

Bat Out of Hell

The Vampires ride hard and fast

BY CURTIS CARTIER

THEY DON'T drink blood. They don't wear fake fangs or black trench coats. They don't read Anne Rice novels and they wouldn't be caught dead watching *Twilight*. What they do is ride souped-up motorcycles at ridiculous speeds, party like rock stars and occasionally forget to wear clothes while doing either. They're the Vampires. And they're probably Santa Cruz's best known motorcycle club.

"What do people say when they think of the Vampires? Probably, 'Oh, you mean those hooligans on bikes,'" says Keith Seric, sergeant-at-arms for the Vampires Motorcycle Club and a 10-year veteran of the group. "We're really just all about the riding. We ride hard and we ride fast. Everything else is just icing on the cake."

Originally founded in San Bruno in 1954, the Vampires, like several other clubs of the time, took its name from the decade's most popular horror flick genre. The initial group eventually disbanded in the late '60s, but in 1988, with a blessing from what was left of the old school Vamps, a small group of motorcyclists resurrected the club from the grave.

Today, the Vampires have chapters in Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo and San Francisco, and they boast a membership of several hundred—though, for tax purposes, they don't like to give out exact numbers. The group organizes or participates in about a dozen events every year, including barbecues, public rides, a members-only camping trip called the "Stackholio Ride" and the infamous "Naked Ride," which is exactly what it sounds like and draws more



COUNT ON IT Once a year the members of the Vampires Motorcycle Club lose the leathers and ride naked as jaybirds down Pacific Avenue, but most of the time they're easily identified by the patches on their jackets.

than a few curious stares when it roars down Pacific Avenue. The group, unlike most clubs, has no bike brand or style requirements. Its members ride Harley-Davidson hogs, Kawasaki crotch-rockets and Honda dirt bikes. "As long as it's got two wheels and a motor, it's good with us," explains Seric, who rides a BMW R-1150.

The membership is similarly eclectic. Professions represented in the ranks range from physical therapist and IT technician to firearms manufacturer and military officer—anyone with a love of motorcycles. But perhaps the most unifying trait of the club's members, besides their affection for two-wheeled death machines, is their

assortment of crash-related injuries. From Seric's two metal plates, 22 screws and two pins to another member's "powdered" wrist and hand and another's shattered knees and legs, not a single Vampire has been spared his or her pint of blood for the sake of the hobby.

"That's the difference between real riders and SQUIDS [a slang term for beginning and reckless riders that's short for Stupid, Quick, Underdressed and Imminently Dead]," says James Penick, a UNIX systems administrator who, at nearly 7 feet tall and 300 pounds, qualifies as a mountain of a man. "We always get back on our bikes, no matter what happens."

Fang Gang

Becoming a Vampire doesn't require being bitten or consuming the blood of another member. It does, however, take about a year of hanging around and another year as a "prospect." Easily identified both by the large square patch reading "Prospect" on their jackets and by their frequent trips to buy drinks and snacks for the other members, prospects are brutally hazed in their quest to earn a "full patch" and become official members.

Tom Payne, a young outdoor survival guide, is coming up on one year as a Vamps prospect. He's hopeful that the



MONSTERS BALL *Vampires savor their java at Pergolesi.*

other members will eventually vote him in and says he was simply looking for friends to ride with when he decided to join.

"I had been hanging out with the guys for a while," he says. "I'm into motorcycles, they're into motorcycles, it just seemed like a good fit."

As in the 1950s, Vampires are once again America's favorite monster. From feature films like the aforementioned *Twilight* series to HBO's *True Blood* and CW's *The Vampire Diaries*, it's never been a better time to be a bloodsucker. For the Vampires Motorcycle Club, however, all that popularity translates into some annoying and often-hilarious confusion.

"Every now and then, we'll get someone who will pop up on the website forum and want to be 'turned [into a vampire];'" says Penick. "It's usually some deranged 16-year-old who saw the teeth on the logo or something. They have no idea that the Vampire Motorcycle Club has nothing to do with teenagers drinking Clamato."

Once Bitten

Swallowing what must have been a cantaloupe-size ball of pride, the Vampires agreed to let a *Santa Cruz Weekly* reporter ride "bitch" on the back of a bike for a weekend run. The day started, as it almost always does with the Vampires, at Caffe Pergolesi. Arriving late and blisteringly hung-over, the crew straggled in to the coffeeshouse around noon. And after an hour of caffeinated concoction consumption, engine talk and debate on the whereabouts of a lovestruck Vamp who had disappeared the night before, it was time to hit the road.

My chauffeur for the afternoon

was Penick, the giant biker, and our steed was a Yamaha YZF-R1, which, he promised, was "faster than a Lamborghini."

The day was sunny and warm and the air perfumed with the smell of dead leaves as we coasted through town and merged onto Highway 1. It took about two minutes of cruising at the speed limit before Penick decided to show off his machine's cajones, instantly blasting forward and nearly leaving me behind. Traffic seemed at a stop while Penick expertly weaved between cars, often riding the center line before topping off at a speed that, for legal reasons, we'll just say was not quite 150 miles per hour.

"You all right, man?" He shouted when he finally exited the freeway, to which I shakily responded in the affirmative.

Off the highway, we headed north on Old San Jose Road. Flowing through the leaf-laden curves and waving at any fellow bikers we passed, the trip took us through Laurel Glen Road to Highway 17 and eventually back to downtown Santa Cruz. Leaning into turns and accelerating through straightaways, the "beautiful dance" described by Penick before we left took on vivid new meaning as we flew through the forest, the road seemingly laid out for maximum motorcycling enjoyment. Arriving back at Pergolesi, my limbs were still shaky and my heart still racing when Penick summed up the day with an offer that has likely turned plenty of other decent, hard-working folks into full-on leather-clad bikers.

"If you liked what you saw, go get a bike and we'll go again," he said. "Think about it this way: for \$7,000 to \$15,000 you can go faster than any sports car on the market." ☺