



At Tavern House, the Focus is Food

Written By Victoria Kertz | Photography By Tavern House

David Wilhelm's new restaurant may be on the waterfront,
but the view isn't the highlight here.

People are always flocking to Newport Harbor, with its gondolas and mega-yachts and sunsets to gaze upon. But it's not the view that people are after at Tavern House, formerly 3-Thirty-3. This is David Wilhelm's new restaurant, and people are here to eat.

If his name sounds familiar, that's because he's a pioneer of Orange County dining. He cofounded classic eateries like Chat Noir in Costa Mesa and French 75 in Laguna Beach, placing Orange County on an upscale dining path to greatness. His most recent hit is Jimmy's Famous American Tavern, with multiple locations in Orange County and L.A., but once he sold his stake in Jimmy's, he set his sights on what he calls the best location on Newport Harbor.

His redo of 3Thirty3, the dated and tourist-attracting nightspot, is largely cosmetic. "I've always loved the bones of this place," he says of the elevated restaurant, surrounded by boat slips and desirable real estate. He wants Tavern House to be known for its food and become the go-to place for locals to celebrate occasions—large and small—like the early taverns in England.

The bulk of the four-month renovation took place in the kitchen, which needed updated appliances and space to execute a Wilhelm-esque menu. This naturally delighted Executive Chef Michael Payne, who started at Jimmy's as a line cook and worked his way up. "The new kitchen has created numerous opportunities to create a more widely diverse menu," Payne says. And it's true, the menu is extensive.

With an array of appetizers, seafood and meats, unique flavors surprise and dazzle at every turn. Stealing the menu show are a few resurrected dishes from Wilhelm-restaurants-past. Fans of the '90s-era Newport Beach mainstay Barbacoa will delight in the Voodoo Shrimp Martini, crispy rock shrimp in a sweet chile glaze that was a hit nearly 30 years ago. A diner asked him to bring it back when he first took over the space. "I had kind of forgotten about it," Wilhelm says of the shrimp. The Buttermilk Fried Chicken, originally hailing from his Sorrento Grill in Laguna Beach was equally surprising. "It's hands-down our number one selling dish," he says.



Seafood-ies will love the BBQ Bourbon Baked Oysters, which arrive sizzling in their shells. “I like to combine salty and sweet and smoky,” he says of the bacon, garlic, barbecue sauce melange. The half-dozen oysters are served with an unbelievably good Campagne bread from Bread Artisan Bakery in Santa Ana (coincidentally owned by one of his former servers). Payne agrees the oysters are second to none, as well as another seafood dish poised to become a crowd favorite: the Red Snapper Veracruzana. Served in a cassoulet dish, its striking, spicy tomato broth makes it one of those dishes that tastes much better than it looks.

With consistent craftsmanship in every dish, it’s clear that this location is all about the food. The DJs and nightlife that 3Thirty3 offered may be gone, but Wilhelm says they’ll certainly host holiday parties. He’s already planning a festive decor to match holiday crowds and the famously lit boats for the Newport Boat Parade in December. An overflow dining room can serve as a private venue for up to 40 people, complete with harbor views, but it won’t turn into a regular nightclub again. “It’s completely different,” he says. It’s a genuine David Wilhelm restaurant.

TAVERN HOUSE KITCHEN + BAR

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