



A GOURMET'S GASTROPUB: A minimalist dining room awaits patrons at The Crow Bar and Kitchen in Corona del Mar (top left). Chef Scott Brandon creates the "not-just-a-Ding-Dong" dessert (bottom center), a Cubano sandwich with roasted sweet potato fries (bottom left), and an exceptional roasted pear salad with mâche, baby spinach, almonds, and Cabrales blue cheese (right).

The Crow Bar and Kitchen

2325 E. Coast Highway, Corona del Mar; (949) 675-0070

Dinner for two, food only:
\$45-\$75

Setting:
Minimalist with a splash of neighborhood comfort

Service:
Brisk, efficient, and friendly

Best dishes:
Sweet potato fries with aioli dip; roasted pear salad; "not-just-a-Ding-Dong" dessert

Serious fun: two words that best describe what's going on at The Crow Bar and Kitchen in Corona del Mar. The Crow Bar bills itself as a "gastropub," a small, neighborhood bistro that emphasizes good grub, good grog, and good friends.

The first thing you notice about this gastropub is that it's wildly popular. On any given evening, the place is packed. Singles and couples mix at the small bar, and strangers share stories and even their plates at two large communal dining tables. The second thing you notice is the noise level. This isn't the place for a quiet, intimate meal. However, after wading through an impressive wine list and an even more impressive beer list, you will eventually get to one of the most inventive menus in Orange County.

The kitchen is where things get serious. Owner Steve Geary lured chef Scott Brandon

from nearby Oysters to design and execute a hefty offering of inventive plates with a focus on superior, locally grown food products and simple yet explosive food combinations. Cheese plates, a cured olive plate, blue-crab deviled eggs, and ham-wrapped dates start the evening. Seasonal salads come next; my pick is the exceptional roasted pear salad with mâche, baby spinach, almonds, and Cabrales blue cheese. Then there's the Cubano sandwich, a tasty combination of thinly sliced pork loin, Nueske's ham, house-made pickles, mustard aioli spread, and Havarti cheese stuffed into a compressed torpedo roll and served with a side of perfect oven-roasted sweet potato fries.

For more substantial fare, there are the larger plates, including the Fra' Mani premium sausage plates: the bangers and mash or the grilled Italian sausages with Tuscan white beans and braised escarole. And, to finish, there's the "not-just-a-Ding-Dong" dessert, a rich, frosted Belgian dark-chocolate mini-cake stuffed with a creamy vanilla brioche and served with a side of vanilla gelato. —Pete Johnson