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LOCAL

RESTAURANTS



Chef Craig Strong at his new restaurant, Ocean at Main in Laguna Beach. Strong was formerly the executive chef at Studio at Montage Laguna Beach.

LEONARD ORTIZ
STAFF
PHOTOGRAPHER

A first look at Ocean at Main

Chef Craig Strong's love for Laguna Beach sets the stage perfectly for his 'California Coastal' menu

By Anne Valdespino
avaldespino@seng.com

After nine years at Studio at Montage Laguna Beach, Craig Strong left his executive chef position to open his own restaurant: Ocean at Main.

Here's a look inside the space, which has been freshly redecorated by one of Orange County's favorite designers. Doors opened for lunch Friday.

BACKGROUND » Chef-owner Strong, who speaks Spanish, has cooked abroad and in the U.S. He has a one-star Michelin rating to his credit from his time at The Langham, Huntington Hotel & Spa in Pasadena, as well as many other honors and awards from Forbes Travel Guide, Food & Wine magazine and Wine Spectator. He has been continually praised by local critics and

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food journalists, and this is one of the most anticipated openings of the year. The new space, which is both Spanish style and beachy, speaks to his time cooking at The Arts Hotel in Barcelona and his love for Laguna. It sets the stage perfectly for this menu, which has been dubbed “California Coastal.”

THE LOOK » Kudos to Strong for choosing Laurie Alter of Tuvalu Home to set the tone with her casually gorgeous interiors for this 4,500-square-foot space with seating for 126, the former Taverna Laguna Beach.

Cool blues, greens and neutrals, in shell and driftwood shades, predominate, and fabrics and wood grain provide texture. Seafaring ropes on a divider delineate the bar from the dining room. Alter has respected this 1940s building’s days as the Laguna Federal Savings and Loan. It’s the work of architect Aubrey St. Clair, who designed many of Laguna Beach’s government buildings and private homes.

A Spanish tile fountain and murals by Laguna Beach artist Boris Buzan remain a centerpiece of the patio, which is stunning at night, lit in such a way that it glows blue and becomes irresistibly inviting. Orange County fusion artists Joe Aaron and Jordan Thomas (the JoJo Bros.) have created custom pieces throughout the restaurant, including a three-dimensional coral triptych.

GIRLS ONLY » Don’t miss a trip to the ladies room, which manages to be simultaneously chic and cheeky.

MENU » Raised in produce-rich California, steeped in French techniques and seasoned in Spain, Strong marshals all his influences here with a menu that’s bold, and a bit more rustic, than his last, yet still carries over a few signature dishes. Roasted beef tenderloin (\$48) with a textbook per-



PHOTOS BY LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The dining room and bar, right, at chef Craig Strong’s new restaurant Ocean at Main in Laguna Beach on Thursday.



The grilled Pacific swordfish features fresh harissa, artichokes, charred eggplant, lentils and mint.

fect bordelaise gets a sexy side of sunchokes prepared three ways, the dish unexpectably brightened with a bit of fresh raspberry sauce. Signatures like his famous roasted beet salad (\$16) with golden beet “egg yolk,” garnished with pansies, and his spice cake (\$12), with coffee cream and crème fraîche ice cream, play well with the rest of the menu. There are

light bites for the bar crowd and \$10 kids’ entrees that will appeal to families, yet even these display a masterful touch: Homemade turkey bolognese sausage pizza with bocconcini (\$18) gets topped with tiny broccoli florets and delicate purple garlic blossoms.

BEVERAGES » Craft cocktails are as finely tuned as



The Hawaiian prawn potato soup features basil, Grecque potato and Old Bay crisps.

the food, never too sweet or spirit forward. Try the Plein Air (\$13) with Old Forester bourbon, apricot, sage syrup and lemon, with a charred fresh sage garnish for a smoky finish. The St. Clair (\$14) sings a lighter note with Ketel One Vodka, cucumber, mint and St. Germain providing a floral scent.

The wine list includes 50

bottlings from California, France, Italy, Australia, Germany and South America. A Braumeister ceramic four-tap tower gleams at the bar, craft drafts include Docent Brewing selections from San Juan Capistrano and other local beers.

THE LAST WORD » Chef Strong loves music, but none plays in his kitchen because

he wants his staff focused and engaged. His cooking is always refined and every dish perfectly balanced. “It’s built on one word: harmony. When I did my training, we hired the entire staff and on Sept. 10 I sat them in this room and I said, ‘When you go to the symphony you go to watch people do something extraordinary, both visually and for your ears. When you sit in these chairs and watch the chefs in the background and see the service orchestrated around you, it’s the same and things need to be balanced,’” he said. “It’s making music for your mouth, not your ears.”

INFO » 222 Ocean Ave., Laguna Beach, 949-715-3870, oceanatmain.com

OPEN » Lunch from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily; dinner from 5 to 10 p.m. nightly. The bar is open daily from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; light bites and pizzas only from 3 to 5 p.m.