

CUISINE

Stacked Up

Bold cuts and colorful hues dominate fall's fashion, but at Harlow's in San Juan Capistrano geometric shapes and innovative flavor combinations are en vogue. Chef Aaron Anderson's grilled sturgeon with tempura-batter cauliflower and fresh arugula salad is plated high with bright colors and seasonal garnishes.





HARLOW'S

BY JENN TANAKA ■ PHOTOS BY ED OLEN

Unexpected delights. That is the first thing that comes to mind when dining at Harlow's in San Juan Capistrano. The drive to the restaurant down the grass-lined Rancho Viejo Road that winds parallel to the 5 freeway brings you to a small shopping plaza. While the exterior is unassuming, the interior décor evokes a speakeasy fused with an old Hollywood movie theater. Burgundy walls and thick drapes cloak the dining room, dark wood panels, gold and jewel flourishes, give the restaurant a heavy, almost kitschy vibe. Live music billows from the bar area. Sectioned off into rooms named The Gatsby, The Rabbit Hole and The Stein Salon, the restaurant seems like an amalgam of design concepts. Enough about the décor; the real show-stopper is the food.

Seasonal and exciting, each dish is a reminder of why we live in Orange County. The flavors are locavore cooking at its finest. "We use numerous sources, most of which are local," says Chef Aaron Anderson. "From our coffee, to our meats, produce, and even wine, we always keep our ear to the ground for new contacts in the area for specific ingredients. It's a great way to make friends and business bonds all while helping build our local economy... I'm proud to purchase Persian mulberries from a local OC family that planted the tree three generations ago." The chef's pride for his ingredients is evident throughout his menu.



TOP: Tuna tartare with taro chips dotted with house-made Sriracha sauce; BOTTOM Short-rib flatbread with peppers and mushrooms



CLOCKWISE: Chef Aaron Anderson; beignets with house made hazelnut ice cream; grilled peaches with burrata and prosciutto.

The bread baked in-house sets the pace. Even if you vowed off carbs, this fist-sized loaf forces you to reconsider. Just a whiff of this soft, airy sponge of buttery goodness makes you salivate. Which is apt since our round of starters did not disappoint. Charred local peaches with creamy burrata and salty la quercia prosciutto melded sweet and savory flavors into a symphonic course. Each element was so satisfying on its own that extra flourishes would have been superfluous. Anderson understands that each ingredient must sing on its own. The dish is a melodic composition – Italian summer on a plate. Anderson and his kitchen team’s inspiration stems from whatever interests them at the moment. Whether it’s “local scenery to art exhibits to vintage cookbooks,” he says. This genuine excitement reinvigorates classic dishes that at first glance seem passé.

Tuna tartare, a popular staple at fusion restaurants since the mid-’80s, blends Japanese accents with French technique: diced sushi-grade yellowfin tuna enlivened with mint and ginger syrup topped with black tobiko (flying fish roe) that pops and crunches with each bite. The roe adds texture to the silky chilled fish while a raw yolk from a quail egg doubles as a lusciously fatty sauce that binds it all together. Wisps of micro cilantro refresh the palate, and thinly sliced taro chips become an ideal vehicle to shovel the layers of flavor into your mouth.

Even if you just nibbled on the sides, you can appreciate Anderson’s style. Brussels sprouts seasoned with house-cured pork lardons and lobster mac ‘n cheese are comfort foods with a twist. Purists will approve of the fromage blend’s creamy texture that combines taleggio,



fontina and cheddar. But they may sneer at the tinge of citrus and vanilla introduced by a house-made gremolata. It’s a daring take on a classic, but the extra flourishes add an unexpected smattering of flavor without too much fuss.

While the protein options are sufficiently delightful – roasted chicken breast, rib eye, cider-brined pork chops – the real stunner is the sturgeon. The grilled fish known for its firm, almost steak-like texture is popular for its mild flavor. For chefs, it’s like working with a blank canvas. Anderson’s garnishes paint the dish into something memorable. Served with a light pea puree and a peppery radish and arugula salad, this plate is difficult to share. The tempura-battered cauliflower that rests beneath the sturgeon is equally addicting. After I begrudgingly offered bites to my tablemates, we all agreed that we could easily devour a platter of the fried cauliflower on its own. Days later, I’m still thinking about it.

The only lackluster part of the meal was dessert. Expecting that the New Orleans-style beignets were going to be as fluffy as the bread that started our meal, we eagerly

anticipated this finale. When you bite into a beignet, you expect it to be light and pillowy with a sugary finish. These beignets, unfortunately, were disappointingly dense. While this particular dessert did not live up to expectations, the accompanying house-made hazelnut ice cream and espresso mocha-dipping sauce that tasted like liquid fudge fully made up for the beignets’ shortcomings.

Reminiscent of Napa or Sonoma, Harlow’s food evokes wine country. What brings a chef like Anderson, who has cooked for a diverse group of restaurants in Los Angeles, Portland and Indianapolis to OC? “We built the Harlow’s brand around the culture of San Juan Capistrano,” he says. “Sophisticated and refined, yet the salt of the earth. We just want to represent what the city is known for.” And, like the swallows that flock to the city each year, we can’t wait to return to this little gem hidden in San Juan Capistrano. ●

WATCH AND LEARN ■ Chef Anderson prepares Harlow’s tuna tartare.

SAVOR THE SEASON ■ Harlow’s is located at 31111 Rancho Viejo Rd., San Juan Capistrano :: harlowscuisine.com :: 949.240.8100

