

**NIRVANA GRILLE**

RATING: ★★★

303 Broadway

Laguna Beach

949.497.0027

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

HOURS Tues.-Sun. 4pm-9pm;

Fri.-Sat. 4pm-10pm

WHERE TO SIT Request the large hidden booth in the back and get cozy.

WHAT TO WEAR Dreadlocks and Salvatore Ferragamo shoes; this place serves old school Laguna locals and hippie kids alike.

ABOUT THE NOISE Despite the unfiltered Syrah-induced cacophony, the buzz puts babies to sleep.

WHO'S THERE Gone Baby Gone and Eagle Eye cutie Michelle Monaghan, Laguna theatergoers, and the Laguna-based Academy Award-worthy MacGillivray Freeman Films crowd.

ORGANIC OPULENCE Clockwise from left: Sun dried tomato crusted Australian rack of lamb with sautéed broccolini, shallot butter and mashed yukon gold potatoes; black bean soup and corn chowder; Nirvana blackened aromatic prawns with grilled corn cream and squash.

Nirvana Grille

Lagunatics rejoice! Your path to enlightened eating is paved with haute cuisine

| By Kelly von Hemert | Photography by Edward Duarte |

Nirvana Grille in Laguna Beach certainly makes a play for the righteous path. The restaurant's seafood is wild, the chicken is free-range and the hamburger beef is organic. The menu's eco-controversial Chilean sea bass is thoughtfully sourced from fisheries that are carefully monitored and controlled to prevent over-fishing. And its carbon footprint-conscious staff makes weekly trips to cash in on glass bottles since the city doesn't have a recycling program in place for restaurants.

Yet, as we cozied up in a corner both on a buzzing Saturday night, we had a hard time swallowing the menu's claim of "California Clean" cuisine—especially when served in the indulgent guise of tender blue mussels in silky tomato and leek broth. Punctuated by a tangle of matchstick-thin, herb-flecked pommes frites, the dish is hardly calorie-conscious—though the potatoes, soaked in the cream-based broth, are organic, mind you. And maybe

this slight rub reveals the real story of Nirvana Grille; that organic bliss is a dish best served a bit decadent.

Nirvana's path to enlightened eating starts with chef/owner Lindsay Smith-Rosales, a 20-something Laguna native who was weaned on baby bottles full of wheat grass—hand-extracted by her vegan, Ayurvedic doctor mother. "It was no big deal. Don't all kids like to eat grass?" she teases. Balancing two successful restaurants co-owned with her husband and new mommy responsibilities of her own, Smith-Rosales extolls her vision of "California Clean" with the clarity of a Tanqueray and tonic.

Like most eateries flaunting a green badge, Nirvana prides itself on local organic produce. The salads are predictably pleasing, from the spinach-and-candied-pecan varietal that's all the rage, to iceberg wedge, to a seared Romaine, for those who like their salad on the 'cue. But it is the Caprese that best embodies delectable CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED indulgence: the beefy, tangy wedges of green heirloom tomatoes are fried in a wispy cornmeal crust and drizzled with a buttery shallot and citrus-tomato compote that is the perfect dip for the just-out-of-the-oven sourdough bread rolls. Equally blissful is the simple salad of butter lettuce flecked with fresh minced tarragon, basil and chives and dressed in a diaphanous creamy balsamic shallot vinaigrette. For a perfect winter warmer, try the puréed black bean soup and corn chowder served side by side in the same bowl. The savory cumin-imbued beans are a lovely foil for the sweet, creamy corn.

While chef Smith-Rosales sometimes proves less is more with her salads, some of our favorite entrées complement her ability to get complex. Like the wild mushroom ravioli—house-made pasta pillows with the circumference of a Nikon lens cap—are rife with slivers of woodsy Portobello, oyster, cremini and button mushrooms, bathed in an earthy artichoke cream pesto and flecked with pine nuts and parmesan cheese. The Nirvana seafood capellini is even better, with its house cuts of fresh catch in a reduced stock of tomato cream, chervil, tarragon and leek. We loved the sundried tomato-crust rack of Australian lamb with herb demi-glace, green beans and oyster mushrooms and caramelized leek mashed potatoes. The filet mignon brochettes with the characteristic tenderness of the cut were dripping with a house-made teriyaki sauce, and packed a caramelized savory sweetness that perfectly complemented the meat. And the sweet, barely pan-seared blackened wild sea scallops, asparagus with Meyer lemon oil and delicate French lentils are to die for!

The occasional dish does fall flatter than Main Beach surf at low tide. Like the wild lump blue crab, mashed into a stringy, mealy texture before frying and further deflated by the accompanying corn and pepper salad reminiscent of Green Giant Niblets.

The wine list is short, though carefully selected. Smith-Rosales is partial to boutique wineries and it shows on a Cali-lover's list free of bigger labels like Clos du Bois, KJ or Opus One. "We want to support the mom-and-pop operations, like us," she says. Nearly half the list is priced under \$40 per bottle, many at less than twice the retail price. And corkage is \$15 a bottle, which is a third of what you'll pay elsewhere for the privilege, making Nirvana Grille a perfect date spot when you're not in the mood to wait in line for the bathroom or the valet at Javier's. There are 10 wines by the glass and we suggest sipping them at the granite slab high top tables in the shoebox-sized bar, shoulder-to-shoulder with locals who navigate seamlessly from boardroom to canyon hike to dinner table.

Whatever its faults, Nirvana Grille seems to be finding a loyal following. Perhaps it's local favorites, like the house-made veggie burger, topped with blue cheese and served with thyme fries. And in what appears to be a one-woman grassroots revolt against \$45 steaks, Nirvana Grille is also very fairly priced. The itty-bitty eatery's easy-going vibe doesn't hurt either. With its inviting chocolate leather sofas, crisp white table linens, and whisper-soft



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waiters, Nirvana Grille is a perfect date spot when you're not in the mood to wait in line for the bathroom or the valet at Javier's. It's also the natural choice for the Zinc Café set to sup, mimicking its jewel box community atmosphere minus the insistent pet-toting crowd with their sprawling dogs and annoying parrots.

Despite Nirvana's attempts—and occasional failures—to simultaneously please both high-minded hedonists who devour fries without flinching and the eco-chic granola set that might call PETA to report the Chilean sea bass as an incident of cruelty to animals, it's a good old, down-home comfort dish that really stands out as pure bliss: the flaky-crust rhubarb pie erupting with Fuji apple and berries. It's served with the house-made ice cream, whose cinnamon has a creamy, sweet feel of butter fat that elevates the spice from pedestrian to faintly exotic—and goat cheese maple that is smooth and unctuous and surprises with tangy nibs of chevre throughout.

Who says you can't have your rhubarb-granola cake and eat it too? 🍴



GREEN TEAM *From top:* Blue mussels with pommes frites in a light cream broth with tomatoes, leeks, shallots and herbs; chef/owner Lindsay Smith-Rosales with husband and business partner, Luis Rosales.