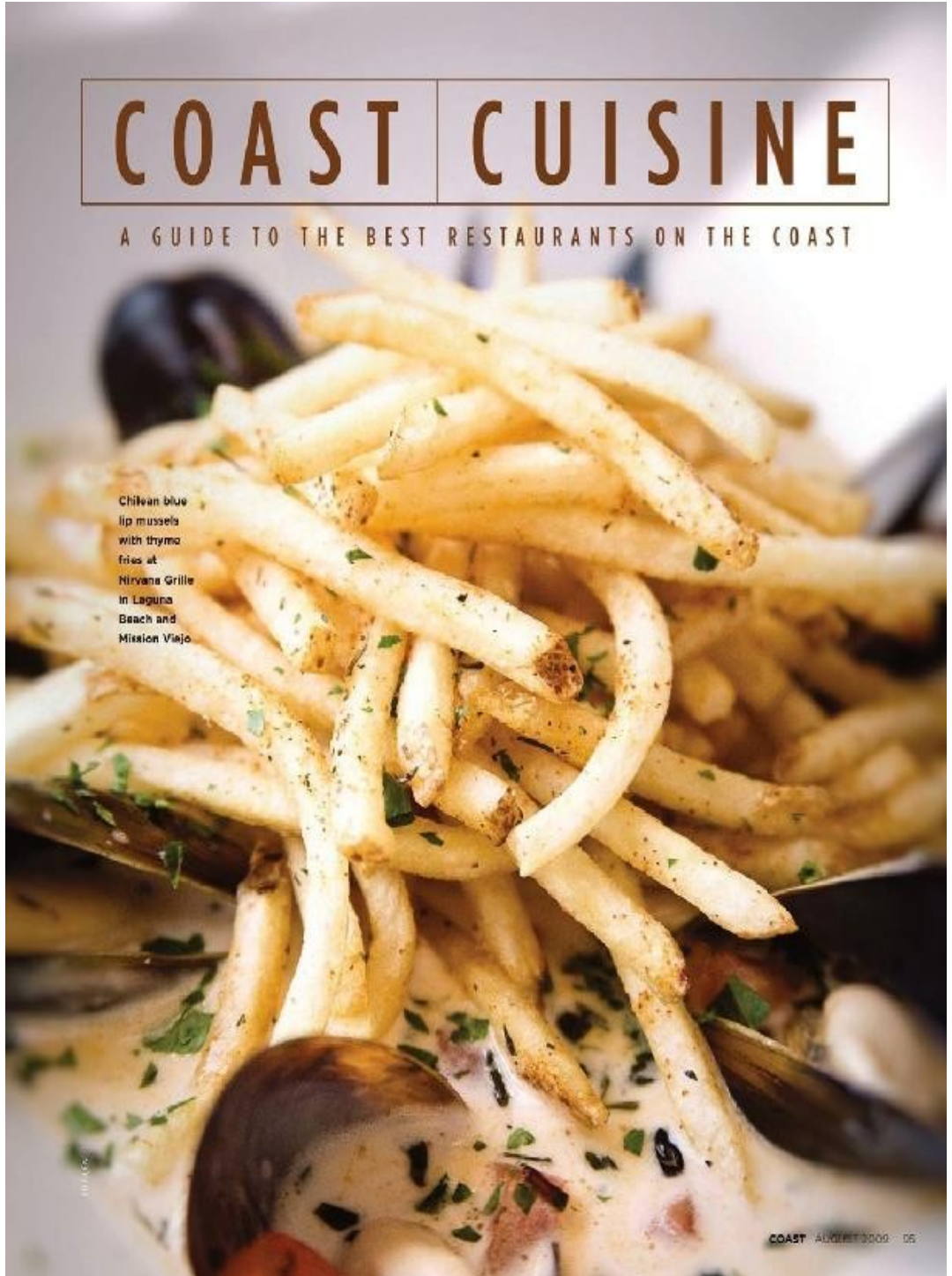


COAST CUISINE

A GUIDE TO THE BEST RESTAURANTS ON THE COAST



Chilean blue lip mussels with thyme fries at Nirvana Grille in Laguna Beach and Mission Viejo

CUISINE >



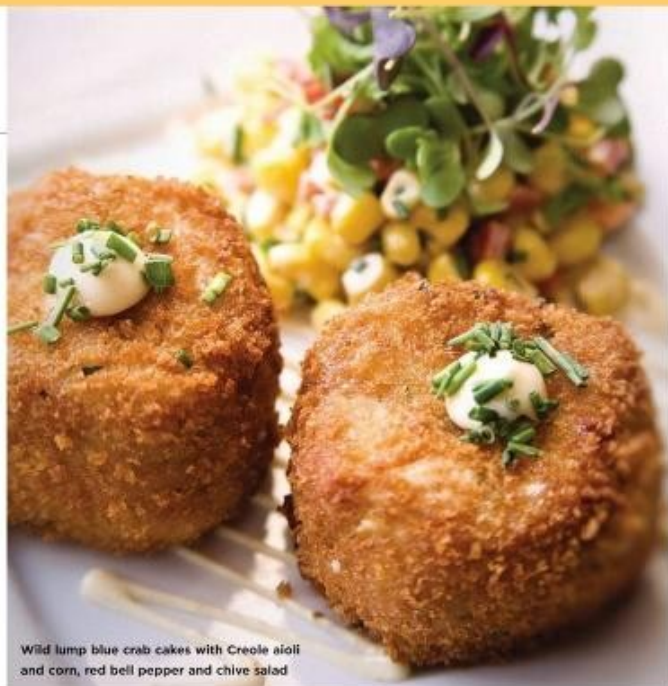
Strawberry-mint lemonade



Grilled filet mignon brochettes with grilled pineapple and fried onion



Goat cheese ice cream with strawberries



Wild lump blue crab cakes with Creole aioli and corn, red bell pepper and chive salad

PHOTOS BY ED VOLEN

NIRVANA GRILLE

Laguna Beach is just a little bit different than the rest of Orange County. It's a little cooler, a little ahead of the curve, a little more progressive. Artists are drawn here, movies are filmed and more than a few TV shows have put the iconic coastal town on the world's radar. It's where trends begin and followers are made.

It wasn't a surprise, then, that Laguna Beach is where we found Nirvana Grille, a family-run bistro camouflaged into the downtown, almost as if it didn't want to be found. But demure and understated, even while setting up shop on one of Laguna's most traversed byways, is kind of Nirvana Grille's modus operandi—a fact that became apparent after checking out the décor (understated), the menu (still understated) and the simple preparations of classic fare (more understating). You get the feeling at Nirvana Grille that you've walked into a family reunion of sorts, and even though you're not technically part of the group,

it's very easy to get used to the well-worn rituals.

It could be the familiar flavors and smells, or the servers who chat easily about what's on the menu that day and practically melt while describing some of their favorite dishes. On one particular occasion, as the server salivated over selections from the vast cocktail menu, we became intrigued by the lengthy list of non-alcoholic options like strawberry-mint lemonade, which came muddled like a mojito but with a crimson hue and bright fruit flavors. Similar in color but with a kick was the Nirvana Margarita made with blood orange juice—a heady cocktail enriched with fresh lime and Grand Marnier that spoke of summer and all its sequia-bazed glory.

But perhaps most spectacular about Nirvana Grille is what goes unsaid: the restaurant's unwavering commitment to local growers and vendors that allows it to source the best organic, natural products around. The menu itself might be an international tour: of California, French and Asian influences, but look closely and

you'll find that the ingredients make up the hallmarks of this time and place—things like avocado and figs, and pink grapefruit and heirloom tomatoes that define the regional cuisine of Southern California.

We began with Chilean blue lip mussels that came floating in a broth of tomatoes, leeks, shallots, and herbs, finished off with a touch of cream and topped with thyme-paprika French fries—a traditional French bistro staple but adapted to California's fresh produce. The mussels were plump and tender, the broth piping hot and deeply satisfying, even on a warm summer evening, and if you can't manage to soak up all the juices with the shoestring fries, we recommend using a spoon. Leave no liquid behind.

Next were the wild blue crab cakes, two identical spheres of lump crab meat panko-crusting and served with Creole aioli and a corn, red bell pepper and chive salad. Golden brown and looking scrumptious, they had the firm-but-light texture reserved for the very best of crab cakes, but left something to be desired in the flavor department. The cakes themselves were a tad bland, and the salsa could have used a little more kick to balance the mildness of the crab. The aioli, for its part, added little to the dish.

Definitely not lacking in flavor were the filet mignon brochettes marinated in ponzu, rosemary

and garlic, then grilled and served with a slice of grilled pineapple and fried onion. Forgive the fact that the meat was slightly overcooked, the fusion of island-inspired and Asian influences paired with tender filet was a winning one, especially with the sweet grilled pineapple, which had caramelized in parts, adding a further layer of depth and dimension.

This is the kind of food that Executive Chef and owner Lindsay Smith-Rosales has become known for over the past several years, since the original Nirvana Grille opened in Mission Viejo: clean, California-centric and with a flair for all things fresh. The Laguna Beach location, which opened in early 2008, carried on that tradition of fresh bistro fare but also indulged in its beachfront proximity by adding a recently opened rooftop bar and lounge on which to savor all the season's libations and starters during Happy Hour (which, happily, is half-price Monday-Thursday). For the summer months, Nirvana Grille's food menu focuses largely on seafood and lighter preparations of beef and lamb, with the occasional casual-turned-gourmet classic mixed in, like the Nirvana beef burger made with organic grass-fed meat. But for our entrees, we went with a modern-day surf-and-turf of pistachio-Dijon-crusting Chilean sea bass with beurre blanc and pistachio-crusting Australian rack of lamb with roasted veal demi glace, both served with creamy mashed Yukon Gold potatoes, and lemon-olive oil asparagus and broccolini with shallot butter, respectively. The sea bass, crispy on the outside and exceedingly tender on the inside, was a masterpiece of simple perfection with the beurre blanc adding an additional element of richness. The lamb, cooked to an ideal medium-rare, was tasty and mildly textured with the addition of the pistachios, and the depth added by the roasted veal demi glace was welcome.

Dessert at Nirvana Grille ranges from the decadent (chocolate molten sponge cake) to the light and sprightly (Fuji apple pie with double crust with housemade cinnamon ice cream) but the one that strikes the most satisfying balance is the restaurant's signature: two scoops of goat cheese ice cream with fresh halved figs. Taking its inspiration from the classic cheese-and-honey combination, the subtle tanginess of the cheese played well with creamy ice cream and against the honeyed flavor from the figs.

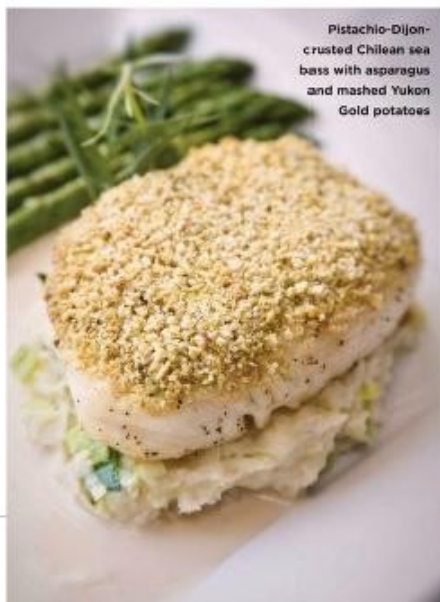
For summer dining, Nirvana Grille is a fresh option. And it's guilt-free—at least from the environment's perspective.

303 Broadway #101, Laguna Beach, (949) 497-0027; 24031 Marguerite Pkwy., Mission Viejo, (949) 380-0027; nirvanagrille.com. Starters/small plates, \$8-\$16, entrees, \$9-\$35, desserts, \$8-\$12.

BY JESSICA FORSYTH



Pistachio-crusting Australian rack of lamb



Pistachio-Dijon-crusting Chilean sea bass with asparagus and mashed Yukon Gold potatoes



Executive Chef and owner Lindsay Smith-Rosales