

THE COAST NEWS GROUP

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Sexy and delicious sum up Clara in Carlsbad

by David
Boylan

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The clean, bright interior from Jess Hicks at Clara in Carlsbad. Photo Kimberly Motos

I will admit up front that knowing Clara was a Chef Alex Carballo project I held an "oh this is going to be good" attitude even before I stepped foot in the door. I featured Alex back when he was at Stone Brewing World Bistro & Garden's and his partnership in Moto Deli was one of my favorite openings of the past few years.

He is a talented, passionate chef and both are on full display at Clara. On a side note, Alex and another good friend Julie Darling recently took ownership of the Til-Two Club in City Heights. It's an old-school bar and live music venue and fulfills a lifelong dream for Alex, who played there when he was in a band in his younger years.

Side note aside, my enthusiasm for Clara was enhanced when I learned they had Seth

Marquez behind Clara's innovative beverage program. Seth comes from Campfire and Sycamore Den, two of my favorite places for cocktails. On top of that they have a stellar sommelier in Derry Van Nortwick so yeah, my expectations were high going in to say the least. More on the cocktails and wine programs in a minute as I'd like to start with the concept and the space.

Clara features craft beverages and markaf,fresh cuisine in
Carlsbad's WJage Fair. Courtesyphoto



There is no played out gastro pub or public house tired concept going on here. Clara is simple yet elegant and a space with its own identity. From the classic font they selected that reminds me of a movie font from the past to the name Clara, which loosely translates to mean clear, bright, and honest. A big shoutout to Jess Hicks, the San Diego designer behind the 2,000-square-foot, L-shaped beauty of an interior.

Let's get back to the cocktails and wine as that's where I started the evening and Clara could easily be a destination for both.

We started with a couple from the "Patio Pounders" section of the cocktail menu. I was introduced to the term Patio Pounder recently from a French wine importer in Detroit while sipping a very nice rose on a hot summer day and love the term. I'm a sucker for cleverly named cocktails and the Rambler's Daughter had me even before I read what was in it.

That said, it was delicious with tequila, fino, raspberry, lime, cucumber, salt, peychauds and ROda. And you are not alone if you have not heard of several of those ingredients but trust me they

all work beautifully together There was not a cocktail on the menu that did not sound delicious.

On the wine side of things, I asked the sommelier Derry Van Nortwick to select a versatile white that would work across the board with the menu-sampling chef Alex was about to bring out. His selection was a Domaine Zafeirakis 2016 Malagousia from Greece. It was my first experience with a Greek white wine and it was perfect.

I also experienced my first Parron, which is a Spanish glass wine pitcher designed for passing around the table. It allows everyone to drink from the same utensil without touching it with their lips and fosters communal drinking accompanying food. It does require some *kill to ensure the wine enters one's mouth and to keep it from spilling onto clothing but that is half the fun. In this case it was a mini Parron designed for two people and Derry filled it with Txakolina, an everyday white wine from the Basque region of Spain and it was a lot of fun.

The California-centric menu from chef Alex spotlights fresh ingredients and bright flavors. 1--1e presents a menu featuring of-the-moment, vibrant dishes that rely on the quality of their seasonal ingredients to deliver big flavor. Bar snacks, appetizers, flatbreads and entrees feature uber-fresh vegetables, local seafood from Catalina Offshore and meats

We sampled a nice variety of the menu including the Cauliflower Tacos and Lettuce Wraps, both of which are vegetarian options but will make meat eaters happy as well. I could have eaten a dozen of the Deviled Eggs with mustard, jamon and crispy garlic chips, they were that good. And while flatbreads are on just about every menu these days,



Clara's Beet Flatbread was a unique twist and the Lemon herb chicken with sweet potato hash, cippolini, bread is made in-house for a nice touch. zucchini and tomato at Clara. Courtesyphoto

The Wild Mushroom Gnocchi was as light and flavorful as gnocchi can get and the Skirt Steak with sweet potato hash, sofrito braised greens and chipotle butter was fabulous. Our seafood sample was the Scallops with sunchoke puree, fennel, asparagus, tarragon oil and panko gremolata and it all worked together nicely.

I should note that along with the bar, the kitchen at Clara is open late with a scaled-down menu but one that would work perfectly for me past 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday they are open until midnight with the kitchen going until 11 p.m. and a 4 to 6 p.m. happy hour. Friday and Saturday the bar goes until 2 a.m.

Maybe work up an appetite dancing at Coyote located below and head up to Clara for some fabulous food and a nightcap. Whatever your strategy for the evening, check this place out.

Find them at 300 Carlsbad Village Drive #213 in Carlsbad or www.claracarlsbad.com.