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TRIPLE THREAT: House Made Meatball Sliders with spicy tomato sauce, basil and smoked mozzarella is a crowd pleaser at The Crow Bar and Kitchen. The Corona del Mar gastropub, formerly Garlic Jo's, has an urban feel with its brick walls and espresso wood furniture.

CINDY YAMANAKA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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The Crow Bar and Kitchen

Rating: 4 stars

Where: 2325 E Coast Hwy, Corona del Mar

Cost range: \$40 per person

Corkage fee: \$20

Phone: (949) 675-0070

Elizabeth recommends:

To start: Serrano ham wrapped dates

Entree: Ahi Nicoise Burger

Finale: House-made "Ding Dong"

Wine: Lorinon Tempranillo (\$15 for a half carafe)

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Tuesday, May 27, 2008

The Crow Bar makes 'gastro pub' downright appetizing

Review: With smart, casual setting and gourmet takes on British and American comfort foods, it's no surprise the Corona del Mar eatery is a hit.

By **ELIZABETH EVANS**

SPECIAL TO THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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"England and America are two countries separated by a common language."

So said British playwright George Bernard Shaw. I would agree and add that in most cases, the English usage is more poetic: "petrol" instead of "gas," "boot" rather than "trunk," and one goes to the "chemist" not the "drug store."

The list could go on, with one glaring exception: "Gastro pub." Granted there is no real American equivalent for these places where gourmet casual food is served in an updated public house (pub). But the name grates.

The Japanese have izakayas and the French their brasseries. Here in America, such terms are more fungible, but the foreign concepts and names can translate well.

Which brings me to The Crow Bar and Kitchen in Corona del Mar. The tiny eatery, tucked along the Coast Highway, has been feeding the hip and local since late last year. This West Coast gastro pub has Oysters alum Scott Brandon in the kitchen, and a smart casual setting.

The name is an homage to the classic gastro pubs – if something less than 20 years old can be classic – including The Eagle in London (said to be the original), and The Spotted Pig in New York City. But as this is Coastal Orange County where, it seems, the ebony-feathered scavengers outnumber any real sea birds, the crow gets a star turn.

Inside, stark black and white photos, graphic silhouettes and even a couple of stuffed birds decorate the space, but they can be easily ignored once you start catching sight of the food coming out of the kitchen, and then dig into the single-page, changes-with-the seasons menu.

Dinner is a crowded house. The folks seem young and savvy. Tall chilled schooners of beer – there are several dozen offered on tap – are even more

popular than cocktails.

Is this the first trendy bar I've been to where clever cocktails shaken into martini glasses aren't the order of the day? Possibly so; while a dirty martini is well prepared, beer or wine is more appropriate with the food. And in case you haven't guessed, this place is about the food.

We start with Blue Crab Deviled Eggs (\$9). Three to an order, this is substantial finger food, with plenty of the crustacean filling the pale yellow yolk. The eggs might have been my favorite starter if not for the Serrano Ham-Wrapped Dates (\$9) a sort of tapas-meets-rumaki invention. The chewy sweet dried fruit mixes and matches with the salty crisp Spanish ham and warm creamy goat cheese filling. Go ahead eat just one. Then ask for another order of three.

Brick-oven flat breads are better for larger parties to share as an appetizer. The oblong pies are cleverly topped with ingredients such as wild forest mushrooms and fennel (\$13), or Serrano ham, quince paste, tetilla cheese and rocket (\$12), but we're smitten with the pancetta, caramelized onion, fig jam and Gorgonzola topped crust (\$12).

We also order Duck Fat Fries (\$8) served with a pungent truffle-infused aioli. These are more brown than golden with a savory meaty aroma and taste. The potatoes aren't cut as long as I would like, but I do like their heft and the intoxicating scent that doesn't let down the taste of these over-the-top spuds.

Larger "Plates" are a compendium of modernized traditional dishes. These vary in size and complication, from Scotch Quail Eggs (\$9) to Steak Frites (\$26).

I order the Organic Pork Schnitzel (\$11). Once in Vienna, I schlepped my family through back alleys and into a smoke-filled room to eat the Austrian veal-based version of this dish. Here, pork is pounded thin, coated in bread crumbs and pan fried, and served with a herbaceous garlic apple sauce and thick discs of shredded fried potatoes. Worth traveling for.

Fra' Mani is the Berkeley-based salumi company run by meat man extraordinaire Paul Bertolli, and it's where the pudgy bangers (sausage) come from in the Bangers and Mash plate (\$19). These moist and meaty sausages rest on Yukon gold potatoes and fragrant melted leeks and are topped with a dark brown sauce.

Ahi Nicoise Burger (\$15) is a rare piece of fish on a soft potato roll, with an olive-y aioli, roasted tomato,

sliced eggs, red onion, and sided with slender pan-fried green beans. It's like the south of France in a bun; order a glass of the Kite Rose (\$8) and see if you can smell the lavender.

For dessert, we're tempted by the Not Just a Ding Dong (\$8), a first-rate play on the foil wrapped pastry of our youth. Here, a hockey puck of glossy cream-filled chocolate cake and ganache rests on a strip of foil, to fool the eye, but not the palate. If the British had a comparable Nursery pudding (their term for kiddy dessert) it might be Sticky Toffee Pudding (\$8), the dense dried fruit and brown sugar dessert, topped herewith a scoop of mascarpone gelato.

At lunch, the room is less crowded, but with a somewhat older crowd than at dinner – or maybe in this better light I can make out details better. Not that age matters; these people apparently have good taste.

I start with the house Clam Chowda (\$11) a bowl crammed full of in-shell clams, cubes of potatoes, carrots and bacon. It looks less chowder and more like stir-fry, and it comes to the table preceded by the heady scent of smoky bacon. Although it's hidden beneath the chunks, the creamy broth shouldn't be missed.

Among the salads, there are takes on the Caesar, and on the Wedge – Ice Cube Salad is squared chunks of lettuce topped with Pt. Reyes Blue cheese (\$9.50) – and then there's The Bistro Salad (\$9.50). This combination often found in the Beaujolais region of France is nicely done here: a bed of curly endive is lightly coated with tangy sherry vinaigrette and liberally tossed with crisp bits of bacon. On top there is a tiny poached quail egg.

I typically like a more substantial yolk running its warm, sunny goodness into this mix, but the quail egg is so delicate and lovely I can't begrudge its existence here.

Come to think of it, I can't even begrudge the name "gastro pub." After all, a rose by any other name still smells good.

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libertylaw wrote:

Crow bar is excellent- delicious food- great tap beers- nice little tv room downstairs. I have enjoyed many items from their menu- looks like I need to try the meatball sammy. Nice job Scott.

5/29/2008 7:24:18 PM

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debaser wrote:

Cute little food, big prices. Feh. Bartender and wait staff are first-rate. Valet crew are snotty brats in need of gainful employment or a drubbing. Local appeal only, in my opinion.

5/29/2008 1:58:25 PM

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audlogirl wrote:

Elizabeth, you had me at "Gastro Pub." Well written. I want to eat everything you described.

5/29/2008 10:35:39 AM

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