

Where the Gettys Hold Court à la Falstaff

By TODD KRIEGER

SAN FRANCISCO — The PlumpJack Balboa Cafe may seat 75, but what it really feels like most nights is an oversize dinner party. Regulars have taken to calling it Mortimer's West, after the ultracubby Manhattan restaurant that is home to socialites and the occasional power broker.

"You can always go to the Balboa for a drink and know you'll run into someone," said Trevor Traina, 29, who grew up in a Pacific Heights mansion belonging to his then-step-mother, the author Danielle Steel, and his father, John Traina, a shipping executive.

The "someones" whom Trevor Traina had in mind are largely the offspring of the city's old and moneyed families, who have made the Balboa Cafe their hangout of the moment, and a glittering nexus for Gen-X San Franciscans with social and political connections.

A number of them are investors in the cafe. The younger Mr. Traina is one. So is Richard Guggenheim, of the museum Guggenheims. But the two main partners — and the joint center of the party that seems to be perpetually taking place at the saloon-style watering hole — are Billy Getty, 27, a grandson of the billionaire J. Paul Getty, and Gavin Newsom, 30, his boyhood friend and a rising local political star.

One night not long ago, Mr. Newsom and Mr. Getty were holding court at a small table in the back room of the Balboa, which is in the yuppie-friendly Cow Hollow neighborhood, as a procession of friends tramped through.

It was the eve of a 64th-birthday party for Mr. Getty's father, the philanthropist, composer and wine buff Gordon Getty. Mr. Guggenheim dropped off an early birthday present: a magnum of 1934 Château Margaux. At a nearby table, Stanlee Gatti, a prominent party designer, dined with Elaine McKeon, the chairwoman of the board of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Interior designers who recently completed a makeover of Billy Getty's penthouse apartment on Russian Hill, discussed their work with an editorial team from Harper's Bazaar, which plans to feature the home in a future issue.

At 9:30, Gordon Getty arrived in high spirits with a group of friends and belted out an operatic snatch of song. (At his birthday party the next day, where he was feted by 400, the



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Gavin Newsom, center, and Billy Getty at their PlumpJack Balboa Cafe in San Francisco, with Mr. Getty's girlfriend, Vanessa Jarman.

singer Jewel dropped by.)

Mr. Gatti said of the Balboa Cafe's appeal: "There's an association with the Gettys — with Billy Getty and Gavin Newsom. People do go because its kind of cool to go to their joint."

Pat Kelley, the general manager of the saloon, at 3199 Fillmore Street, has worked there since before the current partners acquired it in 1995. She said: "It used to be a lot of kids

In San Francisco, a cafe becomes a haven for the politically and socially connected of Gen-X.

drinking beer. Now, it's 30-somethings with platinum cards drinking single-malt Scotches."

Mr. Newsom, who was appointed by Mayor Willie L. Brown Jr. to the city's Board of Supervisors last year, making him the youngest member, is a charismatic figure, with slicked-back dark hair and a voice that seems perpetually hoarse, not from cigars or liquor but from nonstop talking. Though barely out of his 20's, he already has a repertoire of politician's gestures — placing his arm conspiratorily on a listener's shoulder, punching the air to make a point.

By contrast, Mr. Getty is soft-spoken, ponytailed and usually dressed in a casual-sporty way, in sweaters and sport coats. He also seems a bit

defensive about his life of privilege. "This is in no way a vanity investment," he said. "The questions always come like this: 'Do you drive a Mercedes? Do you get your hair done at such and such?' That's beside the point. We provide 360 people with jobs." He was referring not just to the Balboa but also to the PlumpJack Squaw Valley Inn in Lake Tahoe and the PlumpJack Winery in Napa.

When Mr. Getty and Mr. Newsom took over the cafe, it was the latest addition to a mini-empire built on their appreciation of the good life. In 1992, the two men — whose fathers were best friends and who themselves grew up nearly as closely as brothers — founded a wine shop in Cow Hollow. They christened it PlumpJack Wines, a reference to a nickname for Shakespeare's grogswilling Falstaff (and to the name of an opera by Gordon Getty). Two years later, they opened the PlumpJack Cafe also on Fillmore Street, which soon became a favorite of the city's foodies. The cooking won accolades from food magazines, and Mr. Newsom and Mr. Getty won mention in society columns as the city's most eligible bachelors.

But with the clientele of the PlumpJack Cafe skewing older and more serious, Mr. Newsom and Mr. Getty turned their eyes toward the nearby Balboa Cafe, a longtime neighborhood institution appreciated for its unpretentiousness and excellent, inexpensive hamburger. A fixture of Herb Caen's columns in The San Francisco Chronicle, the Balboa had fallen on tough times and was

beginning to look as if it had served its last Vitamin "V" Martini.

The PlumpJack partners bought it, Mr. Newsom said dead seriously, "because we're standard-bearers." He is a fourth-generation San Franciscan, the son of a retired state appellate court judge and the great-grandson of a prominent banker. "It was purely selfish — the partners invested in it because they wanted this place to continue," Mr. Newsom said.

Pat Steger, whose column The Social Scene appears in The Chronicle, said: "They have taken the corner back. They have arrived."

Even though the Balboa is spiffier than before, with tablecloths now, the television over the bar is still tuned to 49'ers games, and the food is traditional saloon fare. "What was it Dominick Dunne once said?" Ms. Steger asked. "Nobody appreciates a good deal like the rich do."

Not everyone is thrilled by the transformation. The latest Zagat Survey, quoting diners' comments, reports, "Old-timers are still wondering 'what happened' to this Marina 'burger joint extraordinaire' 'in the heart of yuppieville'; it's now a 'poseur scene' filled with young singles."

As Mr. Newsom, who grew up well connected but not rich, plunges more deeply into politics, he has nudged his businesses and his friends to reflect a sense of civic duty. He persuaded Billy Getty, who has traveled to Africa and is interested in conservation, to become involved in the city's Recreation and Parks Commission. Fifteen percent of profits from the Balboa Cafe are donated to local charities, Mr. Newsom said, as is his \$23,000 supervisor's salary. "You can never achieve success if you can't help other people," he said earnestly.

In the cafe's back room, the late-night talk may still be spiced with Mr. Getty's tales of bungee-jumping in Africa or of wine auctions in the Napa Valley. But now it includes San Francisco politics, too.

On this night, Mr. Newsom could not resist ribbing Mr. Gatti, who is also the president of the city Arts Commission, about a controversial plan of his to erect a 24-foot steel peace sign in Golden Gate Park. "I think the opposition was reasonable today," Mr. Newsom called across the room to Mr. Gatti, needling him about the latest public hearing. "It was neither arrogant nor obtuse."

Mr. Gatti shot back: "They weren't arrogant. They weren't obtuse. They were stupid."