

805

LIVING

Arts
& Culture

VINYL GETS A NEW SPIN

Old-school records are making a comeback at dedicated lounges in the 805 area. Here's where you can experience the sound of another era.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER OLSON



JEFF ROOT HAS BEEN CHASING THE VINYL records experience around the globe for decades. He and his wife, Lisa Salmon, have lived in New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and throughout the U.S. Wherever they've been, visiting vinyl bars has been a shared pleasure of theirs and a chance to connect with a way of experiencing music that feels more grounded and permanent.

Listening to a vinyl record is "a more curated, intentional experience than having stuff thrown at you," says Root, comparing music on vinyl to the more fleeting experience that comes from downloading or streaming. "Record stores are fun places to be, and records themselves offer a different type of sound and a special type of object permanence."

Root has been thinking about opening a place dedicated to and inspired by records— what he calls "an American version" of intimate vinyl bars he's visited around the world—for some 15 years. "We just never lived in one place long enough to do it," he says. Until now.

He and Salmon took over **Jan's Place** in San Luis Obispo's historic Railroad District last year. The shop was part hair salon, part bar, and the couple decided to keep the signage but change the articulation. Jan's Place became Jan's (pronounced *yôns*) Place (jansplaceslo.com) "because awnings are expensive," Root jests.

Their small storefront—maximum seating capacity is 30—is a snug listening lounge, with seating oriented around turntables that regularly >

Jeff Root (below) puts 2019 album release, *Special Edition, Part 1*, by New Zealand band Fat Freddy's Drop on a turntable (opposite) at Jan's Place vinyl bar in San Luis Obispo. For a smooth listening experience, Root uses a Cafe Sound speaker from Cathode Bias (bottom), a company that makes updated vintage-style sound systems.





Jan's Place proclaims its purpose in neon (top) and serves a wide variety of wines, including Chokaisan Junmai Daiginjo Nama sake (above).

host DJs. “Think about it like sitting around a fire,” says Root. “The DJ is not on a pedestal, like a priest, but in the middle of the room, with patrons sitting all around. . . . That allows us to keep the volume low. In fact, our tagline is, ‘music at a polite volume.’ ”

Jan’s Place hosts DJs most nights of the week, and across myriad genres, from cumbia and Latin jazz to hip-hop and funk to rock and roll and country. And guests get to spin, too: Open Decks Nights take place weekly, allowing patrons to sign up for 30-minute sets to play their own records. Often, these are vinyl albums they’ve just purchased at the popular Boo Boo Records store down the street. The appeal for DJs of all skill sets is the 10-speaker mobile sound system that Root custom-built, which generates powerful sound.

“And if you’re unfamiliar with turntables, or how to use a mixer, we have a supportive group of people who’ll teach you, and who’ll show you the essence of DJing,” says Root. “I’ve seen people come in week after week and get progressively better!”

And if vinyl’s what gets them to Jan’s, a unique food and drinks program helps keep them there. More than 100 wines are featured, along with sake, cider, and beer, many with a local slant. And more than 20 types of tinned fish appear on the menu—sardines, anchovies, squid, mackerel, whitefish—which are often served with parsley and saltines, along with hot sauce and Meyer lemons from the owners’ backyard.

The Jan’s Place clientele, like the music experience that lures them here, spans the decades. “I love seeing multigenerational people sitting in the corner, listening to music, loving the experience,” says Root. “Vinyl records are definitely being rediscovered by a whole new generation.”

The numbers prove him right. Vinyl record sales rose for the 18th consecutive year in the U.S. last year, according to the tech news website Engadget, with revenues reaching \$1.4 billion, the highest since 1984. And the revival is not just nostalgia-based. The global market research firm, Business Research Insights, says that, in 2023, 58 percent of vinyl buyers in the U.S. were aged 18 to 34.

The clientele crosses the generations at San Luis Obispo’s **Lo-Fi Lounge** (lofislo.com), too. Vinyl’s appeal “is less about age and more about whether you’re a creatively minded person—a music head,” says Robbie Bruzus, Lo-Fi programming director. “We see people in here from their 20s to their 60s.”

Opened in August, Lo-Fi Lounge is a creative concept from the team behind the city’s two Kreuzberg California coffee shops. The remodeled >



Robbie Bruzus, programming director at Lo-Fi Lounge in San Luis Obispo, makes a selection, taking care to handle the record by its outer edge.

space sends guests “on a little bit of a hunt,” says Bruzus, requiring them to find the secret sliding bookcase to enter. Inside, the decor is theatrical, with colored lighting and floor-to-ceiling red curtains. And then, there are the turntables, which reel in DJs regularly. Here, they do sit atop a pulpit—a three-by-eight-foot stage, made from reclaimed vintage speaker cabinets.

The featured sets run the musical gamut and include myriad renditions of house music as well as Latin, rock, ’70s punk, and ’80s new wave. “But we’re pushing a chill vibe, not high-energy, dance, top-40 stuff,” adds Bruzus. “We want an eclectic mix of the unexpected.” Patrons are invited to sign up for half-hour sets and spin their own vinyl here as well, during Wax on Wednesdays, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.

The low-fidelity focus here is by design, mirroring Bruzus’ love for “the imperfections of vinyl,” he says—something he sees in Lo-Fi patrons, too. “In my life, most of the records I’ve sourced have come with scratches and pops,”

he says. “Those imperfections create their own unique remix to that record, and to me, tell a story of where that particular record has been. That’s a good fit for the atmosphere of this space—a little rough around the edges, but it sparkles and is warm and sexy and a space you want to hang out in.” The Lo-Fi bar serves craft cocktails and several local beers and wines.

In Atascadero, the vinyl selection at **Decades Hi-Fi Lounge** (decadesslounge.com) has a more personal story. The thousands of records that patrons can select to play on the state-of-the-art sound system represent co-owner Sheldon Ferguson’s haul over many years. “I migrate them into the store on a weekly basis, catalog them, and color-code them to signify which decade that record came out,” says Ferguson. “Fleetwood Mac has brown tape on it, for the ’70s, and the majority of the selection is ’80s, which was the heyday of my buying records.”

Ferguson left the corporate world—he worked on camera and photos apps for Apple in the >

Sheldon Ferguson (left) rifles through albums from his personal collection, which he shares with listeners at Decades Hi-Fi Lounge in Atascadero. A 2017 soundtrack album cover from the Netflix series *Stranger Things* stands on a vintage stereo receiver at the lounge (right) beside a screen print illustration of The Clash front man Joe Strummer that was created after his death to promote Strummerville, a charity formed in his honor.



OTHER WAYS TO GET IN THE GROOVE

Even when they're not the star of the show, records can be a unique way to draw a crowd. Two area lodging establishments are among a handful offering occasional vinyl-inspired moments as a way to enhance the guest experience.

Inside the Ojai Rancho Inn, a cozy bar called **Chief's Peak** (chiefsspeak.com) allows guests to sip by the fireplace or the pool. Open seven days a week, the establishment features a selection of natural wines, beer, and sake cocktails. There's a record player in the room, too, "which plays a collection of records mostly curated by Kenny Osehan, the owner," says Zelly Dugan, brand experience lead for Shelter Social Club, a hospitality company that owns Chief's Peak and other casual properties, like The Alamo Motel in Los Alamos and the Hamlet Inn in Solvang.

The Chief's Peak music scene expands the last Thursday of each month with Sound Seekers Listening Club from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., featuring sets by DJ Fire Breathing Panther and guests. "The theme changes monthly, keeping things fresh and fun," Dugan adds. "Past nights have

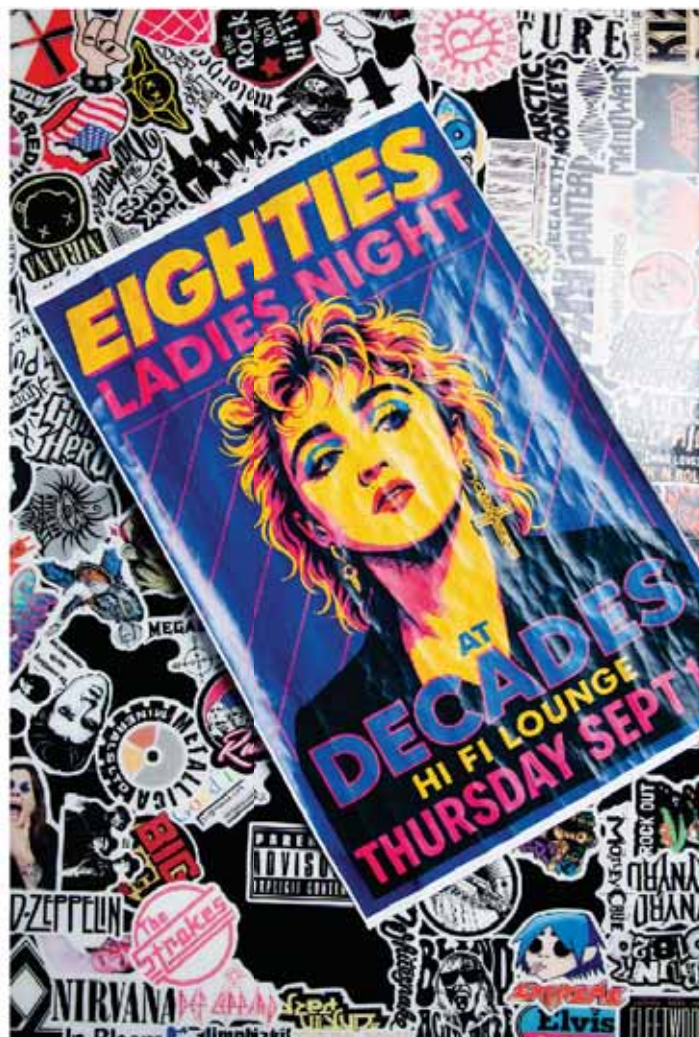
included Euro Dance Party, Igneous Rock, '90s Rap, Caribbean Boom Box, and many more."

An event entitled Rock Like a Banshee launched in May at **The Society: State & Mason** wine bar in Santa Barbara's Hotel Californian (hotelcalifornian.com). Every Tuesday from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m., and in partnership with Banshee Wines, the team at The Society: State & Mason sets up a record player, and guests play DJ, choosing from the in-house LP collection or bringing their favorite records from home.

"People love it when they come in and discover that the music they're hearing is playing on a record," says manager Ashley Oswald. "I've noticed that it also sparks interesting conversation at guest tables."

The team sources its own vinyl from used record shops in Santa Barbara, Ventura, and L.A., and their current album lineup includes *Aja* by Steely Dan, *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis and *In Rainbows* by Radiohead. On these evenings, Banshee wines, which include estate pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, and bubbly from Sonoma County, are offered at a 30 percent discount.

Concert and band posters hang on the wall under a disco ball at Decades Hi-Fi (left); a colorful flyer promotes Eighties Ladies Night at the lounge (right).



Silicon Valley before moving to Atascadero—and opened Decades with his business partner, Brian Golden, in June. There’s wine and beer on tap, but the vinyl is the main draw, he says. This includes customers bringing their own records, which they’ve often just purchased at fan fave Traffic Records, half a block away. They play them through a sound system made of vintage equipment, including a 1970s Pioneer receiver and a Soundcraft mixer. The demographic is large, from people who remember loving vinyl and come in to enjoy the sounds, Ferguson says, to younger vinyl newbies who can now find contemporary bands and artists putting new music out on records, too.

The physical aspect of listening to records is unique to the new-to-vinyl crowd, Ferguson notes. “It creates a more ceremonial aspect to listening to music,” he says. “It’s yours. It forces you to put down your device. It’s tactile. And reading the inner sleeve provides a better understanding of what’s behind the music and what feeds the creative process. Younger listeners are more prone to invest in something they understand better.”

Decades features wine and beer on tap. Purple Reign, a hard seltzer from local favorite Colony Mash Brewing Co., is the lounge’s top seller.

It’s coffee, not spirits, that whets clients’ whistles at **American Pie Records** (americanpierecords.com) in Camarillo, which opened in 2022. Here, pour-over espresso drinks, along with ice cream and pastries from popular local bakery Bread Basket Cake Company, are always on the chalkboard menu. Manager Dustin Reese, himself a budding bassist, is also responsible for curating live musicians, mostly locals, who take the quaint stage on Fridays and Saturdays. And the customer experience is rounded out by an extensive array of used LPs.

“People are tired of not owning things,” says Reese, who sees an increasingly younger clientele coming in to browse the albums. A wide range of genres are represented, though classic rock, jazz, and hip-hop sell especially well. “In a digital world, where apps vomit videos on you, over which you have no control,” Reese continues, “people want more and more to get a story.” Records, he believes, offer that, thanks to photos and notes that add colorful context to the music.

And Reese sees vinyl’s resurgence—its staying power—as a testament to the power of permanence. “My favorite show on Netflix can suddenly be gone, but nobody can take a record from me,” he says. “It’s in my hands. I have it. And owning it means you respect it more.” ♦



American Pie in Camarillo (above) sells records, coffee drinks, and baked goods, like mini pies, cookies and muffins (top); vinyl doubles as decor (opposite).

