What do you do when your favorite spa retreat (a legendary one you’ve visited 22 times) is neglected by a series of indifferent corporate owners and starts to fray around the edges? Well, if you’re the philanthropist Joanne Conway (her husband is billionaire William Conway Jr., co-founder of the Carlyle Group), you buy it, restore it to its former glory, and give away the profits to organizations that help children.

The Golden Door, outside San Diego, is arguably one of America’s most storied luxury spas, a Zen-like escape that has always inspired fierce loyalty in its guests. Opened in 1958 by wellness pioneer Deborah Sockely (now a robust 93-year-old who still owns Rancho La Puerta in Mexico), the tranquil, rejuvenation-style retreat has pampered, toned, smoothed, and soothed all manner of prominent women over the years, from Hollywood luminaries (think Elizabeth Taylor, Barbra Streisand, and Nicole Kidman) to power players in the worlds of business, finance, law, and media. Regulars quip that people go to the Golden Door to get in shape and often end up getting jobs. (Six men’s weeks per year keep husbands and boyfriends from getting jealous.)

Bringing it back from the brink isn’t just a rich woman’s vanity project—it’s a labor of

THE GOLDEN DOOR, REFRESHED

The revered 57-year-old California resort gets a head-to-toe makeover.

BY SANDRA BALLENTINE
love. Since purchasing the 40-room property, Conway has spent $15 million resuscitating it, not including the millions spent buying up 300 adjacent acres as a buffer against encroaching development. As her new chief operating officer, Kathy Van Nessa, puts it, "The future of the Golden Door was questionable, and Joanne said, 'This is a place that has profoundly changed my life, and I don't want it to go away.'"

To this end, Conway charged biodynamic and organic gardening expert Jeff Dawson with reinvigorating the soil and rendering new stands of avocado, citrus, and olive trees. The spoils from his abundant vegetable, herb, and flower gardens go directly into executive chef Greg Fry's kitchen. "He gets to grow, I get to take," laughs Fry, as he proffers a colorful slice of freshly dug Chioggia beet and a perfect strawberry.

The handsome 35-year-old waves poetic about his prolific laying hens and 150,000 brand-new honeybees. Plus, Fry can't wait to serve up Dawson's soon-to-be-launched Golden Door tomato. "You've never tasted a tomato like this," he says.

ike everyone involved with the hotel's renaissance, Fry is bullish about the future: "Our goal—and it's one you can already smell, see, and taste—is a productive property that enhances the guest experience and also supports our charitable work." Dishes like snap pea and mint salad with heirloom greens and coriander-crusted scallops certainly don't hurt the cause. And Fry's gluten-free gingersnaps are already an institution.

For the decor, New York–based interior designer Victoria Hagan headed up a sensitive refurbishment. "When you're dealing with a place that women have been going to for generations and have such affection for," says Hagan, "you have to be careful not to take away what's special about it." Pulling from the hotel's impressive collection of Asian art, as well as from her own furniture line, the designer gave the tired interiors a much-needed face-life. "It was a good fit," she says. "My work is deeply rooted in the details, history, respect for the land, and a sense of renewal—all things integral to the Golden Door experience."

And what an experience it is. Where else can you hike challenging mountain trails; practice Tai Chi, Pilates, and yoga amid gorgeous Asian-style gardens; hike through fragrant orange groves; meditate in a labyrinth; learn cardioboxing, Ta-ta, and archery; indulge in a fresh-rosemary body wrap; and get sorted by a life coach—all before dinner?

A retreat and spa veteran, I tend to roll my eyes when people say a place is "life changing." But a week at the Door made me a believer. I was cosseted and cared for but also pushed and challenged. Who knew I was good with a bow and arrow? Or that I have an impressive left hook? The staff intuit what I wanted—and needed—at every turn. I came away refreshed, motivated, clear-minded, and more physically confident. Not to mention a few pounds lighter. I also left with several bins of Chef Fry's gingersnaps (from the Door's new artisanal food line—all profits go to charity), so the weight loss might be temporary. But that's okay—these calories have a cause.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL AND A SENSE OF RENEWAL ARE INTEGRAL TO THE EXPERIENCE.

A four-day stay starts at $6,000; seven days, $8,850. The Golden Door is at 777 Deer Springs Road, San Marcos, California; 866-420-6414; goldendoor.com.