



# Saving the Chamois

**Praise for an après-ski institution. by Jackson Hogen**

Junior Wilson doesn't know when—or even how—the rumor got started, but it circulated faster than the forecast of a four-day storm front. Le Chamois, the signature pizza joint and watering hole at the base of Squaw, was to be razed by Squaw's new management and replaced by some bland new structure that wouldn't know the difference between KT and K2. Locals and tourists were beside themselves. They commiserated over pitchers of Stella. They made "Save the Chammy" bumper stickers. None of it was or is true, of course, but it makes for a good excuse to eulogize the place.

Le Chamois's owners—Wilson and partner Katja Dahl—are proprietors of this special place that has become a fixture in ski lore. It's not about the building per se, which was originally erected as post-Olympics lodging. The simple wood structure was converted into a pizza and beer place in 1969, the foundation for an uninterrupted, symbiotic relationship between mountain and tipping house. Wilson and Dahl took the reins from one of the original owners, Rocky Rudolph, in 2002, pledging to keep Le Chamois's essence intact. And aside from installing a much-loved outside bar to better serve patio patrons, they have done just that.

Certainly Le Chamois's longevity contributes to its appeal. It's been part of so many lives over so many years that it's created its own energy field. Squaw's glitterati cozy up with locals and tourists alike at any of the Chammy's three bars. You can't swing a cat here without hitting a legend. Want to put together an impromptu Chammy race team? How about overall World Cup champion Tamara McKinney, Hahnenkamm winner Daron Rahlves, Olympian Eva Twardokens, pro skiing's erstwhile Rookie of the Year Hansi Standteiner, and former U.S. Ski Team downhiller Barry Thys? Speed your game? Six-time speed-record holder Franz Weber and Olympic medalist Jeff Hamilton slow down long enough to have a brew here. Big mountain talents Jimbo Morgan, Scott Gaffney, JT Holmes, Brad Holmes, and Cody Townsend hang their helmets at the Chammy. Of course, most patrons are of the rank and file sort. "The locals have made it their home," says Morgan, who ate here as a kid, worked here as a teenager, and now uses it as his babysitting hub so he can take a few midday runs. "You can come here at the end of the day, let your guard down and just be yourself. Everyone gets it. It's the locals' own little Cheers. You can leave for 10 years and come back and the same guy will be sitting on the corner barstool. There must be 50 Norms in this place."

Adding to the charm are the odd hours: the Chammy is only open from après-ski to sundown, every day that the lifts are running. "It's the place everyone goes after their last run," says local freeskiing eminence Gaffney. "It's a natural concluding spot." Many a relationship with the life expectancy of a mayfly has been launched here, but so have more enduring bonds. At the going-away fête for boardercross creator and on-slope announcer Uncle E—it was a binge for the ages—Sherry McConkey (wife of the late Shane) introduced Gaffney to future wife Dawn, who proffered her phone number on a cocktail napkin.

Le Chamois isn't just woven into Squaw Valley's DNA, it's several threads in the fabric of American ski culture. Just ask anyone with a "Save the Chammy" sticker on the bumper of his weathered Subaru. The immortal *Hot Dog... The Movie*, which the Academy Awards somehow overlooked in 1983, includes several scenes at the Chamois. If you drop by this season you might just spot Debbie Dutton, who played Shannon Tweed's stunt double in the film, chilling on the patio. You'll find that she, and the Cham, are aging exquisitely.