

Family business is making memories at Sylvan Beach Pavilion

Elvis has left the building, but La Porte's Sylvan Beach Pavilion is staying busy

By Sandra Bretting | April 7, 2016 | Updated: April 9, 2016 1:14am



The Shafaiis have brought "good food and excellent service to what's no doubt one of the most original venues in the country." A view of the bar at the Sylvan Beach Pavilion on Tuesday, April 5, 2016 in La Porte, TX.



Raj Shafaii poses outside the deck area at the Sylvan Beach Pavilion on Tuesday, April 5, 2016 in La Porte, TX.



Raj Shafaii says of his family business, "We thought that if we gave people a nice, clean place, they would use us."



From right to left, Raj, Norma, Armand, Rami and Alex Shafaii pose for a photo on the deck of the Sylvan Beach Pavilion on Tuesday, April 5, 2016 in La Porte, TX.



A view of the patio deck bar at the Sylvan Beach Pavilion on Tuesday, April 5, 2016 in La Porte, TX.



From bottom clockwise, Raj and Norma Shafaii with their children, Rami, back left, Armand, back middle and Alex back right pose inside at the Sylvan Beach Pavilion on Tuesday, April 5, 2016 in La Porte, TX.

Perched on the Gulf of Mexico, the Sylvan Beach Pavilion in La Porte is all windows, white walls and pale roof.

But the history provides plenty of color. Local legend has Elvis Presley playing on the stage there early in his career. Presley played many small Texas venues in the mid-1950s, when the present pavilion was built.

Harris County owns it, and Shafaii Party & Reception Centers won the right to manage the pavilion in 2013.

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Patriarch Raj Shafaii came to this country in 1975 from Iran and soon enrolled as a structural engineering student at the University of Texas.

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The business, led by Raj Shafaii, 59, and his family, owns and operates five venues around Houston. Patriarch Raj Shafaii came to this country in 1975 from Iran and soon enrolled as a structural engineering student at the University of Texas. "I loved my job as a structural engineer," Shafaii said. "But I got into business because my uncle kept pushing me to be an importer." Shafaii and his wife, Norma, entered the import business in the early 1980s by bringing colorful Chinese tablecloths into this country.

While moderately successful, the couple hit it big when women started clamoring for detachable lace collars back in '86. The Shafaiis supplied department stores like Palais Royal with collars by removing the lace from their tablecloths. Soon the business had 60 seamstresses and brought in as much as \$100,000 in sales each month. "But I was traveling so much, I was never home," Raj Shafaii said.

After the birth of their third son in the early '90s, the Shafaiis were ready for a change. The couple converted their 12,000-square-foot warehouse and assembly plant on Broadway Street in Houston into a party venue five years later. The Broadway Hall found early success as a spot for quinceañeras.

"Norma had friends who would invite us to quinceañeras," Raj Shafaii said. "We would go there as guests, and we realized there weren't enough banquet halls near where our warehouse was. We thought that if we gave people a nice, clean place, they would use us."

The Shafaiis opened a second venue in Galena Park three years later. That time, they converted a 17,000-square-foot former grocery store into a party venue.

By the time the Shafaiis got the contract to run the Sylvan Beach Pavilion, the other locations were bringing in roughly \$1 million annually in gross sales, Raj Shafaii said.

While he declined to provide annual revenues for the Sylvan Beach location, he noted it's the best performing of the family's venues.

"New memories are being created there all the time," said Ted Powell, president of a nonprofit group called Friends of Sylvan Beach. "The venue is so unique, and what the Shafaiis have done is bring good food and excellent service to what's no doubt one of the most original venues in the country." "We're booked every Saturday night for this rest of this year, and into next," Armand Shafaii said. "I would work the concession stand," said son Armand Shafaii, 31. "That was my first business, when I was 13." Today all three sons work with the family's business.

Sylvan Beach Pavilion

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