

Feature

Delectable Dining

With more restaurants opening in 2015, Laguna Beach continues to thrive as a culinary capital of the west coast.

By Peter A. Balaskas

Ever since the White House Restaurant opened its doors in 1918, Laguna Beach has been patiently cultivating its presence as the go-to place for fine dining. A special “aromatic aura” seems to hover over the town that beckons both locals and visitors alike, appealing specifically to their olfactory organs and taste buds. On South Coast Drive, racks of lamb, tandori chicken and other Indian dishes tantalize the customers’ appetites at Natraj. Down the block is San Shi Go, which offers a variety of sushi and fried tempura. Meanwhile on Beach Street, the 40-year-old Polina’s Salerno Italian Restaurant offers a plethora of pastas, especially gnocchi, a potato pasta served with meat and marinara sauces.

Ivan Spiers, owner of Mozambique Steak House and his newly opened Skyloft, feels that when it comes to Laguna Beach’s appeal for diverse restaurants, visitors simply want to enjoy the independent, hole-in-the-wall eateries that the locals enjoy.

“There is also a sense of community and pride here,” Ivan says. “I think that’s why so many people go out to dine or unwind...because they know that inevitably they will run into someone they know.”

Whether they are newcomers or decade-long legacies, Laguna Beach's restaurants seem to withstand all obstacles, from an unpredictable economy to the ever-evolving tastes of their clientele. And by overcoming these challenges, the city's restaurant scene continues to strive towards epicurean and financial longevity.

Part I. The Newcomers

Insightful Inspirations

Designing and opening a new restaurant can be a very daunting task, unless the restaurateur has a specific vision for the space and a good eye for what the public wants. For two years, Scott McIntosh harnessed his entrepreneurial experiences owning and operating his Anaheim Hills restaurant, Reunion. After much success, he has now expanded the chain to the Boat Canyon Shopping Center in Laguna.

"Laguna made the best sense for our expansion; [we had] several years of experience operating restaurants [there]," Scott says. "We've learned a lot, taken some lumps, but all in all, we have loved the town and the people who dine with us."

Scott feels that Laguna Beach embraces new businesses and it has helped independent restaurant owners navigate through the permit process with ease. So much so, he opened his second latest eatery: Asada Tacos & Beer, a smaller version of his original Asada Restaurant that was located on South Coast Highway until its closure in 2013. And he believes both of his culinary creations will fit very well with the city's dining scene.

"We feel that Reunion and Asada will bring the same guest appeal to the Boat Canyon Center and add a great dining destination in North Laguna," he says. "There is a great

synergy of established restaurants together with new [restaurants], which add a great deal of options for locals and tourists.”

Ivan’s passion for fine food and exquisite dining is clearly shown with Skyloft, which has an added exterior level for guests, enhancing the romantic ambience for a couple on a first date, a group of friends enjoying happy hour or tourists who want to relax and watch the sunset at the beach. He says that when it came to deciding where Skyloft was going to be located, why not Laguna?

“If you live in Laguna, you know you never want to leave; so rather than commute to another city, I decided to open Skyloft [there],” he says. “With the city’s approval, we set out to add a third level where guests can enjoy panoramic views of Downtown Laguna, Main Beach, and the beautiful homes on the hills all while enjoying a refreshing cocktail.”

For restaurant owner and local Anna Driggs, having her Central Coastal Peruvian located on Forest Drive in downtown is a crowning moment for what she considers to be a life-long love affair between her and Laguna Beach. She shares that it all began with her childhood summers in Laguna, which has led to her moving her family there after she got married. For Anna, Laguna has it all, which made it an obvious choice for her restaurant.

“Its eclectic culture is what convinced my family and I to become a part of its culinary fabric,” she says. “I knew that a foodie town like ours would not only embrace our concept and favors but that we were actually craving the change that Central provides.”

Palatable Presentations

For a new restaurant to catch the diner's eye and taste buds, it is essential that the owners create an atmosphere and a menu that embodies Laguna's welcoming artistic culture and ambience. For Reunion, Scott wanted to present a warm, friendly atmosphere where people can unwind and relax with family and friends, especially including rich leather booths, decorative lighting and an enclosed patio that possesses an indoor/outdoor feeling to the space. And as far as the menu is concerned, Scott focuses on "modern comfort" dishes, like smokehouse barbecue, seafood and steaks. Reunion will also offer a selection of craft beers, cocktails and an expanded wine menu, as well as hosting Happy Hours Monday through Friday starting at 2PM. For the weekend crowd, Reunion will have breakfasts that include bottomless mimosas and champagne.

With regard to Asada Tacos & Beer, Scott says that the foundation of the menu will consist of handmade tortillas with fresh, high quality ingredients that include deep flavor profiles. The eatery will have Taco Tuesday, offering the finest in signature tacos, burritos and enchiladas. Asada Tacos & Beer will also provide a diverse selection of craft Mexican draft and bottled beers, as well as a variety of tequilas, margaritas and sangrias. On weekends, Asada Tacos & Beer will be serving Mexican breakfasts starting at 10AM.

"I tend to design my menu based on items that will provide crave and value," Scott says. "Lagunans have many choices to dine, and the competition can be fierce; however, I think that our guests appreciate quality in both food and service of both concepts."

Ivan captured the welcoming, atmospheric paradigm he created with Mozambique and performed a complete transformation with Skyloft by opening the interior space and choosing colors and textures that reflect the ocean, resulting in a bright and airy setting.

“We offer two bars that are horseshoe shaped, so they encourage people to talk to one another and be social or allow for people watching,” Ivan says. “Our live music takes center stage every night where we have some great bands lined up...offer[ing] everything from reggae to rock and we think it will appeal to people of all ages in Laguna.”

In terms of its menu, Ivan went towards a different direction than the exotic, South African cuisine of Mozambique. Skyloft will offer the culinary connoisseur what he calls “fun and playful” Americana choices such as barbecue ribs, briskets, jambalayas and their special shrimp ceviche.

Cultural flair is what drives Central Coastal Peruvian. By using high quality produce and organic, hormone-free meats, this exotic eatery produces exquisite dishes such as polo sliders, seafood-based ceviche peruano and pescado a lo macho and their signature fillet minions. But Anna stresses that almost all of their dishes can be made vegan, if requested.

“Above all we want to make sure that everyone can come and dine with us without changing their lifestyle,” Anna says. “I have been battling food allergies for a better part of a decade now and I completely understand the restrictions that we have to place ourselves on in order to have a healthy lifestyle.”

Part Two: Legacies

Thai Longevity

Although these new owners will face a number of challenges during their first few years, all of them do realize that it is possible to maintain their longevity in Laguna Beach.

Culinary legacies such as the independently owned Natraj and San Shi Go, as well as popular chains such as Hennessey's, have lasted for 25 years. Adolfo's Mexican cuisine and the Heidelberg Café have lasted for 30 years. And Greeter's Corner Restaurant has been serving breakfasts, brunches and lunches for over 35 years.

Another dining legacy is Thai Bros. on Laguna Avenue, which has been serving exquisite Thai dishes---including their famous yellow chicken breast and Bamboo Park Curry---for 20 years. Owner Panida Pikultong feels that when it comes to staying relevant and evolving with the Laguna restaurant scene, it was important to maintain the same look and design that customers have grown to love over the years, to keep their menu simple and to hire experienced chefs.

“Three years ago, we got two of our family members to come from Thailand; so, we are set in the kitchen,” Panida says. “We believe our customer retention rate is fairly high. So once we can get you in here, we have a good chance of keeping you.”

Mozambique Magic

Another secret for maintaining a long-standing restaurant is cultural diversity in their menu selections. Whether it's the locally owned GG's, whose Italian cuisine has graced Laguna for 10 years, or the popular chain BJs, whose Laguna branch has been smoothly running for 20 years, it is essential for any restaurateur to present something unique for the public. Ivan realized this 10 years ago with his Mozambique Steak House, whose delicious South African dishes include seared tuna steaks, chicken livers and their signature dish, the peri-peri prawns. He has also conducted significant remodeling on the venue, most notably including The Veranda---whose third level location overlooks the

Pacific Ocean---and The Durban Room, a 35-person capacity private area which has its own bar, patio area and outdoor entrance.

“It reminded me of home [in South Africa] and I felt like Laguna Beach would be the perfect fit for what I was envisioning, which was a upscale restaurant that served South African flavors, but with a contemporary American twist to them,” he says. “We were fortunate that people responded to those tactics and that’s why we’re still here ten years later and going strong.”

As far as what 2016 has in store for the overall Laguna dining scene, the restaurateurs are filled with boundless optimism. Panida believes that there will be more after-hour eateries, like her Thai Bros restaurant. Ivan feels that although trends come and go, only great food, service and ambience serve as a major driving force when it comes to attracting new customers. Anna says that the local eateries, like her Central Coastal Peruvian, will continue to meet the guests’ expectations. And Scott shares that all restaurants in Laguna will continue to strive to be the best they can possibly be for both locals and tourists alike.

“I think with the mix of great restaurants, there will be a natural push to raise the bar in menu, service expectations and the overall dining experience,” Scott says. “I don’t like to make predictions, but it looks like it’s shaping up to be a busy 2016 in Laguna Beach.”

Sidebar

Pick and Choose

In Laguna Beach, there are a cornucopia of eateries to choose from, depending on your specific tastes and moods. Here are the latest venues who have just opened its delectable doors: