



Nirvana Grille

24031 Marguerite Parkway, Mission Viejo | (949) 380-0027

- Dinner for two, food only:** \$20–\$85
Setting: Corner bistro ambience with a touch of elegance
Service: Five-star sharp; co-owner Luis Rosales is a service veteran of both the Ritz-Carlton and Montage hotels
Best dishes: Pan-seared pork tenderloin in a tomato-citrus compote; fresh fish



Leslie Bird

REACHING THE ZENITH: Chef Lindsay Smith-Rosales and her husband, Luis Rosales, (bottom right) opened Nirvana Grille in Mission Viejo about a year ago. Smith-Rosales uses the freshest seafood in dishes such as the scallops and asparagus (left) and the sea bass (top right).

Nirvana Grille, a little slice of foodie paradise tucked away in the most unlikely of places—a strip mall in a quiet Mission Viejo neighborhood—is a surprise hit and yet another example of the trend toward compact neighborhood bistros.

Chef Lindsay Smith-Rosales and her husband, Luis Rosales, opened the restaurant a year ago. Smith-Rosales is an eight-year veteran of some of the toughest kitchens in Orange County, including Pascal and the Ritz-Carlton. Rosales has more than 20 years of front-of-the-house experience at the Ritz-Carlton and the Montage.

By her own admission, Smith-Rosales likes to take risks. "Some of our best dishes are really mistakes or experiments," she says. For example, the pork tenderloin, a popular entrée, came about when she ran out of ingredients at home one night and used some fresh oranges and tomatoes to complete the white wine-based compote.

She's big on smoked salt and Spanish paprika, local produce, and wild fish. "Both my parents were vegetarians, and I've inherited their obsessive approach to pure, fresh ingredients," she says.

Her obsession is every foodie's gain. Think of chicken as a bit pedestrian? Pork as always overdone and lamb as sinewy and gamy? Not at Nirvana. Smith-Rosales is one of just two people in the kitchen, so she personally prepares much of the food. No detail goes unattended. Her care and attention is obvious in the superb Cajun-spiced seared ahi steak, the basil and garlic aioli-crusted wild king salmon, and the French lentils that show up as a side to several dishes.

Rosales aptly manages the front of the house, overseeing the young, enthusiastic servers with paternal good-naturedness. Smith-Rosales often walks the floor, too, chatting with her customers. It's the kind of attention and interaction that will keep Nirvana at the top of my "must recommend" list.

—*Pete Johnson*