its original Downtown location, attracted a solid LGBT clientele along the way, and for a time greeted customers with a sunken bar defined by a long, brass foot rail.

From its early beginnings in 1934 and until July of last year, the nomadic establishment operated as The Brass Rail.



A new look and name for a historic bar in Hillcrest (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

“There was even a brass pole from floor to ceiling at one end of the bar that made no sense,” said owner Gayle Santillan, who temporarily closed the business following San Diego Pride weekend to make sweeping design changes beckoning to the decade it was founded.

After enlisting the services of locally based Bailey Bishop Design, she reopened it a few weeks later as The Rail with the help of her son and general manager, Dustin Santillan. They continued applying finishing touches to the property until their grand-reopening party in February.

A few architectural tweaks were made in the preliminary redo such as the removal of claustrophobic drop ceilings. The taller, original ceiling now shows off a network of wood rafters and gives the impression of a dramatically larger space. In addition, wide accordion doors were installed along the building's Fifth Avenue side, allowing the afternoon sunshine and nighttime street lights to pour in.

Trailing the length of the bar are metal liquor racks suspended overhead. They match the industrial motif of the bar's back wall, which uses bronze piping to frame a new tap system spotlighting 20 beers, most of them crafts.

Amid fresh tile flooring and a whiskey-themed lounge section overlooking the dance floor are framed posters and photographs capturing cultural images from the 1930s. Santillan combed the internet to find them and ended up with some pertaining to the end of Prohibition, as well as a blown-up photo of Nat King Cole sitting at a piano in formal attire, and a wall-sized vinyl graphic of pinup model Zoe Mozert.

"I looked for people and scenes and things pertaining to liquor that came out of the '30s to reflect when The Brass Rail first opened," Santillan said while pointing out an old double-door whiskey cabinet she incorporated into the décor.

A reintroduction of food is also part of the club's renaissance. It hasn't been served here since the mid-'90s. Available during non-peak hours between 2 and 8 p.m. daily, the menu is limited to five different types of grilled cheese sandwiches, though the offerings are due to expand soon with the introduction of weekend brunch.



A whiskey cabinet augments the period décor

In the hopes of attracting a bigger craft-cocktail crowd, some old classics with crafty twists are slowly appearing on the chalkboard menu. They include spins on the Rob Roy, Paloma and mule — drinks that the bar's regular customers rarely demanded while taking comfort in well drinks and domestic beer over the years. The business has been in Santillan's family since 1993, when Gayle's late father, Arthur Cunningham, purchased the bar at its existing address (3796 Fifth Ave.) from Louis Arko, who is also deceased.

Arko had acquired The Brass Rail from a previous holder in the late-1950s and moved it in 1963 from Downtown (Sixth Avenue and B Street) to the northwest corner of Fifth and Robinson avenues, directly across the street from where it currently resides.

Arko's LGBT patrons had discretely followed him into Hillcrest, and they remained loyal when he moved the bar to its final location, which was sometime in the late '70s according to Santillan's records.

"We don't know who owned it before Louis Arko," she said.

Although it was during Cunningham's ownership when the bar established deeper roots within the LGBT community.

"When my father owned it, the late Hal Frost was the manager," Santillan said. "He was known as Mother Hal and started Hip Hop Fridays and Latin nights on Saturdays. Both are still going strong. The Dreamgirls also performed here every week. I credit Hal for bringing ethnic diversity into the bar. He stayed on with me until 2004, four years after my father's passing."



(l to r) Dustin and Gayle Santillan, general manager and owner, respectively (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

Cunningham had also expanded the bar's square footage by nearly 50 percent after cutting into two adjacent spaces that housed a shoe store and travel agency. He added the side patio as well, which Santillan says "saved us after California's no-smoking law went into effect a year or so later. That was a difficult time for nightclub owners."

The patio remains the same but sits under new exterior colors that changed from brown and yellow to gray and blue. In addition, the establishment's tan-gold signage using a linear, vintage font adds bolder definition to the entrance. "I'm really excited to see that the owners took advantage of the city's storefront improvement program," said Ben Nicholls, executive director of the Hillcrest Business Association. "The Rail is one of Hillcrest's original nightclub destinations and an important part of our community."

Santillan acknowledged the incentive program provided financial assistance for revitalizing the exterior, although she chose not to disclose how much she received from it or what she spent for other renovations.

Looking ahead, she assures The Rail is here to stay despite rumors it was put on the market or recently changed hands.

“I wouldn’t have taken on this large of a project if I didn’t plan on keeping it for a long time,” she said. “We’ve already seen a 10 to 20 percent increase since the remodel. As San Diego oldest gay bar, we want all walks of life to be comfortable coming in.”

The Rail’s evening entertainment schedule includes Manic ’80s on Mondays; Boylesque on the third Thursday of every month and the Sinful Dames drag show on the fourth Thursday; hip-hop on Fridays except on the third Friday of every month when ManUpp presents “DILF” night. Also, Latin music and go-go dancers fuel the vibe on Saturdays, with Girls Night Out and their women’s dance on third Saturdays from 6–9 p.m., leading into the Latin nights.

For more information, call 619-298-2233 or visit thebrassrailsd.com.

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