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Post-Mudslides, Montecito Roars Back

'We've come out stronger and better,' say residents from Oprah to Ellen as real estate, restaurants and hotels — including the grand reopening of the Rosewood Miramar — attest to the rebuild: 'The change from last year to this year has been dramatic' *By Abigail Stone*

It's one of those situations that you see on television that you think, 'It doesn't happen here,' and it did," says WME head of television, broadcast and sports **Rick Rosen**, referring to the one-two punch of the Thomas Fire and heavy rainfall that, just over a year ago, turned Montecito, just 80 miles north of Los Angeles, into a disaster zone. Says Rosen, whose weekend home and family were spared, "We were very lucky." Producer **Steve Waterman** (*Stuart Little*, the Alvin and the Chipmunks movies) recalls seeing "cars in trees and pieces that you knew were houses," as well as the explosion of a gas pipe, which turned the sky pink.

The devastation was massive. Four of the city's creeks overflowed, pushing torrents of loose mud down the hillside; 23 people were killed, 130 homes destroyed and Highway 101, a river of sludge, closed for 11 days. **Jeff Bridges** and tennis star **Jimmy Connors** were among the many people who had

Destruction from 2018's mudslides, caused by four of Montecito's creeks overflowing.



to be airlifted to safety.

The area is continuing to heal. In early January, on the one-year anniversary, **Oprah Winfrey**, whose estate had been covered in mud in sections, took part in a vigil to remember the victims with TKnumber people.



Winfrey



Bridges

"We've come out stronger and better," says star realtor **Suzanne Perkins**, whose clients include affected residents **Rob Lowe** and **Ellen DeGeneres**. The latter led a GoFundMe campaign last year that raised more than

\$150,000 for local disaster relief, with \$20,000 going to the Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade, a group of hastily assembled volunteers who worked to clear mud one bucket at a time. Actor and former Montecito resident **Timothy Stack** recalls how while donating to the Village Cheese Shop — "they were open just to make sandwiches for people doing the cleanup," he says — DeGeneres "walked in with literally a bag of money, dropped it on the counter and said, 'Here, I got some more,' and left. I thought that was a really cool thing."

Now, a year later, the area is experiencing a rebound. The industry-favored San Ysidro Ranch resort, which saw half of its property destroyed by mud, is expected to be fully operational in June; last month, it reopened its two restaurants after months of



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1 Exterior of the Rosewood Miramar Beach Montecito.

2 Rosewood owner Rick Caruso, photographed Feb. 13, says, "When Ian Schrage bought this 20 years ago, I was very disappointed. I'm thrilled that I have it."

3 Panoramic views from Miramar Beach Bar, a Rosewood restaurant.

renovations. Known for decades for its secluded bungalows, the resort has drawn **John and Jacqueline Kennedy**, who honeymooned there in 1953, as did **Julia Roberts** and **Danny Moder** in 2002.

The Ranch's reopening follows that of The Four Seasons Biltmore, which had closed for

five months after suffering significant damage to its grounds and first floor — during the closure it took the opportunity to add plunge pools to four of the bungalows on its 22-acre site. When it reopened last March, The Montecito Inn, built by **Charlie Chaplin** in 1928, created

Style

Recovery

a memorial in its garden to the mudslides' 23 victims.

Other hotels are also seeing renewal. The El Encanto was purchased by LVMH in December. **Michael Keaton** and **Jane Lynch** attended the **John Mayer** concert that officially opened the Spanish Colonial-style Hotel Californian in May, with its **Martyn Lawrence Bullard**-designed interiors; its restaurant, Blackbird, is a favorite of **Jason Segal**.

Then there's the highly anticipated Rosewood Miramar Beach Montecito, which began a soft-opening phase on Feb. 11. It's located on the site of the old Miramar Hotel, a property that first started hosting guests in the late 1800s but shuttered in 2000. (In 1999, the Women Filmmakers' Summit, organized by director **Allison Anders**, was held there, foreshadowing the Time's Up movement by almost two decades; guests included **Shonda Rhimes** and Sundance founding director **Michelle Satter**.)

Reimagined for the 21st century by developer **Rick Caruso**, the sole five-star hotel in the state also boasts the only guest rooms in SoCal located directly over the



DeGeneres



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1 Chef Phillip Frankland Lee at Silver Bough. Lee's grandfather, actor Phil Silvers (*The Phil Silvers Show*), was friends with original owner Charlie Chaplin's children.
2 Four Seasons Biltmore reopened after repairing first-floor damage.
3 Abalone a la Flambadou, \$tk, at The Monarch.



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sand. Median room rates are \$595 a night and top out at \$5,575 for the Ambassador's Suite. Its boutiques include **Gwyneth Paltrow's** Goop Sundries Shop and The Gate House, a **James Perse** boutique. The property also showcases five restaurants, including Caruso's, an Italian-influenced spot, as well as Miramar Beach Bar and Malibu Farm at Miramar, all three with alfresco seating featuring beach views. Though a freeway shutdown impacted the renovations, "we never stopped working" during the mudslides," says Caruso, adding, "I have always loved this

region. It's spectacular."

Among Rosewood Miramar's culinary challengers are the four restaurants at The Montecito Inn, spearheaded by *Top Chef* alum **Phillip Frankland Lee** and wife **Margarita Kallas-Lee**, including The Monarch (DeGeneres and wife **Portia de Rossi** recently bought out the place for a party) and the ambitious, intimate eight-person Silver Bough, which opened January 31st and currently requires dinner reservations a month out for Thursdays through Sundays. The \$550, three-act menu spotlights locally caught

fish, Kobe beef, caviar, 24-karat gold and truffles.

Other contenders include the Neopolitan-style pizza at Bettina's in the Montecito Country Mart (Winfrey loves to shop here); **Matthew Kenney's** vegan Oliver's, owned by cellular billionaire **Craig McCaw**; Tyger Tyger, offering a menu of street cart-influenced Southeast Asian bites (part-time resident **Julia Louis-Dreyfus** is a fan); and Babu Ji, a branch of the lauded NYC Indian eatery.

The area's upswing is also being felt in the housing market. "Sales of high-end homes have risen over 69% in the past year," says **Adam McKaig** of Douglas Elliman, who recently sold a property adjacent to the **Ronald Reagan Ranch** for \$14 million to an undisclosed buyer. "The change from last year to this year has been dramatic and we're only two months into the year," says Perkins, who's had three sales for over \$10 million since January 1st and just closed on a home listed at \$35 million. Among recent big transactions and listings: DeGeneres and de Rossi purchased a Balinese-inspired estate in Montecito for \$27 million in January, while Keaton recently listed his nearly-19-acre horse ranch in Summerland for \$8.72 million.

Rosen, however, says he can't imagine ever listing his place. "I have no plans to ever leave," he says. "I love this house. I love the area. I love the community." **THR**

Matthew Kenney's restaurant Oliver's serves vegan small plates (such as spinach and artichoke flatbread with cashew parmesan; \$20) and entrees (heirloom zucchini and tomato lasagna; \$23).

