

LAGUNA BEACH
COASTLINE PILOT

Restaurant Review

**THE GOSSIPING GOURMET:
A little bit of heaven in Laguna**

By Elle Harrow and Terry Markowitz

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Webster's defines Nirvana as a place or state characterized by freedom from or oblivion to pain, worry and the external world. Now instead of embarking on a long spiritual journey, all you have to do is drive down to the corner of Broadway and Beach to the new Nirvana Grille.

Laguna's own Gregg Abel has transformed the old world ambience of Robilio's into a light contemporary dining room with earth tones, clean lines and an enlarged eat-in bar area. Chef Lindsay's California plein air art collection graces the walls. A unique feature is the cleverly designed rich, dark-chocolate leather chairs that can be fit together to create booths of varying sizes or used at tables.

Perhaps, because Chef Lindsay and husband Luis opened the first Nirvana Grille in Mission Viejo almost two years ago with the same menu, they seem to have ironed out most of the kinks of opening a new restaurant rather quickly. Service in particular is smooth, attentive and friendly. Lindsay and Luis also make it a point to shmooze with their guests, making everyone feel like family. Actually, some of them are, because Lindsay is a Laguna girl and has a lot of relatives in town.

A basket of sliced sourdough bread arrived with our menus, lightly sour with a bit of crust. It was pleasant, but not nearly as delicious as the hot, crunchy rolls that came later.

A nice variety of salads, many featuring organic greens, include: baby organic beet salad with goat cheese, pine nuts and champagne citrus vinaigrette or a butter lettuce and herb salad with tarragon, basil, chives, parsley and croutons in a creamy balsamic, shallot vinaigrette.

The small plates are perfect for a snack at the bar or as an appetizer at dinner. The organic cauliflower and goat cheese gratin has a Parmesan herb crust. The blue mussels in a tomato leek, herb, creamy broth are accompanied by thin French fries. We shared the wild lump blue crab

cakes with creole aioli, micro greens and corn and pepper salad. The two small but rich crab cakes had been deep fried to a dark golden brown. The thin crispy crust was not at all greasy and contrasted with the lush soft interior. The Creole aioli had a lovely flavor and a bit of bite. The very fresh clean flavors of the cold corn and pepper salad provided a perfect balance.

It was refreshing to see that the first three entrées on the menu are vegetarian. The veggie burger with brown rice, vegetables and mushrooms is house made. It is served with blue or cheddar cheese, caramelized onions and thyme fries. There is also a mixed vegetable plate and wild mushroom ravioli in artichoke cream pesto.

There are seven seafood entrées including cioppino, blackened aromatic prawns, seafood capellini, basil aioli crusted wild king salmon and Alaskan halibut.

The pan-seared scallops are paired with delicious French lentils. Their garnish was perfectly cooked asparagus. The scallops were seared nicely but they were not particularly plump, sweet or juicy. However, the wonderful little French lentils when mixed into the beurre blanc became a very flavorful sauce that carried the whole dish. We would eat any entrée on the menu that came with these lentils.

Somewhat disappointing was the pistachio crusted Chilean sea bass, which they consider their signature dish. The fish itself did not have the velvety texture and delicate flavor of great Chilean sea bass. We have found this to be true in other restaurants as well lately.

The other problem with this entrée is that it was all white: white fish on top of white mashed potatoes, resting in white beurre blanc.

The pistachio crust was mostly white panko bread crumbs that had had been sprinkled on top, rather than sautéed with the fish.

The plate needed some punctuation in color and flavor. We did however enjoy the accompanying asparagus brushed with Meyer lemon oil. We also requested a side of green beans, which were cooked just right, retaining their crunch and bright green color.

Chicken lovers can feast on a chicken, wild mushroom, parmesan risotto or a pan-roasted breast with herbs de Provence in shallot white wine and cream pan sauce.

Among the meat dishes is a filet mignon beef stroganoff over fettuccine noodles, a retro dish we are happy to see making a comeback.

There is rack of lamb, pan roasted pork tenderloin in tomato citrus compote, an organic beef burger, and a blue cheese crusted filet mignon. Can't make up your mind? Try the surf and turf with aromatic prawns and a petit filet.

In these days when presentation often takes precedence, you rarely see pies on the menu since a slice does not usually make a perfectly neat picture. Thankfully, Lindsay is interested in taste. The dessert menu offers three seasonal pies: apple, blackberry and mixed fruit. We chose the

latter because it included that harbinger of spring—rhubarb. The pie crust was a marvel: flaky, buttery and beautifully browned. The fresh fruit filling was tasty but perhaps a little sweet for our palate. Don't miss these pies, whatever else you order. However, the goat cheese maple ice cream that is served with Grand Marnier glazed pineapple does sound intriguing. Chocolate lovers can choose from molten bundt cake, brioche chocolate bread pudding with crème anglaise and pecan chocolate tart.

Nirvana Grille is the kind of restaurant that could easily become your local. The friendly atmosphere, the large bar area, the small plates, as well as a nice variety of dishes to choose from, with prices that give you a lot of bang for your buck will make you want to return again and again.

IF YOU GO

•**WHAT:** Nirvana Grille (949) 497-0027

•**WHERE:** 303 Broadway

•**WHEN:** Tuesday – Thursday and Sunday 5 to 10 p.m.;

Friday and Saturday 5 to 11 p.m.

•**PRICES:**

Appetizers: \$7 – \$13

Entrées: \$9 – \$32

Desserts: \$7 – \$9

•**WINE:**

Bottles: \$25 – \$93

By the glass: \$8 – \$13

Corkage Fee: \$15

ELLE HARROW AND TERRY MARKOWITZ owned a la Carte for 20 years and can be reached at themarkos755@yahoo.com.