

LAGUNA BEACH

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OPENING A SUCCESSFUL RESTAURANT IN LAGUNA BEACH CAN BE a tricky proposition; there are tourists to lure and locals to retain. Culinary creativity needs to co-exist with comfort. Everyone involved in the operation must realize the guy at the end of the bar decked out in a Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops could very well be a high-powered CEO. The unique combination of world-class luxury, coastal serenity and independent spirit better known as the Laguna Beach vibe must flow freely throughout the venue at all times. Above all, a successful Laguna Beach restaurant must incorporate all of these rules of gastronomic engagement while retaining its own personal character. Each new culinary concept, menu design and dining space must contain a singular appeal compelling enough to draw diners to their doors.

Over the course of the last several months, Laguna Beach has seen a quintet of restaurants open their doors for the first time, eager to take on the challenges that the city's discerning palate demands. These new establishments are the collective endgames of journeys borne out of intriguingly different roots: One rose from the ashes of a longtime city favorite; another is the product of a veteran restaurateur acting out on her instinctive connection with the city; still another cobbles a path that can be traced back to its chef's early days in Manhattan. Despite the varying paths that each establishment has forged en route to opening, each restaurant has succeeded in creating venues that honor Laguna Beach's unique sensibilities in their own distinctive voice.

FIVE & DINE

Laguna Beach welcomes
five new restaurants
to its dining scene.

By Rich Manning

Photos by Judy Tiangco





Restaurateur Nancy Wilhelm knows what it takes to be a major player in the Laguna Beach dining scene. After all, her first restaurant, Tabu Grill, has been consistently lauded as one of the city's prime culinary jewels. Her new venture, Starfish, which opened in June, brought the lively and laidback ambience of downtown to the city's southern end, just across from the Montage Laguna Beach.

"I have received a lot of compliments from locals saying that they are so glad we're here," Nancy says. "They've told me they don't necessarily feel the need to go downtown every time they want to have the kind of fun, upbeat experience that we offer."

Nancy's execution of her vision for Starfish is an organic process. The restaurant itself sits quietly in a corner of a lengthy strip mall. The interior space is anchored by a centralized bar whose warm lighting counters the dark, mysterious hues of the surrounding dining area. The menu items created by chef Jarvis Yuan offer a fusion of Asian flavors and American sensibilities—Nancy has dubbed the concept "Amer-Asian"—and offers upscale yet easily accessible dishes like garlic noodles and baby back ribs touched with an off-beat flair. Because of the comfortable persona that Starfish strives to cultivate, Nancy expects the venue to attract an eclectic band of visitors ranging from all walks of Laguna life. It is an element of variety that she embraces wholeheartedly. "It doesn't matter if you come in wearing a suit wanting a full meal or if you are a person coming off the beach looking to grab some spring rolls and a glass of wine," she says. "We want to be known as a place that has something for everybody."

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