

Finocchio's

You've probably heard of Finocchio's wherever you are, but if you've been in Northern California prior to 1999, you certainly have. For 60+ years, it elicited just about every emotion, from laughter to rage, until San Francisco, itself, stole its thunder, and Finocchio's folded.

Joe Finocchio opened his famed San Francisco nightspot at 506 Broadway after a customer, drinking in his father's speakeasy, performed an imitation of the legendary Sophie Tucker. This gave Joe the idea of a nightclub with men performing with all the glitter, sophistication and glamour of sophisticated women.

He opened the club June 15, 1936. There was little trouble at the club over the years, though military authorities declared Finocchio's "off limits" for selling liquor to WWII military personnel outside of authorized hours. That temporary sanction was lifted New Year's Eve 1943 after Joe Finocchio and other bar owners signed an agreement to limit liquor sales to military personnel to between 5 p.m. and midnight. Beer could, however, be sold between 10 a.m. and midnight. Finocchio's was a favorite tourist spot in San Francisco from the 1930s to the 1990s, but as cross-dressing became less unusual (especially in San Francisco!) the crowds dwindled.

When Joe Finocchio presented female impersonators on Broadway in North Beach in 1936, the police were not amused. They raided the place. Joe was undeterred and the landmark venue became a draw for tourists and celebrity visitors from all over the world. On Nov. 27, 1999 Finocchio's world famous revue closed its doors after 63 years and countless wigs, fans, feathers and false eye lashes. Veteran performers are quick to point out that they were not drag queens, rather they were illusionists, female impersonators hired for their singing and dancing talent. There was no lip-synching at Finocchio's. Mostly gays playing for a straight audience, these performers were on the forefront of gender politics in the U.S. The Finocchio family ruled the cast with an iron hand. Morals clauses were written into every contract, though drug use and moonlighting with Stage Door Johnnys was not uncommon.

For most the of the venue's run, transsexuals were not hired. The Finocchio's wanted performers to enter the theatre as men and leave the theatre as men in order to further the venue's mystique as a house of illusion. Later, these policies were relaxed and eventually, biological women were hired to perform here. The nightclub was the long-time venue of LaVerne Cummings, and Lucean Phelps, the legendary "Male Sophie Tucker," who appeared there for 27 years. Eve Finocchio, widow of the founder, decided to close the club in late 1999 because of a major rent increase and dwindling attendance. The club closed November 27, 1999. Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's only comment upon hearing of the closure was, "What a drag."

