

Loaded deviled
eggs at Reunion
Kitchen & Drink



TURNING UP THE HEAT

Spicy dishes abound at local restaurants—if you can handle them.

By ASHLEY RYAN

There's no denying it: Menus throughout Southern California have been heating up. While trendy dishes are popping up everywhere, that's not exactly the extent of it. Levels of spice are also being amped up, whether it's in American classics like hot wings and chicken sandwiches or on cultural menus ranging from Asian-inspired fare to Mexican cuisine and beyond.



Chipotle chicken sandwich at Finney's Crafthouse, which also offers hot wings and other spicy fare

Research on the effects of spicy foods can sometimes be controversial. But Ana Salazar, a registered dietitian nutritionist at the Laguna Beach Community Clinic, points to an observational study done by Molecular Nutrition & Food Research, a peer-reviewed food science journal, that suggests that phytochemicals in chile peppers may have antioxidant properties and can possibly protect against certain vascular diseases. Endorphins and dopamine may also be released upon consumption. Salazar also notes that spicy foods can worsen conditions like gastroesophageal reflux disease.

"Some people are more sensitive than others," she says. "Some other people may eat a combination of these foods every day and feel no symptoms at all."

Whether you're already desensitized and enjoy eating spicy food on the regular or are delving in for the first time, visit these varied eateries throughout Laguna Beach to test your endurance and see how much you can handle.

FIRED-UP FARE

American cuisine isn't generally thought of as spicy, but certain dishes can really pack a punch. One such item is hot wings and,

at newcomer Finney's Crafthouse, you'll find a unique option: yuzu Buffalo wings, slathered in a sauce made in-house that is inspired by one the founder discovered in Singapore. Spicy tuna rice cakes were also added to the menu this summer, with minced spicy tuna placed atop seasoned rice cakes and garnished with jalapeno slices and Sriracha sauce. A chipotle chicken sandwich rounds out the pub's offerings. "Spicy for the sake of spice isn't what guests like," says Eric Bosrau, Finney's executive chef. "What they like is flavors with a spice that isn't overpowering to the point of being uncomfortable, and that is what I have done with these dishes."

At Reunion Kitchen & Drink, co-owner Scott McIntosh believes that the appeal of its spicy dishes lies in the thrill of the combination of flavor and sensation. The comfort food menu has quite a bit of heat sprinkled throughout, in plates such as the bacon-wrapped jalapenos, loaded deviled eggs, ahi poke stack and jalapeno burger as well as the Jim's Bloody Mary. The bacon-wrapped jalapenos are definitely a fan favorite, stuffed with cream cheese and placed on a bed of house-made raspberry jam. But when you bite into them,



Spicy fish and chips at The Rooftop Lounge



Saigon Beach's spicy lemongrass soup



The 911 roll with spicy tuna at Seabutter

you never know when you'll find one with plenty of seeds to turn up the heat. (These jalapenos also adorn the bloody mary.)

Another hot spot (literally) is the breezy deck at The Rooftop Lounge at the historic La Casa del Camino hotel. The Nashville hot chicken sandwich is not to be missed, marinated in Tabasco then glazed in a mixture that includes hot honey, cayenne pepper, paprika and habanero powder and finally served with chipotle aioli. The Rooftop Lounge also serves up spicy fish and chips, seasoned with everything from cayenne and dried guajillo to togarashi chile powder. And the seafood fra diavolo may sound innocent enough, but the pasta dish has Calabrian chile puree mixed in for some added spice. "You either like the heat or you don't," says Executive Chef Glen Tinsley. "[It's] no mystery that some people just dig the burn."

ASIAN SPICE

If it's heat you're seeking, look no further than fusion restaurant Starfish Laguna, where a large portion of the dishes have elements of spiciness. The Chili Fire Wontons, stuffed with chicken and shrimp then steamed, also incorporate fresh chiles as well as a chile oil made from scratch. The result is the eatery's hottest menu item, with elements of sweet, savory and smoky as well. Founder and chef Gretchen McConnell also points to the Thai crab fried rice as an example of Starfish's perfect balance. "Incorporating fresh chiles and a house-made, Sriracha-infused fish sauce, this dish brings the heat while we cool the palate with chilled cucumber and fresh tomato," she explains. Other mouthwatering options include the Bangkok spicy udon noodles, the flat iron steak satays (presented with a spicy dipping sauce) and the Thai spicy beef with basil, one of the most popular items at the restaurant.

Spiciness isn't always big at Japanese spots, but with Seabutter's modern menu, there are quite a few bites with intensity. A variety of hand rolls are served spicy, with fish like salmon, tuna or scallop, while the crispy rice appetizers also have spicy options, including yellowtail and albacore. Spicy tuna is also front and center in many of Seabutter's rolls, from the 911 roll with jalapeno to the Hot Night roll drizzled in spicy mayo. The hamachi jalapeno sashimi and Pressed Tail sushi, also with jalapeno and yellowtail, are both excellent options for

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: WALES COMMUNICATIONS; COURTESY OF SEABUTTER; COURTESY OF SAIGON BEACH



Bangkok spicy udon noodles, a popular dish at Starfish Laguna

delectable dishes that release endorphins.

Another sushi joint, San Shi Go, offers some unique plates like the spicy calamari roll and a yellowtail special, which features both jalapeno slices and puree. Its inspiration stems from pickled jalapenos used in Mexican food, making this dish a sort of East-meets-Southwest option. The Backflip Roll, which combines spicy tuna with Cajun influences, is also a favorite, dreamt up by chef Yuji Hiraoka, who passed away last year.

Over at Gu Ramen, you can customize the level of spiciness in your bowl. Start with a base of ramen, udon noodles or kale in a chicken and pork bone broth. Make your dish a level two, spicy, or opt for a level three—the highest—for super spicy. Top the bowl with spicy ground pork for added heat, or enjoy other dishes like Thai spicy hot wings, spicy edamame, firecracker shrimp or the spicy pork yaki rice bowl.

An ever-rotating menu at Red Dragon means you never know what you're going to get when you sit down for a meal here, but there will certainly be spicy dishes on the Cantonese-inspired menu. Some past iterations have included a spicy cucumber salad and the stir-fried jade scallops.

After nearly a decade of operating a successful Chinese food restaurant in Lake Forest, owners of Peony Chinese Kitchen rebranded and brought their cultural cuisine to Laguna. This downtown eatery serves a couple of kung pao dishes—chicken or shrimp and scallops—accompanied by

chile peppers that will definitely heat up your meal. Diners can also opt for the garlic spicy chicken fried rice.

Vietnamese food is often light and fresh, but at Saigon Beach, you can also find a few spicy options as well. After they're fried, the pork belly lollipops and fried tofu bites are both tossed in a savory sauce then topped with a chile drizzle made in-house with onion oil and spices for a unique flavor that has a bit of a kick. The restaurant also offers a spicy lemongrass soup, offered as an alternative to the ever-popular pho. "Some customers that try [the] spicy lemongrass end up never looking back," says Saigon Beach co-owner Phong Vu. "It is our goal to introduce Vietnamese food to people that have never had it or allow people who have eaten more commonly known items to expand their options." The soup features round rice noodles and a house-made chile sate sauce; jalapenos can also be added.

At the family-owned Thai Bros., which has been a Laguna staple since 1994, enhances its dishes in very precise ways. While you can grab spicy salads with chicken, beef or seafood, many of their platters are made hot through the use of sauces: spicy lime sauce on the Crying Tiger steak, spicy red pepper sauce on the cashew chicken, spicy basil sauce on the SF egg noodles, spicy red curry sauce on the Fiery Bamboo chicken breast, panang curry sauce on the Red Devil and spicy peanut sauce on the Pik King tofu. Diners can also request for dishes to be made hotter if they so desire.



Crispy fried calamari at Asada Tacos & Beer, served with chipotle ranch for dipping



Pineapple-jalapeno margarita (top) and ceviche (above) at Carmelita's Kitchen de Mexico

CALIENTE CANTINAS

For spicy drinks and appetizers, you can't beat Carmelita's Kitchen de Mexico. Start with a cold, Tajin-rimmed drink, like the pineapple-jalapeno with chunks of charred fruit or the spicy mango with sliced habanero, or amp up the heat even more with the spicy michelada, with a zesty tomato juice base. Then, dive into the ceviche, where slices of jalapeno and Tapatio sauce add plenty of spice to the mixture of wild shrimp, Persian cucumber and lime juice. "In Hispanic restaurants, spicy food is

OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF STARFISH LAGUNA; THIS PAGE: LEFT, BOB HODSON PHOTOGRAPHY; RIGHT TWO PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CARMELITAS KITCHEN DE MEXICO



The jalapeno-watermelon cocktail at South of Nick's is both spicy and refreshing.

expected,” says Marcos Heredia, business operator at Carmelita’s. “So we have to shine here with flavor and authenticity.”

Asada Tacos & Beer, a sister restaurant to Reunion Kitchen that is housed in the same Boat Canyon Shopping Center, also offers deliciously hot sips and small plates. The same bacon-wrapped jalapenos appear on the menu here, but you can also order Dos Dips & Chips, with spicy bean and jalapeno cheese sauces for dipping, as well as crispy fried calamari or spicy tots, both served with chipotle ranch. The short rib nachos are also a must-try, smothered in slices of jalapeno and that same jalapeno cheese sauce that accompanies the chips. And, to drink, try Rosa’s Jalapeno Margarita with muddled peppers.

Known for its stunning ocean views from the edge of Heisler Park, Las Brisas is a beloved coastal Californian restaurant with a lineup full of Mexican flavors. Sip the spicy margarita, made with a house-made chile tincture, while you peruse the menu—or skip it all together and order the Mediterranean branzino. Originally an off-menu special, guests raved until it was added full time. This pan-seared fish is packed with flavor, thanks to a chimichurri sauce that it sits upon, but the heat comes from the chile oil that is incorporated. The same chile oil can be great for date night, as it’s drizzled on the broccoli that accompanies the dry-aged prime rib-eye for two.

At South of Nick’s, all it takes is a quick glance of the menu to see that spiciness



The Taco Stand’s Mar y Tierra burrito

abounds. Cocktails like the Spicy Sunset, made with a fire tincture and Fresno chiles, or the jalapeno-watermelon, which features jalapeno-infused tequila, are the perfect way to start your visit. When it comes to fare, possibly the spiciest items on the menu are the shrimp diablo, courtesy of its chipotle garlic sauce, or the chipotle chicken enchiladas. Other items to enjoy include birria tacos with spicy salsa, ceviche with serrano chiles and either the Sofia’s Mexican Pizza or El Gringo Taco Salad, both with spicy ground beef.

And although The Taco Stand is a quick-service stop that’s relatively new in town, everything is made to order and has been a popular addition to the casual scene in Laguna. Here, you can try shrimp, grilled mahi mahi or Baja fish tacos or the Mar y Tierra burrito—all slathered in spicy chipotle sauce—or visit the extensive salsa bar to customize any item to your ideal heat level.

BLAZING BEYOND

In a town as eclectic as Laguna, it’s no surprise that there are eateries offering lesser-known cuisines that will take your taste buds by storm. Rum Social Kitchen & Cocktails offers a unique blend of island-inspired fare reminiscent of dishes found in the Caribbean, southeast Asia and West Africa. The tuna poke is one of the spiciest items on the menu, with initial heat coming from the fiery Peruvian chile aji amarillo (which also gives it its color) and another layer stemming from the tangy



Chicken tikka masala (back left) and Chicken 65 (back right), alongside a chicken plate at Kebab | Kurry

pickled Fresno chiles. The garlic noodles are another favorite for those seeking piquant dishes, as the noodles are cooked in a broth filled with Caribbean jerk and Cajun spices; the bowl also incorporates shishito peppers tossed in bang bang sauce for further fuel. You can also expect some heat from Rum Social’s Jamaican curry cauliflower, available as a side.

Along Laguna Canyon Road, you’ll find Kebab | Kurry, an Indian and Afghani eatery that incorporates a wide range of spices in its cuisine. “Spices are the heart and soul of Indian cooking, providing depth, aroma and complexity to dishes,” says Majid Mahkri, the restaurant’s owner. Chicken 65 is simply unbeatable, though you can tell by the vibrant red hue that it’s definitely not for the weak of heart. This deep-fried chicken dish features signature spices, yogurt, tomato sauce and, of course, red chiles. But, really, you can’t go wrong with anything on the menu here; each and every item is crafted with a blend of spices that packs in the flavor.

And while ingredients are important, Mahkri says the way the dishes are cooked also plays a role in how much heat is present. “Each ingredient is added at a specific



Above: Rum Social Kitchen & Cocktails’ spicy tuna poke; below: Red Devil curry at Thai Bros.

stage to ensure optimal cooking and fusion of flavors,” he explains. “For instance, spices are often tempered in hot oil at the beginning of the cooking process to release their aromatic oils and infuse the dish with their essence. Vegetables and meats are then added in a specific order, allowing them to cook evenly and retain their individual textures. This meticulous attention to timing creates a symphony of flavors that sets Indian cuisine apart.”

Mahkri adds, “Spicy dishes have a universal appeal that transcends cultural boundaries,” and with so many flavorful offerings bringing the heat throughout Laguna, we couldn’t agree more. ■



OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT AND THIS PAGE, LEFT: ASHLEY RYAN; TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF RUM SOCIAL KITCHEN & COCKTAILS