



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Localism: the Latest Foodie Infusion

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By Eileen Keighley

They say it takes a village to raise a child. The same could



A sampler of what's on the menu at Oak, a new dining spot in the HIP District, at Oak and Coast Highway.

be said about Laguna Beach's latest restaurant, **Oak**. From idea inception, 18 months ago, the three south-county investors, Jeff Liao, Rosemary Polenski, and John Porrello, assembled a team of experts, including a local architect, contractors, chef, purveyors and staff to create a restaurant for locals built by locals.

Being self-proclaimed foodies with a love for hospitality also helps. Liao, a Laguna Beach resident, agrees. "We are always searching for the next great dining experience...so we love to eat, we're foodies and we felt something was missing in this town."

While new to the restaurant business, the investors own a national staffing agency, employing thousands of individuals, and bring different business skills to the table.

Porrello, of San Clemente, explains. "We have created a successful business and understand the power of surrounding ourselves with experts from each field...creating a restaurant business is no different."

Like many passion projects, it started with an aspiration. "Wouldn't it be nice to own a sports bar to watch our favorite team, the Steelers play?" Finally, after finding the location in Laguna Beach, the sports bar had morphed into a bigger opportunity: to create a restaurant, neither high-end nor casual, but something that filled a space where locals wanted to come. Liao remembers finding the site, long occupied by Olamendi's at 1100 S Coast Highway, and asking his partners down to see it. That same day, they signed the deal. "It's a perfect location, not downtown where a lot of the tourists are. It's dear to me because its right across the street from where my family hangs out in Brooks Street. It felt like it was right."

Local architect Todd Skenderian, whose previous local restaurant work includes Urth Caffé, Starfish and Reunion, was appointed to create a contemporary 100 plus seater restaurant. His approach was "to open the restaurant to the views and the streetscape." The result: windows on three sides, more outside space and a big bar. The design side of the project was overseen by Polenski, of Aliso Viejo. Liao had one request. "I just wanted a big bar...18 seats...where people can sit back and tell stories. That was important." He got it.

They approached staffing the restaurant as they would for any client: find the best of the best and keep them long term. Executive Chef Chris Tzorin impressed them with his passion and expertise and for his relationship with Laguna Beach. His father gave him his first kitchen job at 13 at the Beach House. As a culinary arts student, he mastered the weekly "brown paper bag" challenge, where students were challenged to cook its contents. This creativity continues as he challenges purveyors to provide the best, freshest ingredients. Tzorin is a sociable chef, with thousands of social media followers and can often be seen outside in the restaurant talking with the customers. "I want to meet the people I cook for; food brings people together."

The menu development was collaborative and while still a work-in-progress, has variety. The crowd-pleasing albacore, mango, and avocado stack is even tastier with spicy aioli. The duck drums are tender and big enough to share, the octopus and pork belly is a new take on surf and turf. The desert menu is fun-filled – the caffeine-free frozen Nutella cappuccino, looks like a cappuccino with a mix of ice cream, hazelnut and chocolate shavings. The drinks menu is innovative, with a choice of wine on tap and two cocktails designed by the owners; one, Telonics Tea, pays homage to the local mountain biking trail.

New apps for brunch. Tzorin has created a menu of traditional items like business sandwiches and classic Benedicts, then added the more

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Now open for brunch, L2011 has created a menu of traditional items like Huevos Rancheros and Classic Benedict, then added the more unusual such as octopus tacos. Keen to give back to the community, Oak began serving brunch with a 5 percent donation to Hurricane Harvey victims. Porrello speaks for the owners in describing their "desire to support local community, Schoolpower, little leagues as well as employing many high school kids."

As the new owners get to grips with their new venture, they reflect on what they have learned.

What challenges have you encountered? Porrello is keen to make everyone happy, but admits he finds the immediacy of social media a challenge. "Sometimes I wake up and revel in its praise, and then other times I want to chastise the system."

Polenski is more forward focused in how she sees the challenge, "We came out hitting the gates hard, but how are we going to sustain it? That keeps me up at night."

What advice would they wish for 18 months ago? Polenski concedes, "The process could have been sped up. I'd like to have opened a couple of months earlier." Porrello adds, "I have followed my gut and instinct all my business life and it has served me well. I should have stuck with it more."

And finally, what's the best thing about owning Oak? Porrello enthuses, "for the first time in my 30 professional business years, I have done something with business partners that is a passion project and fun. It's so much of a divide from my regular business."

Liao is more simplistic. "To give back to the community that he loves."

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