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Sept. 24, 2000---

SAN FRANCISCO-- A free spirit beats within the seafaring heart of Leo Riegler. He is the saloon keeper of Vesuvio Cafe in North Beach. The Vienna, Austria, native jumped ship from a Norwegian freighter that came to San Francisco in 1948. He never left the City by the Bay.

Riegler is a spiritual match for Vesuvio, which opened in 1948.

The tavern is to the beats what waves are to the beach.

One night in 1960 Jack Kerouac was washed ashore at Vesuvio.

Kerouac was supposed to head down to Big Sur to confer with author Henry Miller, who was a fan of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac was uptight about the meeting. He drank to calm his nerves, phoning Miller every couple of hours to report that he was detained. The two never met.

Most writers from the Beat Generation cruised through Vesuvio, 255 Columbus Dr. Alan Ginsberg previewed parts of his controversial "Howl" at Vesuvio. The 120-seat bi-level bar is across the alley from City Lights Booksellers & Publishers, owned by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. In June the city of San Francisco awarded the bookstore with historic landmark status. Can Vesuvio be far behind?

The raw beauty of Vesuvio is how it never changes. Its dark objet d'art nature reminds me of Chicago's Old Town Ale House. And there's an equal number of colorful characters.

A few summers ago I stopped in at Vesuvio around 10:30 a.m. on a Tuesday. (Vesuvio opens at 6 a.m.) A handful of bike messengers were gathered at the bar, drinking beer. Riegler has met exotic dancers, engineers from New Guinea who worked for an Australian mining company and pilots from British Airways.

Before film director Francis Ford Coppola opened his Cafe Niebaum, down the block at 916 Kearny St. he used to write at Vesuvio. Last year, part-time Bay area resident Van Morrison lit a cigar upstairs at Vesuvio. Van the Man was told he was in violation of California's no-smoking laws. The rock-soul-jazz singer politely adjourned to the outside alley, recently renamed Jack Kerouac Street.

In early 1997 Vesuvio closed for two months to comply with earthquake "retro-fitting" (when old buildings are brought up to seismic safety codes). The entire bar was gutted. All the lamps, tables and chairs were removed. The old slide projector that shows French picture-postcards was taken down.

During a recent conversation, Riegler proudly waved his hand around the bar. His thick fingers looked like little fireplugs. ``Then we put it back together exactly the way it was, even the slide projector in the same place," he said. "Our customers were amazed." Riegler has retained his Austrian accent, trilling his rrrs with thrilling panache.

Bartender Janet Clyde is the resident historian at Vesuvio. She's been at the cafe since 1980. She's become a familiar, friendly face on my annual visits.

"I'll never forget after the retro-fitting, one man came in, he was about 55 years old and in a business suit," Clyde said. "He actually had tears in his eyes when he looked at the place. He said, `You didn't change anything.' Vesuvio has kept its character as a neighborhood bar.

"We have people from all walks of life. (Actors) Winona Ryder. Sean Penn. They come because they enjoy it and no one hassles them. Johnny Depp spent three and a half hours here and bought a bunch of art (by local illustrator-painter Craig LaRotunda) off the wall. He really appreciated the place because he's a Kerouac aficionado."

Kerouac is commemorated at Vesuvio with the "Jack Kerouac" drink: a shot of tequila, a shot of rum, equal parts orange juice and cranberry juice and a squeeze of lime, served in a tall glass . In real life, he dug low-rent California Burgundy.

Carolyn Cassady, widow of Kerouac compatriot Neal Cassady, still corresponds with Riegler and Clyde.

On Oct. 17, 1955, Cassady led the night of "howling poets" through Vesuvio, which Kerouac wrote about in *The Dharma Bums*. The writers were on the road to Six Gallery for a poetry reading. Kerouac said the gathering of the beat posse was "the night of the birth of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance." Riegler said, "There's such a resurgent interest in the Beat Generation. Kids come through here like it's some sort of shrine."

Vesuvio was opened in 1949 by Henri Lenoir, who came to San Francisco from Switzerland in the early 1930s. Vesuvio was the second saloon-restaurant in the North Beach neighborhood. By the early 1950s, Vesuvio became a beat hangout under the battle cry: "Don't envy Beatniks\_ Be One!"

Lenoir also managed the dank Spec's, across the street from Vesuvio and down the alley at 12 Adler Ct. Late San Francisco newspaper columnist Herb Caen was inspired to coin the term "beat" at Spec's in 1957. He was talking to regulars about Kerouac's *On the Road* and the Russian's Sputnik launch. Caen later wrote both were "far out" and "beatnik."

Cool, daddy-o.

Poet Dylan Thomas was one of the first noted writers to swim Vesuvio's salty waters. He always stopped in at Vesuvio during his early 1950s tours through the Bay area.

Clyde said, "On Dylan Thomas's last trip (1953) through the United States, he came to San Francisco State to read at a poetry conference. During that trip he was in here drinking. The next morning the owner (Lenoir) came in and said, 'Who is that drunk passed out on the banquette?' The bartender said, 'That's Dylan Thomas, and he can stay there.' "

Thomas did not go gently into that good night. On Nov. 4, 1953 he left his sickbed to drink 18 whiskies. By Nov. 9 he was dead. He was 39 years old.

Riegler, whose age is unknown, has been a hardscrabble figure around North Beach since 1952. He previously owned the now-defunct Coffee Gallery on Grant Avenue (he hired Clyde away from the gallery). The Coffee Gallery was a live jazz club that also featured comedy, poetry and up-and-coming folk-blues singers like Janis Joplin.

"She used to sing for \$10 a night," Riegler recalled. "She used to sing with an alarm clock hanging from her neck as a necklace. She got high on Southern Comfort. It wasn't a big room. She started belting out those songs so bloody loud, I had to go out on the street.

"I saw her just before she died. I was in Sausalito (Calif.) We were having brunch and she was sitting at a table with three other people. She came over. We chatted, we hugged. And two weeks later she was dead."

Riegler sold the Coffee Gallery in 1971 and went to coastal Fuengirola, Spain, to open a bar. But he totaled a tiny Renault in Morocco and wound up spending a year recuperating in Spain. Riegler returned to San Francisco in 1972 and started bartending at Vesuvio. Later that year, owner Ron Fein hired Riegler to manage the tavern. When Fein died in 1985, Riegler became partners with Fein's son and daughter.

But the best story about North Beach may not be about Vesuvio, but the Condor Club, the former strip joint a block away from Vesuvio. The Condor Club opened in June 1964 and is considered America's birthplace of topless dancing.

Clyde said, "One of the gigs was a girl dancing on the piano while the piano would go up to the ceiling on a hydraulic lift. She would go through a little hole in the ceiling and disappear."

One night at closing time, a dancer and a bouncer got together and used the top of the piano for another kind of act. The bouncer thought he'd flip the switch in the middle of it to send them to the top.

By the time police were called to the scene, the bouncer was dead. He had been pinned to the ceiling. The dancer escaped unharmed.

Riegler shrugged his shoulders. "Show-off, huh?"

No, that's what I'd call tickling the ivories.

The Condor Club closed in 1991. Today it is the Condor Bistro sports bar. The 40-foot sign of headliner Carol Doda has been removed. But the original back bar still exists.

And Riegler is one of the area's original characters. "I never thought I'd be doing this," said Riegler, whose literary tastes lean toward Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway. "I always wanted to work with horses. After I left Austria during World War II, I lived in the Dominican Republic for 6 1/2 years. I worked as a cowboy. I also wanted to be a sailor, but I jumped ship."

Riegler landed on his feet--with the beats.