

[New life for historic Mark West Lodge](#)

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Entrepreneur spends 7 years transforming space into event venue



SANTA ROSA – Following fire, multiple ownership hand-offs and extended vacancy, Mark West Lodge owner Jack Martin has spent the last seven years and over \$1 million reviving the historic resort that was once a main attraction in the North Bay.

The real estate developer turned hospitality entrepreneur recently unveiled a second, outdoor venue on the former cabin grounds, and the business is now turning a profit.

“When I first visited this place, there were bars on the windows, and chains on the doors. It was really scary actually,” Mr. Martin said.

The new Mark West Lodge owner invested \$1 million in improvements to the historic property, including the recent opening of a second events space on the former resort site.

He and a silent partner purchased the property for about \$1.3 million in 2002 with the intention of converting it to an RV park and selling within three or four years. The lodge was for the most part abandoned for the previous three years, and structures were suffering from disuse.

“I had done some adaptive, re-use kind of projects before and saw Mark West as a real development opportunity,” Mr. Martin said.

“I never thought I would be here for seven years, but it’s really become a labor of love.”

Originally constructed as a trading post in the 1840s, the Mark West Lodge emerged as region-wide destination when it became the area’s first hot springs resort, accommodating up to 200 people a night at its zenith.



In the '70s, renowned chef Rene Pavel purchased the property and opened a highly successful fine French eatery that eventually burned to the ground in 1976. The fire, combined with the emerging reputation of other destinations, led to successive ownership changes, all of which failed to revive the fallen reputation of the lodge.



Despite the known challenges of its past, Mr. Martin saw potential for the space for events and dropped the RV park plan. The expansive grounds allowed room for growth and, positioned just five miles down Mark West Springs Road, it was close to Santa Rosa and Napa.

“We saw the potential for really filling that niche of people who want the Wine Country experience for their event but without being pigeon-holed into pouring a certain wine or having to share the space with the business activities of the winery or hotel,” Mr. Martin said.

It took about three years before the lodge was really in contention with other events sites, during which the building was completely redecorated and a bridal room and surrounding gardens were constructed.

“It’s kind of like when a pharmaceutical company tests a drug for years before they make a dollar. We expected to operate at a loss, but it got smaller and smaller every year,” Mr. Martin said.

The lodge now averages about 40 to 50 events a year, and the owner is concentrating on diversifying the business. The indoor space includes wireless and audio-visual amenities, and Mr. Martin is targeting business groups for more conferences, lunches and breakfast meetings. The venue also provides in-kind or reduced rate events for philanthropic groups, teachers associations, religious groups and others.

Mr. Martin recently opened a second outdoor events venue on the property that used to house the resort cabins. The more casual space could accommodate up to 125, includes a restored outdoor fireplace and will eventually have a bar.

The site surrounds the former pool, which has been redecorated as a unique sunken dance floor and eating area. The site is also accented by an elaborate water feature falling down one side of the pool. The venue is currently usable but still undergoing cosmetic finishes. Walking trails surround the space and provide access to the Mark West Creek.

Mark West Lodge provides linens, tables, chairs and two full bar areas for events in the lodge. The site contracts with outside vendors for food service, cake and floral arrangements, if needed. The on-site events space accommodates parties up to 175 people.

Prices can range between \$9000 and \$25,000 for a full-service, everything-included wedding.