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OC chef Craig Strong goes solo.
By Jessica Estrada

AFTER MORE THAN TWO DECADES OF helming the kitchens of high-end dining establishments, most recently the Studio at Montage Laguna Beach, acclaimed chef Craig Strong branched out to open his very own restaurant, Ocean at Main, which feels like a love letter of sorts dedicated to the beloved beach town he's called home for the past nine years.

First, the location couldn't be more perfect. Ocean at Main is situated right in the heart of Laguna Beach, so close to the ocean you can almost feel the sand between your toes. Strong admired the venue for years and knew it was the one. The space's outdoor patio, where guests can bask in the California sunshine and take in views of the sparkling Pacific, was a major selling point.

Then there's the decor. Strong enlisted the help of local designer Laurie Alter, of Tuvalu Home, to transform the space into a beachy oasis wash in hues of gray, blue, and seafoam. Elements such as distressed tables, Mediterranean-inspired tiles, and woven chairs are punctuated by vibrant custom artwork by Orange County fusion artists Joe Aaron and Jordan Thomas. "It feels like it belongs here," he says of the newly reimagined space.

Although the finishes are luxe, the energy of the restaurant exudes that quintessential, laid-back Southern California spirit. "I really didn't want to try to recreate the super-, superluxury experience," says the San Diego native who's known for his five-star touch. "There are elements of sophistication, but it's going to feel very approachable."

That ethos is echoed in the menu with dishes that are elevated but don't need to



be reserved for only special occasions. Case in point: the tuna tartine lunch sandwich with avocado and yuzu nestled between slices of artisanal bread from a local baker and adorned with shaved radishes, cilantro blossoms, and edible flowers.

For dinner, expect seafood-focused entrées with lots of veggies, which seems fitting coming from a chef who discovered his love for food in his family's home garden. Think salmon served with ginger vinaigrette, Brussels sprouts, and kumquat, and cod accompanied by chorizo and potatoes.

More than anything, Strong, who describes the transition from executive chef to owner as "exhilarating," desires to contribute something special to the Laguna Beach community. We think it's safe to say mission accomplished.



FROM TOP: The sky-blue-hued bar at Ocean at Main, in Laguna Beach; chef Craig Strong.