

Foster's Bighorn

Kiss the Moose!

Story by Ellen Weis Photos by Jan Vick & Ellen Weis

“*Emilie kissed the Moose when she turned 21.*” Howard Lamothe doesn’t quite know where this rite of passage came from, or when the tradition began. But many, perhaps hundreds, have celebrated their legal age in this way for decades. Here’s how it works: you hoist yourself onto the barstool, stand tall on curved end of the beautiful 65 foot hardwood bar, reach up and press your face into the intimidating and possibly unsanitary muzzle of a 100 year old moose, (the 11th largest on record,) and smooch. A round of applause seals the transition. Emilie, in this case, refers to magazine editor, Susan Whitesell’s daughter, Emilie Eaton.

Howard Lamothe, a 5th generation Rio Vistan, and current owner of the renowned Foster’s Bighorn Restaurant and Bar, relates animated conversations overheard since 2000, when he purchased the business from Dorothy Brown, who with her husband Tony, owned Foster’s for 35 years. Howard is only the fourth in line in the succession of owners of this unique California establishment. “That’s my grandfather in that photo!” he occasionally hears patrons boast as they stare transfixed at the typed and carefully hand-written captions on the black and white framed photos hanging on the wall. Could be true. Often heard, “Hemingway was here,” however, is a myth. And no, there is no polar bear. “I think they mix us up with the bar in Port Costa,” Howard says.

To enter the cavernous Foster’s building on quaint Main Street, is to immediately encounter more than 250 trophy heads mounted on the high walls – including many record holders, according to The Boone and Crockett Club, the definitive hunter-conservation journal started by Teddy Roosevelt.

The legendary Bill Foster came to Rio Vista in 1933 with apparently six trophy heads. Undisputed rumors had it that Bill brought \$3 million cash with him, too, procured from a life of gambling and Prohibition bootlegging in the East Bay. He ran away from the law – as far

as he needed to go to reestablish himself: Rio Vista. Bill continued to make good quality whiskey well into the 1950’s, and pursued what he could, legally, with gambling. Older generations may recall the slot machines that

remained in Foster’s through 1960. Bill Foster developed his private collection of big-game specimens from Africa and North America, expertly preserved by his friend John Jonas, of the premier Jonas Brothers Taxidermy Studios. Foster expanded the building twice as his collection grew, to create the existing museum-quality showplace.

Fortunately, despite three previous owners, everything was left intact over the decades. Howard and his wife, MaryEllen, have documented each historic photo, “a shuffled deck of cards,” and pieced together several key story lines of the remarkable history.

“We get many folks from Japan, all over Asia, Germany, France, and lots from England. World travelers who must see Foster’s,” says Howard, who warmly greets the locals by their first name, and the out-of-towners with a broad smile and Rio Vista welcome.

Recently, Brendan and Cecilia Shivers visited Foster’s during their first visit to America from Prestwick, Scotland. “They had to see this,” said son-in-law John McGrath. “Having lived in South Africa for 35 years, they’ve seen plenty of big game, and game hunters. But nothing like this.” It did not take long before Brendan’s daughter and son-in-law (with the encouragement from three duck hunters sitting at the bar) cajoled him into the ritual: *Brendan kissed the Moose*. In reality, he stood close and blew it a kiss. No doubt Foster’s Bighorn will now have a high ranking in Prestwick, Scotland.

Foster’s presents the best of a getaway – a true gem with its restored 1950’s neon sign, eccentric menagerie, consistently good comfort food, well-stocked bar, excellent beers on tap, and yes, international clientele. You can’t possibly “upload” all of Foster’s Bighorn in one visit. Bring your traveling friends and family – trust me, it’s worth the kiss.



Photo: Jan Vick



Photo: Ellen Weis