

By TOM AND JOANNE O'TOOLE

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"I've had a great run since 1975," beams Mel Haber, the energetic and enthusiastic owner of the historic Ingleside Inn and the more recent Melvyn's Restaurant at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains in Palm Springs.

A kinetic storyteller, the innkeeper has a great recall of names and events and has a computer-like memory for details. Whenever he hesitates for a connection with his nonstop patter, he'll give the listener a benign look, shrug his shoulders and humorously say, "Well, just another senior moment."

'Host of the stars'

Since he took over ownership of the Ingleside Inn almost 25 years ago and made Melvyn's one of southern California's "in" spots, Haber has met just about every notable who lives in, or has passed through, this valley.

In testimony of his winning ways, he was awarded a permanent bronze star along the sidewalk on Palm Canyon Drive. It proclaims him simply as "host of the stars." To make the 1996 occasion even more memorable, the ceremony was held on his 60th birthday. On hand were his wife, Stephanie; daughter, Autumn; and a "host" of friends to share in his celebration.

"I can hardly believe the good fortune that has come my way,"

Haber says with humility.

On a 2-acre complex, the Ingleside Inn is surrounded by a stucco wall, covered by clinging vines and colorful flowers. As you drive through a set of wrought iron gates, the morning sun dances off the water in the heated pool and jacuzzi in the small front yard. Parked along the sweeping driveway are highly polished Rolls-Royces, Mercedes, BMWs, Lexuses and other luxury cars.

Built in 1925 as a private residence, it was purchased 10 years later by the socially prominent Ruth Hardy, who turned it into a small, exclusive hotel. Thirty years later, after her death, it was sold by her estate to a former guest, but because of his absentee ownership, the inn and small restaurant on the grounds began to decline.

In 1975, the "then-almost-retired" Haber stopped at the inn, liked it (saying it reminded him of a movie set) on a handshake bought the place. He then spent a small fortune restoring, remodeling, refurbishing and redecorating.

Refuge for the famous

Hardy had maintained an elaborate personal card file on her guests, detailing their preferences as well as their idiosyncrasies. Some of the references include: "fortune hunter . . . a pest . . . has all the traits we don't like . . . something strange about this couple . . . quite affected . . . very clever but

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MEL HABER

bears watching . . . Texas-type — big and loud . . . a bit uppity . . . irritates everyone . . . very difficult . . ." and on and on.

For those undesirables who did slip into the restricted inn, it seldom happened a second time. Their cards were clearly marked "doesn't belong here," or "not our type," or simply, "always tell them no space available."

The likes of Lily Pons, Salvador Dali, Clare Booth Luce, David Burpee, Peter Folger, James Ralston and the rest of polite society were always welcomed. In fact, opera star Lily Pons and her conductor husband, Andre Kostelanetz, came for an overnight stay and lingered on for 13 years, making the Ingleside Inn their permanent residence.

From the dusty files, Haber found old registration cards and autographed pictures of Spencer Tracy, Janet Blair, Ava Gardner, Barbara Stanwick, John Wayne,

Greta Garbo and hundreds more. These are sometimes displayed or dug out of filing cabinets when Haber gets off on his storytelling.

He can pull up cards on Greer Garson, Howard Hughes, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Don Ameche, Ginger Rogers, Olivia de Havilland, Cary Grant and countless others. The Ingleside was also the spot selected by honeymooners Clark Gable and Carole Lombard.

More recently, celebrities who have been guests at the Ingleside or enjoyed a table at Melvyn's include George Hamilton, David Hasselhoff, Cyndi Lauper, Marlon Brando, Jamie Lee Curtis, John Travolta, Goldie Hawn, Jack Lemmon, Cher, Joan Collins, Jerry Lewis, Barry Manilow, Liza Minnelli, Larry King, Maria and Arnold Schwarzenegger, and others.

Today, Haber welcomes all guests — the well-known and the unknown — equally. He says it's "still like watching a movie. I can't wait to see what's gonna happen next."

Years ago, when he named the restaurant after himself and held the grand opening, everyone was nervous about making a good impression. Among the early arrivals was a motorcyclist and his girlfriend. "Please, another time," Haber begged. "This is a special night." The couple politely rode off. Later, he learned he had turned away Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw.

Outgoing and uninhibited, Haber is a unique individual who turns one of the corner booths into his "office" during the morning.

What makes Haber so likeable is he doesn't take himself too seriously. He used to be impressed when the likes of Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Liberace, Kirk Douglas and others strolled through the front door. But now when customers start asking about the celebrities, he counters with "Hey, you know who waltzed in here and sat in your very seat last night? Farkie Needleman. That's who!" Needleman, is, of course, a fictitious person. It's one of his ways to redirect the conversation.

A magnetic personality

The self-styled innkeeper is more than a colorful restaurateur. He's the magnet that draws the showbiz names and moneyed set to his pink tablecloth dining rooms. He has become part of the ambience, and regulars expect a little table chatter from this quick-to-smile character who has an opinion on just about everything — and doesn't hesitate to express himself.

"Hey, I'm a nice guy," he grins, "but people are wary of someone who says he's good to people." This is Haber, never one to tip-toe around the edges. He leaps right in with both feet.

"Let's face it," Haber insists, "I'm a saloon keeper. Plain and simple. The only difference is I've got a 'hot' saloon and that gets publicity and notoriety, as well as the beautiful people crowd."

IF YOU GO

Fashioned from a gracious estate, the Ingleside Inn offers just 30 rooms, mini-suites and villas, most with their own fireplace, private sun terrace and furnished with an eclectic collection of antiques. The favored accommodations are those that look out on the interior courtyard.

For brochures, background information, a tariff schedule, along with a sample menu of the offerings at Melvyn's Restaurant, contact the Ingleside Inn, 200 West Ramon Road, Palm Springs, CA 92264. The local telephone at the inn is (760) 325-0046 or (800) 772-8655. The local telephone at the restaurant is (760) 325-2323.



Above: Each room at the Inn is unique and includes an eclectic collection of antiques. Right: Stately trees surround the swimming pool on the property.

