

Fifi Chao Saturday, February 1, 2014

## A Restaurant Worth Checking Out

While I'm confessing to my preferences and what influences them, I can segue to A Restaurant in Newport Beach, the formerly famed Arches that got its new name in 2008.

After experiencing it at that time, I stayed away until recently. I wasn't sure back then what part was meant to keep customers happy and what part was ego, but the sense of self-importance I perceived at the restaurant made me step back and dine at other places.

There have been significant changes in food and people power since then, and it's a place I now want to keep experiencing.

The big turnaround came 10 months ago when Julie and Doug Garn took over as managing partners, and almost everything in food and friendly ambiance changed dramatically. Their vision and the whole attitude of the restaurant made it a fine-dining stop that did not decimate the budget.

Service shines. The four wine sommeliers do an impressive [job](#) of letting us know about the many new and interesting wines on their list, many of them boutique finds, without being overbearing.

The modern American food of Executive Chef Jonathan Blackford is attentively plated and seriously tasty. The entire current package now gives me every reason to spend a lot of time in the ultra-comfortable surroundings.

Doug is known in business circles as the former chief executive and president of Quest Software in Aliso Viejo. His entrepreneurial spirit helped grow the [small software](#) company into a tech giant that went public in 1999. His leadership and business acumen are now serving us well as he focuses on being a first-class restaurateur.

Julie is what I call a dining room realist who can strip the romance and ego from being in charge and relate instead to what can make each diner's experience more than expected.

Chef Jonathan leans heavily on the phrase "do it right" when referencing his dishes, which the restaurant said it derives from superior local produce and famed purveyors with the highest-quality standards.



He keeps a few of the standard dishes on the menu all the time, while the rest are changed seasonally to keep the choices for the customer fresh and in the best manner of healthful ingredients available at the moment.

This is an instantly comfortable restaurant.

Also, sitting in one of the big red booths in the dining room is about as perfect as seating can get. We recently had a leisurely dinner perusing an evening-long scene of customers while enjoying our own food, dish by dish. Good thing there was another couple sharing our table and meal—it allowed us to have even more tastes from Jonathan’s kitchen.

There are daily specials, but most of what I mention is on the printed menu. A great depth of flavor permeates the roasted red pepper and goat cheese soup. It sets up the palate with anticipation for what’s to come.



Brussels sprouts are a favored vegetable by chefs at the moment. We liked these with their leaves removed from the core, dappled with a picatta-style sauce and crisped. The chef loves his pork belly preparation, but he also makes a more refined dish with a similarly rich background by using veal breast. It’s braised in its own liquid with a touch of vermouth and cream and a sprinkling of forest mushrooms. High on my list of super tasty things.

We habitually try steamed mussels everywhere, and these were infused with the flavors of chorizo, fennel, a sprinkling of smoked paprika, saffron aioli and parsley for a bright mélange of flavors.

The carnitas here should please anyone who’s into good Mexican-style food. The restaurant said it brines the chunk of Niman Ranch pork for 24 hours in milk, lime juice, orange juice and a mere hint of cinnamon, then seals it in a waterproof bag, and cooks it sous vide at the gentlest temperature for 12 hours. Fork tender and really, really good. The swordfish served with garlic pappardelle noodles, and the Scottish salmon, are notable seafood items.

Duck is the perfect fowl for the fall and winter season, and the chef renders the duck breast till tender and moist, cooks the leg confit-style, and serves the duo with delicious butternut squash ravioli with brown butter sauce. One of the steaks on the menu is the Imperial Wagyu flat iron,

a flavorful blade cut that can be as good as a rib eye or New York. Have to also give a shout-out for the all natural bone-in rib eye that is a menu staple.

Lunch is a popular meal here and includes a great burger, small plates of spicy Ahi tuna, a meatball casserole, and the thing I cannot pass up: crispy Niman pork belly.

Many of you will remember the separate building facing PCH that housed The Arches liquor store for many years. It's now another eatery belonging to A Restaurant called A Market, a more casual place with a menu loaded with yummy breakfast treats, salads and sandwiches, charcuterie and cheeses. There's plenty to write about that and its own highly regarded chef, so I am saving all that for another column when I can expand adequately.

Let's just say that A Restaurant is now a new chapter in local dining that deserves attention if you care about a welcoming vibe, really good food, and a friendly but sophisticated aura where you can actually have quiet conversations. That's a rarity on the current dining scene.

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