

Review: Juniper & Ivy lives up to the hype

Highly touted new restaurant from celebrity chef Richard Blais delivers on most fronts

By [Pam Kragen \(/staff/pam-kragen/\)](#) 6:04 p.m. March 21, 2014



The Baja Yellowtail at Juniper & Ivy Restaurant in Little Italy. CREDIT: CeCe Canton

LITTLE ITALY — With his new restaurant Juniper & Ivy in Little Italy, celebrity chef Richard Blais rode into town last month on a gargantuan wave of publicity. The problem is, waves crash. Touted by some foodies as the one chef who could put San Diego in the dining big leagues with San Francisco and L.A., the New York native seemed primed for a wipeout.

Yelp reviewers sharpened their knives and forks, the doors opened and ... guess what? The sure-footed kitchen Kahuna is riding that big wave right into shore.

A month into service, Juniper & Ivy is turning out fine and creative food, the service is enthusiastic and on point, the prices are mostly reasonable, the ambience is inviting, and Blais is front and center most nights running his open, heavily staffed kitchen with a sense of joy and serene calm rarely seen when he flamed out in season four of TV's "Top Chef" then triumphed on "Top Chef: All Stars."

Reviewing dishes at the 250-seat "Left Coast Cookery" — so named because virtually the only non-West Coast menu ingredient is Iberian ham — is like shooting a moving target. Nearly half the menu changed out during the eatery's first two weeks (Blais said initial business has been so strong that he could afford to upgrade his menu proteins). But the spirit of Juniper & Ivy is easy to define. It's a friendly, unpretentious neighborhood restaurant with an adventurous seasonal menu that's ideal for group grazing.

Blais' much-touted molecular techniques are there in every dish, but not on the accessible, clearly worded menu. There are no snobby servers, and the smart but down-to-earth sommelier Tami Wong puts even wine neophytes at ease. And did I mention the \$5 valet service? It's a warm invitation in the parking-starved district.

Owned by local investor Mike Rosen and designed by The Johnson Studio in Atlanta, the restaurant's three-story, open-beamed warehouse design is urban casual with four kitchenside bar stools, private dining and patio seating, and a raised bar that overlooks the dining room. The only design miss is the coed washroom. The huge kitchen is open from end to end so diners can watch the staff at work with knives, nitrogen tanks, smokers and blowtorches.

Online diner reviews have been mostly ecstatic except for some complaints about high prices and small portions. Some of the "Snack" items are indeed small, but shareable small plates (\$9-\$17) and entrees (\$19-\$36) line up pricewise with most other local fine dining restaurants. On a second visit with two guests, we stuffed ourselves on a combined nine dishes for \$103 (not including gratuity and wine), which seemed reasonable for the amount of work that goes into each dish and the sublime flavors that come out.

Start your meal with the fist-sized buttermilk biscuit, a \$5 ramekin of pure Southern heaven. It's topped with a slab of smoked butter and served with a flourish under a glass dome piped full of alderwood smoke. It's so good, you'll order seconds.

If you're looking for an umami experience, try the Coachella dates, stuffed with chevre and lamb bacon and topped with a sweet crusting of cocoa and ground espresso beans.

A happy surprise was the fresh-made, perfectly cooked pasta. The linguine and razor clams were bursting with flavor, drenched in sea urchin butter and finished with crispy brioche crumbs. The \$12 dish was the clear hit of the night.

On the raw menu, it's hard to top the pristine excellence of the Baja yellowtail panzanella with foraged samphire. On the "Toast" menu, try the refreshingly different charred black grapes with ricotta and ice wine vinegar. And if you like pork, the savory carnitas with seaweed salsa verde are an interesting twist on the local classic.

If you're craving a burger, you won't find it on the menu. But Blais made his name in Atlanta with his Flip Burger Boutique brand, so he's created an off-menu homage to In-N-Out with his not-so-secret Animal burger, made with three kinds of beef, soaked in mustard, seared and enveloped in cheese, served on an egg bun with steamed onions and a generous side of salt-and-pepper-dusted fries (\$17).

Not every dish is a home run. Some have an overworked quality and others left little lasting impression. The nasturtium and crab appetizer had a nice zing of Meyer lemon curd, but its presentation and overall flavor was bland. The artichokes small plate with Asian pear shavings also underwhelmed, with too little anchovy dressing to flavor the dish.

Have room for dessert? We didn't, but we indulged anyway. The chocolate Yodel (\$11) serves three. It's like a giant frozen Ho Ho topped with molten Valrhona fudge and filled with white chocolate foam and tiny nitrogen-frozen balls of milk and white chocolate. It's decadent, but the chunks of hazelnut brittle inside are so sticky you could lose a filling.

Even better is the citrus yogurt parfait, a zingy, interesting plateful of sweet, tangy semifreddos with waves of sculpted caramelized citrus ice, Mandarin segments, orange blossoms, lemon zest, fennel pollen and olive oil drizzle (\$8).

Whether or not the new Del Mar resident is San Diego's culinary savior remains to be seen. What he can do is make molecular gastronomy cool and tasty once again for local diners who were burned by the unappetizing mad science experiments of some past local chefs. He also brings a grab bag of fresh ideas to the plate. (Who else in town is serving geoduck, beef heart and horseradish dipping dots?) And for foodies raised on TV cooking shows, he adds a few more watts to the city's culinary star meter.

Welcome to San Diego, Richard Blais. Surf's up.

pam.kragen@utsandiego.com

© Copyright 2014 The San Diego Union-Tribune, LLC. An MLIM LLC Company. All rights reserved.