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LOS ANGELES

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LONG BEACH
SAN DIEGO

PRIDE IS A VIRTUE



AIDS AT 25



FOUR AIDS WARRIORS:

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LIZA MINNELLI'S
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

DIXIE CHICKS
REMAIN DEFIANT

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NEWS, POLITICS, AND ENTERTAINMENT

Sheriff to Address LGBT Law Enforcement Conference * Primaries Turn Nasty * Fireworks Over Marriage Amendment

THE ABBEY'S TALE OF 2, 3, 4...CITIES

BY STEVE YOUNG

Perched at the intersection of Santa Monica and Robertson in West Hollywood, the Abbey is a local institution that has drawn a loyal following since it first opened as a coffee house 15 years ago. David Cooley, founder of the Abbey, has overseen five different expansions and spoke to *IN Los Angeles* about the venue's newest makeover: a corporate partnership which has the Abbey poised to open its doors in cities across the country.

Today, the Abbey is a 16,000-square-foot restaurant and nightclub that acts as a social hub for the young, hip mixed gay-straight L.A. crowd. It has been rated "Best Bar in Los Angeles" and "Best Gay Bar" in both the Zagat Guide and AOL CityGuide for 2005 and 2006. With its numerous bars and cabanas, it's virtually impossible to imagine the Abbey's modest origins in 1991, when David Cooley and his business partner at the time opened up a coffee shop across the street from its current location—where Bossa Nova now resides. The gothic aesthetic came into existence from the fact that Cooley's partner happened to have two old stained-glass windows stored in his garage. The name "the Abbey" was an inexpensive way to be noticed: "If we chose something that began with an 'A,' it meant we'd be listed first," Cooley confesses.

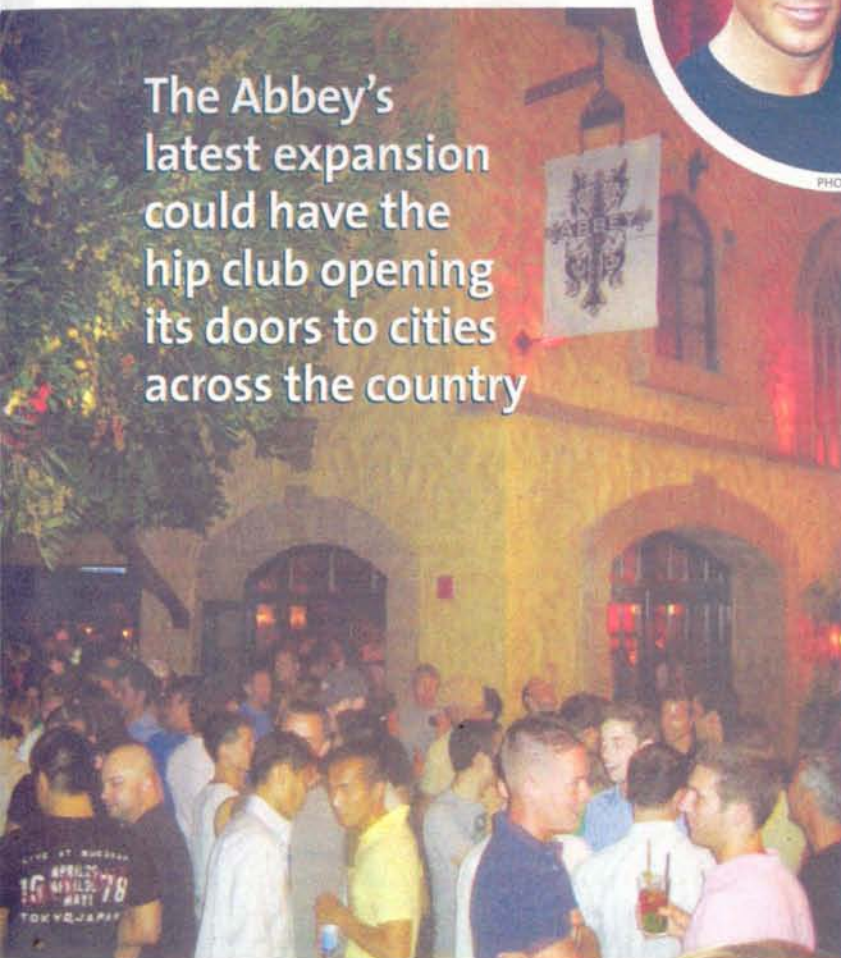
It was just Cooley, his business partner, seven employees, and an espresso machine serving up piping hot coffee drinks to its customers. Cooley was well ahead of the coffee curve until the corporate giant



The Abbey
owner
David Cooley

PHOTO OF DAVID COOLEY BY JOSEPH S. AMSTER

The Abbey's
latest expansion
could have the
hip club opening
its doors to cities
across the country



Starbucks emerged on the horizon. He soon began serving food to his customers, and after his third year, he moved in to the Abbey's present location. Through the years—and after numerous expansions—Cooley's labor force has swelled to 125 people. He notes that they are a loyal group—the average time an employee has been with him is eight years.

In addition to its emergence as a premier nightclub, the Abbey has played host to some important philanthropic events in the gay and lesbian community. Created and underwritten for the fifth consecutive year by the Abbey, "The Envelope Please" is the Abbey's black-tie Oscar viewing party to benefit AIDS Project Los Angeles, the 23-year-old organization with food banks, dental clinics, and other urgent direct services for the HIV community. To raise funds for APLA, Jennifer Love Hewitt joined *Esquire* and Clear Channel L.A. in hosting the event. The inclination toward giving may have something to do with the Abbey's roots. Cooley, who was transitioning from a career in finance at Merrill Lynch when he opened the café, says, "I had to borrow to open up my business, so it's felt very important for me to give back to a community that's been very good to me."

And from these origins the Abbey has become so successful that it has attracted the interest of SBE Restaurant Group, with whom Cooley has just partnered. While SBE may not be a familiar name to clubgoers and diners in Los Angeles, the names of its established hot-spots are: Privilege, Prey, the Lobby, the recently-opened Hyde Lounge, and Yu Restaurant & Lounge are all owned by SBE.

Cooley says: "I am incredibly excited to join forces with SBE Restaurant Group. Sam and SBE really value the special nature and appeal of the Abbey brand, and share my vision for its future. This partnership will help to realize the dream I've had to bring the Abbey brand to other cities and I cannot wait for this chapter."

Sam Nazarian, CEO of SBE Entertainment Group, SBE Restaurant's parent company, says, "The incredible popularity and longtime success of the Abbey are a testament to David's drive and entrepreneurial spirit, and our goal is to preserve its unique character and help successfully translate the Abbey experience into other U.S. markets." Nazarian adds, "Our SBE Restaurant Group will provide the resources and industry know-how to foster this growth and we look forward to working very closely with David."

While no cities have been locked in, Cooley says they will announce their first new location within the next few months. Currently under consideration are mostly warmer cities, which would enable the Abbey to maintain its very California indoor-outdoor design. Among the cities under consideration are Miami's South Beach, Atlanta, San Francisco, Dallas, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. Nazarian and Cooley expect to have five new franchises up and running within the next three years.

All the success and expansion doesn't have Cooley daunted. "I've always had big dreams," he says. "Everytime I've expanded, I've wondered, 'Can I fill this space?'" Customers have answered that question with a resounding yes.