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Laguna Beach Set To Get New Restaurants, Retailer

Il Barone Brings Italian Flavors to Newport Beach; Balboa Bay Club Takes Top Drink Prize



Il Barone dish: restaurant headed by former Antonello chef

By Fifi Chao

Sunday, June 6, 2010

The old Jolly Roger building in downtown Laguna Beach has been waiting for some interesting restaurants and retailers to move in.

We dined some time ago with Sam Goldstein, owner of the building who gutted it and made it ready for tenants. It's taken months to attract the right Laguna-style tenants.

Now we can announce that Tommy Bahama restaurant and store will be occupying the downstairs and Rock'n Fish will take the top floor.

In case you're not familiar with Rock'n Fish, the original is in Manhattan Beach and is owned by Michael Zisis, who also graced that city with the chic Shades Hotel. He's a wonderful guy and Orange County will love having his presence and his restaurant here.

Of course, we already know about the fame and name of Tommy Bahama. The eateries and store are looking at a November opening.

Another November opening could be in the works for a David Wilhelm eatery, also in Laguna, if a real estate deal can be hammered out in time. He's vying for the space that is occupied by Michael Kang's Five Feet, whose lease expires in August.

Michael is considering leaving the building, which has housed his Chinese-French fusion restaurant for 25 years, because of lease disputes with the landlord. David—who is leaving the team at Sorrento Grill in Laguna—wants to start El Diablo, which will feature a blend of modern Mexican-style tapas with classic Mexican fare.

And more in Laguna. Chef Pascal Olhats has been doing some management consulting with French 75. There's some good stuff going on: new menu items and a brighter, fresher look. The redefined front patio overlooking the ocean makes you feel like you're in a St. Tropez cafe. Pascal, of course, has a range of his own restaurants going on. He's got Brasserie Pascal in Fashion Island, Tradition by



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Pascal (where you most often find him in the kitchen) and Pascal Epicerie on North Bristol Street in Newport Beach, Pascal at Hutton Centre in Santa Ana, and Café Jardin and Tea Garden Crêperie, both at Sherman Gardens in Corona del Mar.

New Restaurants

Rich Mead recently opted out of his involvement in Sage on the Coast (in Newport's Crystal Cove Promenade) and has expanded instead toward the hills—Anaheim Hills, that is—with his newly opened Canyon restaurant.

Rich maintains ownership of his Sage restaurant in Newport's Eastbluff Center (one of our favorites). While I haven't yet trekked to this new place in Anaheim Hills, I have heard from several friends living in that area that they're more than excited with Rich's flavorful and interesting foods. I wouldn't expect less from Rich since he's so dedicated to getting fresh produce from the Santa Monica's farmers market and from local farm friends, as well as sustainable artisan products.

Canyon: 5775 E. Santa Ana Canyon Road (at Imperial Highway), Anaheim Hills, (714) 283-1062.

Ritz-Carlton in Dana Point has a new restaurant called Raya. The former 162 Restaurant is now a market cafe. More on that next month.

Entourage Gastropub has opened in Brea. Live entertainment mixes with globally inspired pub fare. Time for me to check it out. Entourage is at 330 W. Birch St., Brea, (714) 256-2100.

Italian Experience

If you want to be engulfed by friendly atmosphere, indulged with superb food, spoiled with good service and given a learning experience in Italian dishes head for Il Barone Ristorante, the new restaurant of Franco and Donatella Barone. It's in the former Pleasant Peasant space in Newport Beach. But you'd never recognize the old digs.

It's now an open, airy space with a compelling wall of candles, good linens, interesting tableware and a perceptible sense of pride.

Franco, of course, was the longtime executive chef at Antonello Ristorante at South Coast Plaza. Here, his food is regionally different from the Old World Italian he perfected at Antonello. Every dish is different than what we've known from him with tastes that are sophisticated and full of depth and texture.

The pizza is brought to another level, made from paper-thin focaccia sheets filled with Italian cheese, quickly baked and then topped with prosciutto di Parma. Likewise the smoked and peppered wild boar dappled with truffle oil is an addictive appetizer to share.

Pastas are varied and strewn with fish, shellfish, artisanal cheeses, lobster, veal and beef ragu, pancetta cream sauce, exotic mushrooms and sweet peas, and specials of the day. Major dishes include beef tenderloin with teardrop tomatoes, several veal and poultry preparations and beef steamed in a clay pot.

This food is made with locally sourced, high-end produce and the finest Italian ingredients. The friendly pricing includes wines. Gotta love the restaurants that aren't pushing prices upward even though their bottom lines are so sparse. This place shows how farm-to-table dedication makes such a difference.

Il Barone: 4251 Martingale Way, Newport Beach, (949) 955-2755. Lunch and dinner.

Andrei's

Andrei's Conscious Cuisine & Cocktails in Irvine set out to make a statement. And it has—both in flair and fare.

The stylish decor is beyond what we'd expected. Dining is upstairs and as you ascend, a wall of water provides soothing sounds. Cushy booths invite us to spend some time relaxing. The sleek and modern interior features a chic central bar and there's just the right amount of greenery and artwork. Nothing is jarring. Everything is peaceful and cosmopolitan.

The reason behind this restaurant—owned by Natalia Olenicoff and her father real estate owner Igor Olenicoff—is to honor the memory of Natalia's late brother Andrei, who was killed in an auto accident in 2005.

Paris-born chef Yves Fournier had been the chef at Hyatt Regency Irvine's Six Park Grill for several years before teaming with the Olenicoffs at Andrei's. He serves up a lot of small plates in the \$7 to \$12 range: octopus and fingerling potato salad; rice and ground lamb meatballs with tzatziki sauce; jumbo shrimp wrapped in filo dough with fennel and radish salad; duck confit and spinach on flatbread and burrata cheese with eggplant caponata.

Jump into the \$14 range and there's a fine charcuterie platter that's ideal for sharing. Entrees made from all natural meats and deep sea fish fall in the \$12 to \$29 range.

The restaurant also features a large space for private functions in the downstairs portion of the building.

Andrei's Conscious Cuisine: 2607 Main St. (at Jamboree Road), Irvine, (949) 387-8887. Complimentary valet parking.

Pub Crawl

I know you're wondering how I spend the rest of my time when not parked at a table in any of these interesting restaurants.

Would you believe that even though I'm not a big drinker, I nevertheless love relaxing in a cocktail lounge? To make things really fun, a few of us from the media recently met in Huntington Beach for a sort of springtime pub crawl dubbed the Oceanfront Shake-Off, visiting the oceanfront resorts from Huntington Beach to Dana Point.

Some of us stayed at the Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach Resort and Spa. Some stayed at the Hilton Waterfront Beach Resort.

This time, I stayed at the Hilton Waterfront. It'd been a long time since my last visit, so I was glad to have time to savor the public spaces and the lusciously relaxing room. In addition to the hotel dining, there are some fun restaurants nearby, one of the best being Cucina Alessa (sister to the original restaurant on Pacific Coast Highway in Newport Beach).

For our lounge visits, the various resorts (each of them a member of the The Oceanfront CA group) had been asked by a public relations agency to create a cocktail (now available in their cocktail repertoire) and an appetizer for the group. We were the judges of the best drink.

We began by watching the bartenders at our two Huntington Beach resorts shake things up, in Hilton's Red Chair Lounge and Hyatt's Shades Restaurant and Lounge. Then, we boarded a bus that took us to Duke's Place in the Balboa Bay Club, Fifteen Fifty Five lounge at the Surf & Sand Resort, Studio Lounge at the Mon-tage and The Bar at the Ritz-Carlton, which polished off our tour in really fine style.

The Newport Peach—a fruity, summery melange of alcohol and freshly pureed fruit from Duke's Place in the Balboa Bay Club—took the top prize. n

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