

Plus Tip

Where to go for casual dining

The Crow Bar & Kitchen lands in Corona del Mar

By Gretchen Kurz

The crow has landed and claimed its roost with an aplomb most restaurants can't demonstrate at such a fledgling stage.

The Crow Bar & Kitchen hatched in late November, but the maverick newbie greeted the world with all the swagger you'd expect of its coal-black avian name-

sake. The Crow Bar & Kitchen is Corona del Mar's, and surely Orange County's, first gastropub with an animal name that's a hearty nod to the British forebears who first married upscale food to a pub setting (The Eagle, The Pig, The Greyhound).

What is a rather established trend in England—gastropubs date to the early '90s—feels brand spanking new on Coast

Highway. It's an enchanting formula. Take one proven chef (Scott Brandon) from his longtime local gig (Oysters), hook him up with a local real estate pundit (Steve Geary), and set them loose on a promising but unlucky site (Garlic Jo's, Brio Tuscan Grill, Tiramisu) where two like minds can create the neighborhood tavern of their dreams. They followed their heart and



The Crow Bar & Kitchen

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL RUTT

Plus tip plus

ROSCOE'S FAMOUS DELI
116 W. Commonwealth Ave.
Fullerton
714-879-2153

OK, so maybe Roscoe's Famous Deli really isn't. It really isn't famous. It really isn't a deli. But it's a truly terrific sandwich joint supported by quality fixin's and old-timey touches.

Key players: Top-notch ham, roast turkey, pastrami, corned beef, and salami play key roles in combinations that can also feature Swiss or pepper-Jack cheeses, thick bacon, mustard, Russian dressing, rye bread, or sub rolls.

Recent doozies: The SoCo with hot corned beef, hot pastrami, Swiss, and Russian on rye. The Fender Club with turkey, bacon, pastrami, and chipotle mayo on sourdough.

Omigosh, that's huge: Priced \$8 to \$10, the 20-plus sandwiches are a well-edited selection, and they're assembled in gut-buster proportions easily stacked 4 inches high.

On the side: Best bets for the side orders (one included with each sandwich) are the rich red potato salad, super fresh coleslaw, and a mean chili. The fruit salad always looks pretty, but only tastes that way when those fruits are in season. Plus, every order comes with half of a crisp, colossal dill pickle.

Spring for a bottle: Sure, they have the ho-hum fountain beverages you know too well, but a better beverage awaits in the cooler's 18-plus collection of esoteric sparklers such as Thomas Kemper Ginger Ale, Frostie's Blue Cream Soda, and Sioux City Sarsaparilla.

Is there a draft in here? Yes, about 20 of them that will delight every style of tap beer lover.

PLUS TIP

trusted their gut—and opened to an eager horde of foodies, brew hounds, and coastal habitués.

The place has been busy from the start. It's clear Brandon's kitchen crew is capable of cranking out well-crafted dishes with unusual speed. But even the front of the house runs well despite the ceaseless onslaught. Both the wait staff and the bar crew know their menus well. Casual and nonchalant, the retooled space is refreshingly simple. Dark woods, pale brick walls, and brick arches let the ample bar and the open kitchen take center stage. Tall communal tables with bar stools stretch across the center of the room. Like the bar, seating is first come, first served. Those with reservations get seating at lower tables along the east wall's lengthy banquette.

Technically, food is what sets the gastropub apart from a lounge, saloon, or cantina. So it's fortunate The Crow Bar & Kitchen has a menu that begs to be grazed—often. Brandon's lineup is heavy on snackish small plates, flatbreads, hearty sandwiches, and rich sides of comfort food amped with worldly ingredients. Wood-fired flatbread with oozing Tallegio gets a dusting of aromatic fennel pollen. Sweet potato fries are partnered with aioli made with pungent Cabrales cheese. Deviled eggs are gussied up with chunks of sweet blue crab. Even the house Caesar goes uptown with La Quercia pancetta and Spanish white anchovies.

I like that Brandon cures his own olives and brines his own pickles. Add a dish of slick-salty Marcona almonds, and you have the perfect bar nosh. Those snappy, spicy pickled vegetables shift with the crops, but they pack a racy zing that nicely counters the richer dishes. Those pickles also appear on the Cubano sandwich, a rich stack of tender pork loin, smoky ham, mustard aioli, and Havarti, all nicely pressed to a perfect crunch. And of course there are burgers (\$9 to \$29). Made with a secret daily grind of natural Angus and prime beef, the quarter-pound patty is plenty rich against the familiar mayo-ketchup-lettuce-pickles-onion backdrop. The Crow Burger takes an Italian tack with Tallegio, Gorgonzola, roasted tomato marmalade, and peppery arugula on ciabatta bread.

The Ahi Nicoise burger is lovely

enough with its tapenade, sliced egg, potato roll, and clever fried green beans. But the *diabla* in me equally relished the image of horrified Frenchmen—*salade nicoise* in a burger? *Sacre bleu!* For villagers unworried about adjustable mortgages, there's also a Japanese Wagyu beef version on a brioche bun with truffle aioli for \$29. Riffing on that affectation, they also offer a bottle (vintage unnamed) of Screaming Eagle with any burger for \$2,900. In which case, I'll have the Wagyu, medium-rare.

Brick-oven flatbreads are crispy oblongs, thin as a flour tortilla, and ideal for a quick bite or shared appetizer (\$10 to \$12). The classic roasted roma tomatoes with basil is unctuous with silky *burrata*. Slightly more old school is the Grilled Cheese of the day, but this is a

sandwich from a chef who knows his cured curds. Think St. Andre with roasted apples and fresh thyme. In fact, a dozen (mainly European) cheeses are offered in groups of three or five. Larger plates for the winter (\$9 to \$26) included such hearty stuff as a fine roasted Shelton Farms chicken with onion soup gratin or the deliciously simple braise of white beans, escarole, and first-rate Fra' Mani Italian sausage. A short rib simmered in stout ale is anointed with caramelized shallots and piquant gremolata. But don't expect those wintry dishes to remain long—Brandon intends to chase the seasons and feature what local farms are picking today.

Of course there are beers and ales, a daring and clever assortment boasting a

couple dozen on tap and almost as many by the bottle. No longer will you have to resort to the Yard House in search of esoteric Belgian or oddball California amber ales. And who else has Craftsman 1903 Lager on draft? To accompany those craft brews, the menu offers pub fare, always with a twist. Scotch eggs hide quail eggs in their crisp sausage jackets. Banger and Mash features a superb Fra' Mani sausage with smashed Yukon gold potatoes and melted leeks. Fish and chips relies on the fish of the day in the lightest batter and a side of curried tartar sauces. The skinny salt-vinegar chips are tasty, but I must admit unwholesome attraction to the duck fat fries, so rich and crisp in their handsome paper-lined pewter cup.

The wine list is deeper and wider than its 100 or so bottles might suggest. It certainly bears the imprint of master sommelier and consultant Peter Neptune, offering loads of good values from beyond California. I wish more of the by-the-glass choices had some bottle age on them (most are '05 and '06). Those spanking new wines make the bottle list look ever more alluring. After all, crows are known as a cagey breed.

Desserts (\$8) are an exuberant lot. The Irish Car Bombe is a deservedly popular construction of Guinness-chocolate cake topped with a Bailey's semi-freddo and lashed with Jameson whiskey crême anglaise. It's hard to fault a float made with premium vanilla and Sprecher's rich, complex root beer. But the Sub-Pop tart should not be overlooked—it's an inspired seasonal fruit crumble hiding under a silly name. I saw many Not Just a Ding Dong chocolate cakes being served, but mine was a dry letdown. So next time, I'll have to try the house-made churros with iced *horchata*.

Bird buffs tell me American crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) are wily and opportunistic. But they aren't prone to migration, especially if the environment is welcoming. Let's hope this crow doesn't abandon its habitat any time soon. **OC**

—Gretchen Kurz searches the county for hidden and inexpensive dining treasures. In addition to her work as an *Orange Coast* magazine contributing editor, she serves as Zagat Survey's Orange County editor.



Oven-roasted prawns with sausage and saffron rice

THE CROW BAR & KITCHEN

2325 E. Coast Highway
Corona del Mar
949-675-0070
www.thecrowbarcdm.com

Lunch and dinner served daily from 11 a.m. Reservations suggested. Beer and wine. Corkage: \$20, waived with purchase from list. Valet or free public parking in lot at Fourth Street and Carnation.