

# OC METRO

Niche is nice

This café serves California cuisine in the heart of Mission Viejo.

By Patrick Mott

## **The good stuff:**

Small But Mighty-Individual attention to all the details

Dynamic Organic-Fresh times 10

**wow Without the Capital-**Understated tastes that linger in the memory

It's a continuing pleasure to see the proliferation of fine little cafés and bistros throughout South Orange County because they fill a very satisfying niche. They don't have the weighty names or reputations (or prices) of some of the more familiar gastro-stars of OC, but neither are they anywhere close to the more generic and inferior eateries that seem to be in every other strip mall.

Nirvana Grille is one of the latest examples. For the last half-year or so, this little restaurant has been dishing up an excellent brand of California cuisine in the heart of Mission Viejo. Just off the intersection of Trabuco Road and Marguerite Parkway, chef Lindsay Smith-Rosales and her husband Luis Rosales have made a corner of a small shopping center their own with a clean, comfortable, straightforward, easy-on-the-eyes restaurant and a menu filled with the freshest ingredients and a big handful of very good ideas.

Chef Lindsay trained at Orange Coast College and went on to hone her craft at two of the most celebrated gastronomic destinations in the county: Pascal and the Ritz-Carlton in Dana Point. Her creations are casually elegant, but the pedigree of top-line professionalism shows. Before opening Nirvana Grille, she and her husband ran a catering business, which is still in operation.

Nirvana Grille is a one-room white-tablecloth place that seats 50, but it feels more intimate than that. The furniture is simple dark wooden chairs, a wine rack near the door and pleasant landscapes and seascapes hang on the walls.

Diaphanous curtains softly separate the restaurant from the parking lot outside and intriguing low lighting is strung across the room on pairs of wires. Tables are adorned with small aloe plants and colorful votive candles. It makes for an intimate effect that's still slightly festive.



Chef Lindsay, it was apparent early on, does just about everything from scratch. I knew I was in for a memorable meal when her husband Luis brought a single bread roll “fresh out of the oven,” he said. It turned out to be a really marvelous sourdough roll – when it finally cooled off enough for me to pick it up.

I was about halfway through the roll and already feeling pretty content when Luis arrived with my first course: the herb salad. Simple in presentation, it was a subtle wonder of taste. It’s organic mixed greens with tarragon, basil, chives, parsley and shallots in a champagne Dijon vinaigrette. This gives the lie to any assertion that salads have to be chockablock with varying ingredients to be effective. The understated herbs and the vinaigrette worked positive magic together. The price was a wonder, too: \$3.95 (an entrée-sized salad can be had for another \$3).

My entrée, the pork tenderloin, was a study in the difference that fresh ingredients make, in proper portion size, and in wonderfully complementary flavors and textures. Pan seared, the tenderloin was served with a topping of tomato citrus compote and on a bed of caramelized leek potatoes. The side vegetable was glazed parsley baby carrots. This dish was a perfect example of how flavors don’t have to be powerful to be palate-thrilling. The combination of citrus and tomato, together with the very lean and plump tenderloin, delicately seared, was sublime. The caramelized leeks were, again, a study in subtlety and paired seamlessly with the creamy potatoes. The only thing left? Something for the sweet part of the palate. And that was well-provided for by the glazed carrots – a mild, citrusy tang that was restrained enough to leave room for the taste of the parsley. This was finely orchestrated cooking.

The wine list is relatively compact, but well thought out in terms of pairing with the menu items. There are also several vintages offered by the glass, and the per-glass portions are quite generous. A lovely Edna Valley pinot noir was a fine accompaniment to the pork tenderloin.

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