

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Latin Chefs One Block Apart Riff Off Each Other's Vibe



Myers and Serantoni: realized they were running on parallel track

Concepts Infuse Downtown Brea With Culinary Spirit

■ By FIFI CHAO

Business partners **Don Myers** and **Peter Serantoni** are a slam dunk as our Restaurateurs of the Year for 2014.

They have two vibrant restaurants in downtown Brea—totally different concepts—within a block of each other that are destination-worthy.

Cha Cha's Latin Kitchen and **Brunos Trattoria** are honoring Mexican-Latin and Italian cultures with some seriously fine food in perfectly presented atmospheres.

The guys are implementing the concepts so well that the awards and recognition are flowing in. Better yet, the public is buzzing about these restaurants and the spirit each represents.

The whole scenario is actually the serendipitous result of Don and Peter following a somewhat parallel pattern in well-known restaurants for many years.

They both realized that if they combined their mutual restaurant intellect and ideas for doing it better and tastier than anyone that they could create a modern eatery with an old soul in culture and food. Cha Cha's was born in 2009. Brunos Trattoria followed in 2012.

Each restaurateur has an enviable portfolio of accomplishments. Don started his restaurant career at age 14 in Tucson, Ariz., at the legendary **Casa Molina** Mexican restaurant. He graduated from the University of Arizona and was a competitive international gymnast during his college

years.

Don worked for El Torito Mexican Restaurants as a regional supervisor and was then managing partner for **Scott's Seafood Grill**.

TAPS in Brea lured him in as president of that restaurant and its other landmark property, **The Catch** in Anaheim.

It's evident that if you're good, everyone wants you. **Roy's of Hawaii** enticed him to become its Midwest joint venture partner supervising locations in Texas, Illinois and California.

Am I allowed to say that the rest is history?

Peter hails from a family in Venice, Italy. His life has been influenced by Italian family gatherings and food and his own family's restaurant ventures. He began the really professional part of his career as director of product development and executive chef for the specialty division of the **Restaurant Enterprises Group**

that controlled several unique restaurants. El Torito restaurants was part of that group.

Peter then held the same titles at the parent company of **Bakers Square** and **Village Inn**. **Chevys** got him involved as chief culinary officer and senior vice president of food and beverage for its 240-unit chain. Major restaurant enterprises like Fleming's and Roy's have sought his expertise. He's a national award-winning menu strategist and was selected by Nation's Restaurant News—the Bible of the industry—as one of the 50 most influential culinarians.

Are you convinced now that these two fellows have all of the goods to bring great dining adventures to us? They certainly have enough respect industrywide and in my small corner of the



Brunos: named after chef Peter's mentor and father

world to be the Restaurateurs of the Year.

Brunos Trattoria
210 W. Birch St.
Brea
(714) 257-1000
Dinner only

Brunos Trattoria provides a complete Italian experience that is down to earth and very friendly, yet cosmopolitan in its approach to food. The soul-satisfying fare impresses while you relax in the charming surroundings.

The decor of warm colors and accents of amber glass, dark wood and exposed brick soothe.

Nothing like a little candlelight to hint of romance or conversation-friendly visits with family or friends. The hospitality quotient is enhanced by the good service.

Brunos Trattoria is named after chef Peter's mentor and father, **Papa Bruno**. It brings to Brea the meals prepared in their home in the heart of Venice, Italy at San Marco 865. The Eu-

ropean sensibility is to shop daily for all of the fresh, seasonal ingredients to prepare meals, and that's part of the psyche of Brunos Trattoria.

Peter's grandmother and Papa Bruno taught him simple and rustic cooking in that loving Venetian home.

We now enjoy those culturally important Italian dishes at their updated artistic best, in looks and taste, at this restaurant.

The wine list offers a broad selection of Italian and Californian wines built around the belief that cost should not be the deciding factor. Guests are encouraged to be adventurous, as each glass and bottle of wine shares the same price point to make the selection process simple. Also featured on Brunos' menu are cocktails that are crafted carefully, including liqueurs and Italian spirits, as well as seasonal ingredients.

Christian De La Vara is the chef de cuisine who collaborates with Peter. On their spring menu are some new intriguing selections you should order. Ricciola in Saor proves that Italians can handle raw hamachi as well as the Japanese sushi chefs—this version comes with

sweet-and-sour shallots, currants and toasted pine nuts. Bucatini di Cinghiale is wonderful: wild boar sausage, pancetta, tomato, radicchio trevisano, and red wine strewn around my favorite pasta, bucatini—hollow spaghetti like drinking straws. Salmone is their terrific salmon with white polenta. Capesante mingles seared day boat scallops with asparagus and tomato risotto. And all those familiar Italian dishes are here, too, just presented more beautifully.

Cha Cha's Latin Kitchen
110 W. Birch St.
Brea
(714) 255-1040
Lunch, dinner, Sunday brunch

This was Don and Peter's first restaurant, which opened in 2009. It has been highly successful and critically acclaimed since day one. Cha Cha's is a fairly big, very good-looking space that gives us the right balance of an energetic and compelling bar/lounge area and a thoughtful dining room where superb food is

coming from the kitchen.

The owners had the idea, and the design team not only gave life to their vision, but the project turned out to be a shining example of uptown modern married to a definitive Latin vibe. This lively Mexican-influenced restaurant in downtown Brea is always bustling with the sounds of its popular happy hour, live Latin bands, and conversations of friends and family.

There's something about that energy in the lounge that draws me in. So many good cocktails and all of those margaritas being served usually causes us to sit at the bar, if we can find a stool, for a before-dinner drink. If not, since these drinks are all made with freshly squeezed juices and infusions made in-house, we'll just have one at our dining room table. The wines are priced right, and a good variety for this type of food is offered.

The California-Latin inspired menu adapts the culinary heritage of Mexico and larger Latin America in a fresh, modern way. Here are some of my takes on the food: wood-fired queso fundido is ridiculously delicious. It's a casserole of baked cheeses, all browned and crusty on top, over roasted potatoes, poblano peppers and your choice of chorizo or portobello mushrooms. Love the crispy calamari with Mexican spices. A dish simply called Shrimp jumps to attention by means of a rather feisty mango-habanero salsa.

Fresh seafood caldo brings forth a Spanish personality with the mélange of mahi mahi, shrimp, clams and squid simmered in a saffron-tomato broth with herbs and toasted angel hair. The duality of textures in the pasta is a good addition to this nice dish. Go for a three-enchilada plate: three cheeses with tomatillo-poblano sauce; simmered chicken with ancho chile sauce, and crab and shrimp with habanero pesto. They are brightly flavored and just plain good.

Best way to decide on the food you'll order is to sip your drink slowly and take the time to really read the menu descriptions. There's a lot that will spike your appetite. ■