

Welcome Center stays busy

← Welcome Center, A1

Three periods of the year for the past three years, during the weekday *Good Morning America* show, a five-second ad for Gilroy has flashed out at the Big Apple throngs, 220 spots in all.

Who knew? But that's not all, according to Howard, who leads the center's marketing push with input from her 15-member board of directors.

In partnership with the Central Coast Tourism Council, there are flashy magazine ads, inserts in the editions of the *Wall Street Journal* that go to five top California cities, and trips to travel trade shows around the country—St. Louis in February 2017—all to promote Gilroy.

The Welcome Center also boasts a cheerful retail gift shop, with more than 300 items from 13 vendors. In five years, it has brought in nearly \$90,000 in sales, portions of which go to the vendors, which include Casa De Fruta on Pacheco Pass Highway and Gilroy Garlic Festival olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

And then there are the cute stuffed garlic characters, Gil and Roy, another big seller, according to Howard, and hats and sandals and shopping bags, golf divots, the popular garlic pistachio nuts, post cards, jackets, baby clothes, cloth throws emblazoned with the famous garlic mural at Fifth Street and the book *Any Bozzo Can Cook* by the garlic festival's veteran comedic cooking duo of Sam Bozzo and Gene Sakahara.

Howard was invited recently to represent Gilroy tourism at the celebration of the inaugural flight of China Air service in and out of San Jose.

The Chinese know the way to San Jose, but apparently they head right for Gilroy.

Of the dozens of foreign nations whose citizens visit the Welcome Center each year, the largest number by far come from China, according to Gimenez, who tracks visitors coming through the door.

Nearly 1,400 Chinese nationals crossed the threshold in just the first five months of 2015. Last month, 335 of the 766 foreign walks-ins were from China. The next biggest contingent was 77 from Germany. The second largest number in the first five months of 2015 were from Canada, at 113.

Over the same period, the number of countries represented by visitors ranged from 34 in January to 48 in May.

Of American visitors last month, 276 were from the Bay Area, 143 from the Central Coast, 48 from Southern California, 95 from Gilroy, 126 from the rest of the state and 123 from other states, for an August total of 811.

That number combined with the 766 foreigners put the total number of visitors to the center last month at 1,577—almost as many as would visit the old Gilroy Visitor's Bureau's downtown location in a year.

That the Welcome Center found itself comfortably nestled in the city's



HOT STUFF In a town where's garlic's king, the biggest seller at the Gilroy Welcome Center's gift shop is Gilroy Garlic Festival olive oil, like that held by executive director Jane Howard. It comes in several flavors, too, including jalapeño.

biggest year-round visitor draw, the Outlets, was pretty much an accident, but a big part of the story.

The firm that owns the outlets, Simon Properties, is the world's biggest owner of shopping venues, Howard said. Their properties include the Great Mall in the Midwest and the Stanford Shopping Center, among many others.

It was Simon's local manager who approached Howard with the idea that the Welcome Center would be more than welcome at the outlet center.

"Thank goodness for her, the rest is history," Howard said.

And the offer to set

up shop where a million or more shoppers spend money every year came with a deal no one could refuse.

The storefront would be rent-free if the Welcome Center did its part to promote the Outlets by distributing their coupon books and other marketing materials.

The resulting five years, Howard said, have been "exciting."

And it's not just directions to wineries, restaurants and Gilroy Gardens the visitors and tourists seek out at the Welcome Center, with its storefront and signage clearly visible to traffic on Highway 101. They come for gifts and

goodies, from snacks and books to keychains, bulbous garlic mascots such as Gil and Roy and clothing emblazoned with the city's logo, it's official brand symbol that the center can use free of charge, one of only a handful of places with permission to do so. The others include the Gilroy Chamber of Commerce, the city-owned Gilroy Gardens, the Gilroy Downtown Business Association and the city's economic development group, according to Howard.

Visitors also come for information. Since 2011, the Welcome Center has distributed nearly 207,000

brochures and fliers for attractions in and around Gilroy and the Central Coast.

And that's a solid number, it's tracked in-house by staff, including six volunteers, and also at Via and Sunset magazines and the Yosemite Journal, when folks fill out request cards from the publications that are forwarded to the Welcome Center.

So in the Garlic Capital of the World which item is the biggest seller among the Welcome Center's retail offerings?

It's olive oil.

Learn more about the Welcome Center at <http://gilroywelcomecenter.org/>.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Renaissance Faire

A Play Faire Production

WEEKENDS

SEPT 17th thru OCT 16th



JOUSTING

Comedy · Music
Artisans & Crafters

FOOD · DRINK

Games & Rides

Free

Celtic Rock Concert

Every Weekend!

at Casa De Fruta, Pacheco Pass, HWY 152, Hollister

NORCALRENAFAIRE.COM