



## Changing of the Guards

Chef John Cuevas steps into a new role at The Crow Bar and Kitchen – and pulls it off regally, as evidence by this Crow Black Label Burger, made with a proprietary blend of 21-day dry-aged prime ribeye, bone marrow butter and caramelized onions, all between a buttermilk bun.

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BY JESSICA FORSYTH :: PHOTOS BY ED OLEN



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## THE CROW BAR AND KITCHEN

**F**ine dining has a new name: relic. In this culinary era, hereinafter referred to as the Age of the Gastropub, comfort food is the new haute cuisine, transforming formerly plebian dishes like potato chips into gastronomical masterpieces. But even less than a foodie-sounding portmanteau, the Age of the Gastropub is not only a specific dining experience but also a culinary movement, defined principally by the modern obsession with concepts such as farm-to-table, seasonal and locally sourced – a reflection of diners' tastes and concerns and an outgrowth of factions, such as Italy's Slow Food movement, that began decades ago in response to the growth of the fast food industry.

But don't think we're unaware of the counterargument: The Age of the Gastropub isn't exactly replete with health food. Dishes like mac and cheese (which has achieved more variations than Lady Gaga's wardrobe)

likely contain more calories than anything on a McDonald's menu, but the counter-counter argument is this: "Comfort" fare is part of a larger trend towards using higher quality ingredients that come from higher quality places, notably from local dairies and farmers that care more about what's not in their food (pesticides, toxins) than what is (size, appearance). Still, dining during the Age of the Gastropub isn't infallible; there are plenty of misses amongst the hits. And to be downright honest, the latest in gastropub fare has bordered on either run-of-the-mill or flat out disappointing (or both). It was with great hope, then, that we dined at The Crow Bar and Kitchen after hearing that John Cuevas, previously of the Montage Laguna Beach and Montage Beverly Hills, had recently taken over the helm as executive chef. With a background in fine dining, it seemed an unlikely fit – burgers and fries vs. oysters and Champagne – but despite

(or perhaps in spite of) his fancy roots, the menu at the Crow Bar has not only risen in the ranks of OC's gastropubs, but has become one of the county's best restaurants, period.

Cuevas's secret lies in a combination of things: his detail-oriented approach to food and his ability to capture the true spirit of the Age of the Gastropub: casual but not sloppy and upscale without being snooty. Take one of his signature dishes, the Black Label burger. The hamburger is ubiquitous, to be sure, appearing on gastropub menus with a frequency that makes it something of an unwritten law, but Cuevas's version takes it to the next level – not with a rare cheese or excessive toppings, but with bone marrow butter, caramelized onions and a buttermilk bun. Add an order of duck fat fries and we're pretty sure we've reached the pearly gates of food heaven. Other dishes on the menu swing to the opposite end of



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1. Aussie yellowtail crudo with stewed grapes, serrano chiles and garden parsley
2. Grilled organic zucchini with local goat cheese, charred lemon and tarragon
3. Sweet pea agnolotti with melted leeks and La Quercia bacon jus
4. The Crow Bar and Kitchen also has brunch on the weekends, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
5. Braised veal cheeks with housemade tater tots, maitake mushrooms and braising jus
6. Roasted bone marrow with parsley and caper persillade and grilled country bread
7. Butterscotch pot-au-creme

the decadence spectrum without being less flavorful. Locally sourced zucchini is grilled, cut into inch-long chunks, smeared with local goat cheese, and served with wedges of charred lemon – a perfect counterbalance to the richness of the menu without being boring. Still, don't start celebrating your waistline just yet; where there are vegetables, there is indulgence. Roasted bone marrow bones from the starter menu are split vertically, revealing a tender center and topped with parsley and caper persillade, all made to be spread on grilled country bread. It's like butter, only better.

Cuevas's talent for mixing the subtle with the bold is expressed no less when it comes to pasta dishes. Housemade sweet pea agnolotti, a delicate-sounding dish, is smothered with melted leeks, then drizzled with La Quercia bacon jus and accompanied by an expertly cooked piece of La Quercia bacon. Similarly, soft shell crab is served

with spiced tartar sauce, roasted tomato, and avocado, then accessorized flavor-wise with Iowa white bacon and a toasted brioche. Braised veal cheeks combine the highbrow (braised veal cheeks) with the everyday (tater tots) to make a dish that is playful and spectacularly delicious, with the meat falling apart at the touch of a fork and melting into the braising jus studded with maitake mushrooms.

After dinner sweets are also on par with a menu full of difficult choices. The butterscotch pot-au-creme with salted caramel and palmiers is smooth, with a deft hand regulating appropriately on the sugar front. Not too sweet, with texture from the palmiers, it's a dessert to remember, much like the rest of Cuevas's cuisine.

## EXPRESS YOURSELF

■ **IPOD TUESDAYS** :: Explore your inner DJ at The Crow Bar and Kitchen during iPod Tuesdays, where guests can submit their 30-minute playlist, play it between the hours of 9-11 p.m. and get voted on to win best playlist of the week.  
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