

LAGUNA BEACH COASTLINE PILOT

Published Thursday, March 6, 2008 10:16 PM PST
Dining

ALL ABOUT FOOD: Birthing a restaurant - and a baby

By Elle Harrow and Terry Markowitz



Lindsay Smith-Rosales is giving birth to twins: Only one will be a baby, although the other will most certainly require the same amount of energy and attention.

Chef Rosales and her husband, Luis, are opening Nirvana Grille, their second restaurant, March 15 and having a baby boy on the Fourth of July.

Lindsay says the baby was planned but the restaurant wasn't. However, when this enterprising couple heard that the former Robilio's space on the corner of Broadway and Beach Street had become available, they thought they'd "just take a look." A serendipitous confluence of circumstances made it impossible for them to pass it up.

When we asked this 28-year-old Laguna native if she was worried about the stress and difficulty of doing these monumental jobs at the same time, she replied with a calmness that seems very integral to her personality.

"I don't worry about things ahead of time. I just try to fix problems when they arise."

She says she knows she can rely on the great support system around her. Lindsay's two sisters, Summer and Danielle, and their mother, Vicki, live in Laguna. Her godparents, Gregg and Kathleen Abel, are here as well, and everybody is eager to take their turn at baby-sitting.

Gregg is also designing the remodel. The first thing they did was to get rid of the open kitchen. Lindsay felt there was no reason for it except to inflate a chef's ego, which is definitely not her thing. Closing it off will make the entire space quieter, allow them to increase the bar area and separate it from the dining area.

This plan will create different environments for each. It is important to them to have a quiet and comfortable place to eat where people can enjoy good conversation as well as good food. We say hurray! Cleverly designed movable booths will give them flexibility and make private parties possible.

Growing up in Laguna, where her mother was an Ayurvedic naturopath, the family was strictly vegan. Mom was way ahead of her time and made all their baby food. They ate no wheat or sugar but plenty of whole grains and raw food. Most of their groceries came from a now long-defunct little organic store in North Laguna called Nirvana Market. As children, all three sisters spent a lot of time in the kitchen with mom and Lindsay says, "We are all fabulous cooks!"

No longer a vegetarian, her background still informs her cooking with a conscious awareness of using organic, sustainable and local produce whenever possible. She likes to describe her food as "clean and fresh."

Lindsay's cooking career began modestly with stints at the Renaissance Café in Laguna doing prep work and then a job in a little café in Kauai. When she returned from Hawaii, her aunt and

uncle, with whom she lived for a time as a teenager, convinced her to go to culinary school because she seemed to love cooking with such a passion. She took classes in the culinary program at OCC and had the opportunity to go to the culinary Olympics in Germany, where the team won silver and bronze medals. On the same trip, they got to take classes at the Cordon Bleu Academy in Paris for two weeks.

As with many culinary students, she worked at different catering companies including Crème de la Crème, Sherman Gardens and Universal and Fox studios, to help pay for school.

She heard that Pascal's in Santa Ana needed help. So, she went there to apply and was hired on the spot, starting work that very day and continuing for a year. Later, she also took a job at the Ritz Carlton.

Doing both became impossible and she had to make a hard decision. She chose the Ritz because she felt it would be better for her career. She worked in the pastry department and ran the line at night as well as doing banquets. Then, she had to have surgery on her hand, so she was moved to the front of the house and learned about reservations, the skills of a maitre d' and running a restaurant.

It was there she met her husband, Luis, who has 20 years of experience working the front of the house — at the Ritz for 16 and the Montage for four. “He is a charmer,” she says. “He just exudes a sense of warmth and peace to all his customers.”

Her sister Summer is the general manager for the Z Pizza chain, and Lindsay was a corporate chef there for a year but was itching to do her own thing.

With all of their combined talents, it seemed logical that she and Luis would want to open a restaurant where they could express their creativity. They went to restaurantsforsale.com, looking for a small

space and found their current location in Mission Viejo, which opened in July 2006 and has been very well received.

Their concept was a moderately priced dinner house with a homey atmosphere, where people would feel welcome and want to dine with them weekly. They pride themselves on remembering their customers.

They hope to repeat both the menu and the ambience here in Laguna. Lindsay's signature dish is pan seared Chilean sea bass with a panko pistachio crust, served with beurre Blanc sauce, accompanied by asparagus with Meyer lemon oil and caramelized leek mashed potatoes. (They only buy the sea bass when it is deemed sustainable.)

Giving back to the community where she was raised has been and continues to be one of her priorities. Nirvana Grille's grand opening March 15 will be a charitable event to raise money for the 20th anniversary of Friendship Shelter, which will receive 100% of the profits from the \$65 per person cocktail party.

We wish Lindsay and Luis all the best and look forward to dining with them soon.

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