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RESTAURANT REVIEW: Elegant menu, but lax like London

By Elle Harrow and Terry Markowitz
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Although most of us occasionally enjoy getting all dressed up and going out for a fancy dinner, who wouldn't really rather have a great meal right in the neighborhood while still dressed in our jeans?

Now, you can do just that at the new Crow Bar and Kitchen on East Coast Highway in Corona del Mar. It's the hot place to be for a casual atmosphere and excellent but unpretentious dining.

It's subtitled "an American gastropub." In London, where people primarily socialize in their local bar, food was something to soak up the booze. But in recent years we have seen the emergence of the gastropub, where food is as important as drink.

Chef Brandon has taken traditional pub grub, like bangers and mash, Scotch eggs and fish 'n' chips, to a new level. But he also serves duck confit, an ahi niçoise burger and fava bean black truffle crostini, dishes that

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are definitely on the “gastro” side.

The Crow Bar’s stated mission is to “establish a new category of neighborhood restaurant that will maintain the classic attributes of comfort and affordability while delivering superior food and service to its guests.” They “aim to bring people closer to the production of their food, both by incorporating local, regional and sustainably grown ingredients whenever possible.”

When you first enter, you are struck by the fact that people seem to be having a very good time, as evidenced by the decibel level and the impression that everyone is busily engaged in the tasting and sharing of food.

The attractive, contemporary room is dominated by the bar area with its two tall, long, communal tables. A brown leather banquette stretches along one wall and an open kitchen provides a view of Chef Brandon and his busy crew.

As you begin to make your choices, be sure to check out the specials written on one of the larger gold-framed mirrors over the banquette.

The menu has an original format: listing a large variety of small appetizers and cheese plates, then salads, brick-oven flat breads, plates both small and large, burgers, sides and fanciful sweets.

You can begin with nibbles such as duck fat fries, blue crab deviled eggs, blue cheese-stuffed piquillo peppers, Spanish-cured meats or Serrano ham-wrapped dates with goat cheese and port syrup. We put ourselves in the hands of our delightful waiter, R.J., who suggested the fava bean black truffle crostini with reggiano parmigiano. The fava bean puree, spread on crunchy toasts, had a gentle hint of garlic and the lingering, subtle flavor of black truffle oil punctuated by the salty, buttery cheese.

The Crow bistro salad is the classic French frisée aux lardons, with frisée lettuce, bacon and poached egg (here a quail egg) tossed in vinaigrette. The so-called “ice cube” salad refers to a cube shape rather than a wedge of iceberg lettuce with blue cheese dressing, bacon bits and dried tomatoes.

Out of the brick oven come a selection of flatbreads, ranging from the simple roma tomato, basil and burrata cheese to the one topped with pancetta, caramelized

The Classic Burger -- a ketchup infused bun, butter lettuce, vine ripe tomato, house pickles, onion and secret sauce served with onion rings at The Crow Bar and Kitchen in Corona del Mar.

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onion, fig jam and gorgonzola dolce. R.J. suggested the special of the evening: roasted grilled asparagus, ricotta and roasted garlic.

Unfortunately, the topping was too skimpy to give it much taste. The asparagus was shaved into tiny little pieces adding color but not much else and the thin smear of ricotta left us longing for more. The best thing about it was the crust — thin and cracker-like with the flavor of good olive oil.

More substantial fare is listed under “plates” and “burgers.” Stout ale-braised short ribs, brick oven-roasted wild bass with forest mushrooms or Italian sausages with Tuscan white beans and escarole all sounded tempting.

We couldn't resist that pub classic of fish and chips, but this rendition is definitely of a higher caliber. It was served in a cone with two pieces of fish on top of the fries, and one more piece cleverly nestled under them so it would stay warm until you worked your way down. The moist fish was encased in a very light, very crisp, very delicious beer batter and the thin fries were equally irresistible, especially when dipped in the accompanying curried tartar sauce.

Then there are the quarter-pounders, all made with a mixture of natural Angus and prime beef: the classic with lettuce, tomato, onions, pickles and secret sauce; the Crow burger, featuring tallegio, gorgonzola, roasted tomato and rocket on a ciabatta roll; and, for about \$20 more, a Japanese wagyu beef burger on a brioche bun with truffle aioli. Now, if you really want to impress your date, order the special — the burger of your choice and a bottle of Screaming Eagle wine for a mere \$2,900 (no, that's not a typo).

Normally, niçoise refers to a salad but here it is a clever take on a burger. It contains all the ingredients of a tuna niçoise salad: tuna, potatoes, tomatoes, eggs, onions, olives and green beans — deconstructed. A rare tuna filet rides on a potato roll saddled with tomatoes, sliced eggs and red onion, then slathered with olive tapenade aioli and partnered with green bean fries (sautéed green beans). The whole thing made a mighty tasty mouthful.

Desserts represent Chef Brandon's playful side with such whimsical titles as “Not Just a Ding Dong,” “Sub-Pop Tart with Seasonal Fruit Filling,” and “Irish Car ‘Bombe’ with Jameson Whiskey Crème Anglaise.” The latter is vanilla gelato with a chocolate center encased in amaretto cookie crumbs and drizzled with a touch of whiskey-scented crème anglaise.

If you're old enough to remember it, think of that Italian standby, bisque tortoni. The fresh, homemade gelato has a very creamy smooth texture and rich taste accented by the crunchy almond-flavored crumbs, in a word, yummy.

This is a bustling, noisy neighborhood spot for good food and good fun, plus they have one of the most impressive beer menus around.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: The Crow Bar and Kitchen (949) 675-0070

WHERE: 2325 E. Coast Hwy., Corona Del Mar

WHEN: Every day, 5 p.m. to midnight

Saturday and Sunday: brunch 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

PRICES:

Appetizers: \$3 to \$14

Entrées: \$8 to \$29

Desserts: \$8

WINE:

Bottles: \$26 to \$230

By the glass: \$6 to \$17

Corkage Fee: \$20

BEER:

Draft \$7.50

Bottles \$6 to \$27

ELLE HARROW and TERRY MARKOWITZ owned a la Carte for 20 years and can be reached at themarkos755@yahoo.com.

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