

Healthful Inspiration

With Chef Lindsay Smith-Rosales of Nirvana Grille

Nirvana Grille is self-defined as a “California bistro.”

Does that call on elements of California cuisine?

To a certain extent. We call ourselves “clean” California cuisine because we take all the healthy elements of eating well and pair them with the flavors of coastal cuisine. Our grounding is an ethical approach to sourcing and preparation—we are completely hormone- and antibiotic-free, all our fish is sustainably sourced, and we are as local, seasonal, and organic as possible.

How about some of the flavors you use?

My husband is Latin, so there are definitely Latin influences, as well as Asian influences and Indian flavors that come from our travels. Rooting it all are the French techniques I learned in culinary school, paired with growing up in a household that was strictly vegetarian and a mother who was keen on vegan, raw, organic, gluten-free—you name it. This has come full circle, giving me the skill and knowledge to cook healthfully without compromising on taste.

You mentioned responsible sourcing. What purveyors do you use?

I’m very particular about what vendors we build relationships with. They know what I will use and that I take my ingredients seriously. We work with Santa Monica Seafood, Ingardia Brothers, Melissa’s Produce, Sysco, and some other small purveyors in the area that know what’s available and in season. Choosing a company like Sysco was based on their commitment to providing a completely green facility and trucks that have low impact, plus a buying power within 200 miles that keeps products fresh, local, and fairly priced.

What would you say has been the restaurant’s biggest draw since opening in 2006?

From the very beginning, my husband and I have really been involved in every facet of the restaurant. There are many owners and chefs who take a back seat, but not us. We’re interactive—we run the day-to-day operations and we’re constantly building relationships with staff and customers. We really love what we do and we realize how much we impact the experience of those who dine with us. It’s great that we get to share what we love with people.



Has the concept evolved over the last six years, or has it remained relatively static?

I think we've defined our look quite a bit more over the years. The restaurant is evolving with us—our dietary habits and our interests. But we also pay attention to what people want. The look, meanwhile, has gotten more streamlined, reflecting our sense of home—hand-selected colors, white plate walls, and a real contemporary farm-to-table look, perfectly replicating the style of our food.

You mentioned being involved in the day-to-day operations. What is your favorite part of a day in the restaurant?

There are so many! From the adrenaline in the kitchen to meeting customers and seeing long-time guests, it's just wonderful to watch everything come together. On the other hand, the hardest part is staff operations. How do you make somebody care about the business as much as you do? But we've been lucky, and have great people working for and with us. At the end of the day, almost everything is rewarding because we love what we do.

What is your interaction with the community like? Do you work with area chefs much?

I do. I have a lot of colleagues in the area—Pascal Olhats was my mentor at his restaurant for my first line cook job when I was just starting out, Yvon Goetz and I worked at The Ritz-Carlton for years, and I worked under Chef Paul at Alchemy Caterers as an expeditor, not to mention my early years as a café barista at Renaissance Cafe in Laguna. There's a new level of respect among us now that we work side-by-side. A lot of us are also involved in charity events—like Table for Ten, benefitting the homeless, CHOC, Kidney Foundation, and Share our Strength, among others.

You're obviously invested in promoting healthy eating. Is encouraging that a challenge?


It is—mostly because you can't force people to eat better. They have to want to eat better. While we're not necessarily representing ourselves as a health food restaurant, we are a place with good food, and you can make the choice to eat well. We include ingredients that are hormone-free and antibiotic-free, sustainable, and organic. You don't have to put additives into food just to make it taste better. People can experience that here and then take it with them when they cook for themselves. We also realize the change in trends of the way people dine and how food affects people. We offer flexibility for diners who have allergies, dietary concerns, or special requests, because that was the norm around my house growing up. Our menu is about 85-percent gluten-free, and the other 15-percent can easily be swapped out for gluten-free options.

What's to come for you and Nirvana Grille?


There are definitely projects we're hoping to move forward on—a product line, for example. We'd also like to create a cookbook for kids—all about encouraging healthy eating. I'd also like to write a cookbook for the restaurant. On top of all of that, I would like to spend more time teaching folks how to cook faster and smarter at home to enjoy a better quality of life and time at home with family. I do some of that now—teaching people to cook in groups or private lessons in and outside the restaurant—but I'd like to do more. If I'm not involved in the community in that way, I'm not building relationships, and that's critical for me.

—Interview by Jeffrey Steen

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