

Lighting—and Passing—

MCMAHON / CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS
2007 Excellence in Club Management Awards Winners

The California Club's Harry Richter capped an exemplary career by leaving members in the very capable hands of Peter Schaub—a "rising star" he carefully mentored.

By Joe Barks, Editor



Harry Richter has retired after a nearly 50-year career of considerable achievement—and his legacy of accomplishments is still growing.

Some men and women are doomed to work for all of their adult lives and never find professional satisfaction. Others suffer the misfortune of floating around for many years in search of a job they enjoy before they can finally land it, only to then come up against retirement before they feel anything close to fulfilled.

And then there's Harry Richter. He's been blessed to be able to retire after a stellar career in club management and say he "absolutely loved every day" and leaves with "no regrets." And he will continue to get immense professional satisfaction—even as he now pursues the well-earned privilege of doing nothing more than "traveling and trying to get my handicap down"—by being able to watch his professional legacy continue to grow, both through the property he worked for and the successor he has groomed to take his place.

Not bad for a guy who literally got off a boat in New York in 1960 and by his own admission was "not highly educated." But because he had learned the trade of pastry chef in his native Germany, within four weeks Richter had his first job. From there, a legendary career began that took him to the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia, formal education at Cornell, hotel F&B work in Hawaii, management positions at the PGA National Golf Club in Florida and the St. Louis Country Club, and finally to The California Club, Los Angeles' oldest city club.

Richter arrived at The California Club to be its new General Manager in 1984. Its landmark Beaux Arts downtown building (opposite page, above right), built in 1929 and designed by Pentagon architect Robert Farquhar, looked pretty much then as it does today.

But when Richter stepped down earlier this year to end his 24 years as GM, the California Club in 2008 bore very little

resemblance in any other way to the one he came to direct.

For example, the club's food and beverage program had been completely transformed, according to club President Steven Ackerman, from "typical club food with bland taste and uninteresting presentations, to a club that can rival any fine-dining experience in Los Angeles and is consistently the venue of first choice for numerous gourmet groups."

And a club calendar that had just a handful of tired events in 1984 ("a Smoker and a few Christmas events," says Ackerman) now listed as many events in a week's time as it did during that entire year. The schedule for 2008 was filled with attractions that were anything but tired or typical, too—including such entries as culinary evenings with well-known guest chefs; music events for the club's jazz and opera societies that featured private concerts with accomplished entertainers; literary events with best-selling authors and Pulitzer Prize winners; and private field trips to art exhibits and other architectural and cultural sites.

Countless other descriptions of marked differences between the clubs of 1984 and 2008 can now be made. But the most powerful impressions of Harry Richter's impact in his 24-year tenure as the California Club's GM come from some of the eye-opening numbers that he left as his parting gifts:

- 1,675 (members)
- \$7.3 million (annual food and beverage sales)
- 12 (the *fewest* amount of years of service at the club among the senior staff assembled under Richter's leadership—a remarkable achievement in a turnover-prone industry)
- 0 (debt on the club's books)

History Won't Repeat

Even with all of this, though, the most valuable item that

PHOTOS BY JOANNA LEFEBVRE, CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS; RETIROING COURTESY CALIFORNIA CLUB

the Torch



Peter Schaub has been well-prepared to represent the second generation of club management for both his family and his property.



The California Club's landmark building in downtown Los Angeles was home to tremendous change and growth during Harry Richter's 24 years as General Manager, and is set for an equally bright future under direction of the new GM, Peter Schaub.

Harry Richter gave to The California Club was his guarantee that there was no chance of the club ever slipping back towards 1984. This came in the form of Peter Schaub, who has succeeded Richter as General Manager, after working for him as Executive Assistant Manager for eight years.

True to his form as a meticulous planner who has always placed a premium on avoiding turnover-related disruptions (as evidenced by the remarkably solid tenure records of his staff), Richter began to anticipate his retirement, and the need to find and mentor a successor, nearly 10 years ago.

Combining his deep network of industry contacts with

The hands-on experience and knowledge gained from his father, Hans Schaub (left), made Peter Schaub stand out as the natural choice to carry on Harry Richter's legacy.



the appeal of working in Los Angeles at such a prestigious property, it certainly wasn't hard to build up a solid pool of extremely qualified candidates for the position and opportunity to succeed Richter. But to Richter, Schaub clearly stood out as the leading candidate to take the California Club into the second generation of what he had started, largely because he already represented the second generation of proven club management—his father, Hans Schaub, is a respected industry veteran who has led the growth of the Minneapolis Club.

"There are a lot of young managers now who are very highly educated, but have little hands-on experience," Richter says. "Peter came with hands-on experience and knowledge that he learned first from his father, and then from people he worked for like Bill Schulz at the Houston Country Club—and that's really what a club like this needs.

"Peter's strong point is how he is always out among the members and staff, being visible while providing great service and dealing with all of the issues that come up in a very patient way," Richter adds. "You can't do this job by sitting in an office and hoping that everything will be OK."

For his part, Peter Schaub jokes that his father "really wasn't too crazy" about his also decided to also pursue a career in hospitality—but that both knew it was probably inevitable that he would.

"I didn't want to limit myself, and never decided to also get into this field just for my

father's benefit," he says. "But I think it does get in your blood and stick with you, and I know that deep down he's proud, especially because of the opportunities I've had to learn from people he respects so much."

Under his mentoring by Harry Richter, Schaub says the biggest lesson that he learned quickly, and repeatedly, was how food and beverage quality and service issues have to always

take priority as the driver of The California Club's operation.

"We're not here because we have 51 hotel rooms or a 250-car parking garage," Schaub notes. "We're here because of great food and beverage service; without that, city clubs, especially, are nothing.

"And Mr. Richter taught me that means that even if you're only serving burgers, you have to do it right, or otherwise what's the point?" Schaub adds. "He also taught me that we can't cover our eyes and think our only competition is other clubs—there are a thousand other restaurants in Los Angeles that our members can go to every night, so we have to set and maintain our standards to compete with the very best of them."

And so it has been assured that, with the imparting of this kind of wisdom and knowledge over a carefully planned transition, The California Club has not been traumatized by Harry Richter's retirement this year. Instead, the occasion has been celebrated as an exciting passing of the torch (a celebration that, coincidentally, was enhanced by the awarding of McMahon Group/Club & Resort Business 2007 Excellence in Management Awards to both men—Richter as the winner in the City, Athletic or Specialty (Non-Golf) Club category, and Schaub as a "Rising Star." It is the first time in the history of the Excellence Awards that two have been awarded in the same year to managers from the same club.)

"The club is indebted to Harry Richter for his foresight in hiring and training the gentleman who is now taking his place," said Steven Ackerman. "One of Harry Richter's greatest gifts to the club is how he ensured that his legacy of excellence will continue into the next generation.

"One of the measures of truly great managers is how they perform the critical role of selecting and training others who can succeed them," Ackerman added. "For how he found and prepared Peter Schaub for our club, Harry gets an A-plus. We hold Peter in the utmost regard, and he has our 100% support as he begins his career as our new General Manager." **C&RB**

Ideas

IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT THE CALIFORNIA CLUB UNDER HARRY RICHTER AND PETER SCHAUB'S LEADERSHIP

- Redesigned and landscaped club's patio and terrace (see photo, above right) and initiated successful *al fresco* lunch and dinner offers, including "Music Under the Stars" program with lighter fare, to improve F&B business during slower summer months

- Created "Members Only" golf and tennis tournaments with local clubs that culminated with dinners at California Club.

Achievements

AT THE CALIFORNIA CLUB UNDER HARRY RICHTER'S LEADERSHIP

- Membership grew to over 1,675 in three categories (regular, non-resident and privilege holders).
- Annual food and beverage sales grew to \$7.3 million.
- Senior staff developed and retained, with no one now having fewer than 12 years of tenure.

PHOTO (TOP LEFT) BY JOHANNA LEFERBER, CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS; (TOP RIGHT) COURTESY CALIFORNIA CLUB