

# Hard Rock launches new era at Lake Tahoe



Lake Tahoe Hard Rock could become a destination unto itself on the South Shore. Photos/Denise Haerr

**By Kathryn Reed**

STATELINE – To be successful in the ranching and casino industries takes some of the same qualities. It's about successfully herding your product (cattle or people). It's about providing an experience that is above the rest – indulging in a prime cut of beef, being at a place you want to keep returning to.

Jon and David Park are embarking on a journey to be both rancher and casino purveyor. And in some ways their divergent enterprises are crossing paths.



Brothers David and Jon Park spent \$60 million revamping what was a dilapidated casino.

On Wednesday the brothers were beaming as the doors flew open on their \$60 million investment of what is now Lake Tahoe Hard Rock. The 539-room hotel casino was essentially stripped to the studs and reinvented into a totally different experience from what was the Horizon.

In many ways the Hard Rock is returning to its roots. The vintage Stateline property opened in 1965 as Del Webb's Sahara Tahoe. Elvis played at the Sahara 106 times. His suite is being renovated, but is not ready to be rented.

"We are modernizing it without taking the Elvis out of it," Don Marrandino, who is running the property, said.



Elvis used to be a regular when this was the Sahara.

In the lobby is the original poster from one of Elvis' shows in the 1970s in Lake Tahoe. The cocktail performance cost \$20 and included two drinks.

That showroom he played in is likely to be reinvented. Most recently it was where the movie theaters were. Marrandino wouldn't even hint at who might be the first to perform at the new venue.

"We have to build it first," he told *Lake Tahoe News*.

When that will take place remains to be seen. Old components of the former showroom still exist below the floor of the movie theaters.



Mojo Green christens Vinyl on Jan. 28.

Siobhan Fajayan, director of marketing, told *Lake Tahoe News* it's possible the larger music venue will resemble the Joint in Las Vegas.

For now, though, Vinyl – the old Cabaret – will suffice as the music venue. It holds a few hundred people if they all stand. The stage looks temporary or at least portable.

Music is everywhere – even in the elevators. Lyrics from Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" are on the back railing.

Even the door handles throughout the property are guitars.



Memorabilia curator Warwick Stone watches as Michael Jackson's glove is installed.

Memorabilia is a huge part of what this property and all Hard Rocks are all about. Michael Jackson's glove in the lobby of the hotel was not finalized until 4:20pm – just a few hours before the doors opened to the public.

Warwick Stone is tasked with managing the \$7 million rotating collection. From his studio in Las Vegas he puts together the various exhibits.

He used to be a tailor in the rock 'n' roll industry. The leather jacket he designed for Freddie Mercury of Queen in 1982 is one item he would love to have back to be able to

display at one of the Hard Rock properties.

The attention to detail is evident throughout the hotel-casino; down to the woman installing Jackson's glove who was using tape to remove any lingering lint. Menus are not stuck in sticky plastic. Some napkins were imprinted with lips; under them it says "Jenny 867-5309". Every name tag lists that employee's favorite band.

Another venue not yet open is the convention center space. The two large ballrooms are expected to be online in early February.



Every room has been renovated.

Rooms are in coral-rust, grey tones. They are modern, but tasteful. Bathrooms are small, but that's what the norm was 50 years ago when the goal was to get people out of their rooms and onto the casino floor.

Half bottles of wine from Madrona Vineyards of Camino are in

the rooms. Those needing a larger bottle can find them downstairs in the steakhouse.

The entire dining experience is designed to transform what the South Shore is used to.



Seafood at the Oyster Bar is available 24 hours a day.

Chairs in each venue are comfortable, with the cushy ones outside Fire Break the most enticing. Here people can enjoy a variety of seating – inside and out – that looks out onto the casino corridor and up to the mountains.

Ten of the 20 beers that will be on tap at this restaurant are ready to be consumed. This restaurant is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The Oyster Bar is open around the clock and serves crawfish harvested from Lake Tahoe. Using locally sourced food is a goal of Executive Chef Jonathan Snyder, who is a 1991 graduate of South Tahoe High School.

Park Prime is the high-end restaurant at the casino. It's definitely quieter than the raucous casino floor. The emphasis is not on musical memorabilia, but instead on fine dining.

While the beef isn't Parks', one day it might be.

"The long-term goal is to do that," Jon Park told *Lake Tahoe News* of his desire for his beef to be served at the restaurant. There are a few hoops to jump through to make that a reality.

Ranching has been part of the Park family's way of life in the Carson Valley since the late 1880s. For some, it still is – including the brothers.

People don't often associate ranching and Lake Tahoe. But remnants of that segment of the basin's past are still visible in some places. And in some ways it is prominent inside Park Prime.



Breaking in the table games on opening night.



Artwork on the walls is of images of the Parks' ranch in the Carson Valley. Old burlap sacks line another wall.

But this massive makeover looked like it almost might not happen. Final touches were still being made Jan. 28 – opening day.

“It was the hardest finish of my life,” Joe Stewart with SMC Contracting told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We went out the back door as they opened the front door.”

He had about five months to turn a 50-year-old hotel into something that looked brand new. Stewart was tasked with bringing everything up to code and then adding high-end finishes. The footprint is the same, but most of the property was stripped to the core.



The hotel-casino has 500 employees.

“The only thing we didn't find was Jimmy Hoffa,” Stewart joked.

But construction is not done. The big concert venue, two more restaurants and the pool area are slated for the next phases.

The main goal, though, is to provide a quality product with incredible service.

Service – that was one of the mantras preached by everyone who spoke to the media before the property was opened to the public. It was working on Day 1 as every employee was smiling, asking if they could help and how you were doing.