

Dine / Bodega Laguna Cocina & Cantina



Clockwise from top left: the Laguna Tacos, which were carried over from the old Laguna Fish Co. menu; the interior of Bodega Laguna, which offers comfy spaces in which to relax; the Midnight Rider (front) and Laguna Azul cocktails; chicken fajitas



The Magic of Mexico

WITH WHIMSY AND WELL-CRAFTED FARE, BODEGA LAGUNA COCINA & CANTINA IS AN ENCHANTING ADDITION TO THE DOWNTOWN DINING SCENE.

By ASHLEY RYAN

When Laguna Fish Co. announced its transition to Bodega Laguna Cocina & Cantina after less than a year in town, many were surprised. But now that the transformation is complete, having reopened in late September, it's clear that the move just might pay off for restaurant owner Ivan Spiers.

Well known for his other restaurants in town—Skyloft, Mozambique and Rumari—Spiers has elevated the Coast Highway space with “Mexicoostal” flavors.

From the colorful bar aglow at the entrance and the sign showcasing the restaurant's name to couches, pillows, kitschy decor and Loteria games spread on

the tables, it's the perfect blend of comfy and chic. Plus, diners can take home a wide array of ceramics, glassware, home decor, apparel items and other textiles, all imported from Mexico, available in the La Tienda en Bodega Laguna shop in the back.

Kick back, relax and order a cocktail, like the gin-forward Laguna Azul, a brilliantly hued beverage with a citrus taste, or the Midnight Rider, crafted with El Jimador silver tequila, muddled blackberries and the restaurant's own sweet-and-sour mix. The drink menu also features classic cocktails with a Latin spin, like the Abuelita espresso martini, the Mexican Old-Fashioned and La Famosa

Margarita, available in five distinct flavors.

When it comes time to tuck into the food, start with the street corn, left on the cob but sliced into smaller chunks for sharing. Placed atop a bed of chipotle aioli and sprinkled with queso fresco cheese and chile powder, this dish has a touch of sweetness. Another sharable option is the halibut ceviche, where fresh fish is cured in lime juice and then tossed with tomato, red onion, cucumber, serrano pepper and cilantro. This can also be enjoyed as part of the chilled seafood “torre,” or tower, along with oysters, chilled lobster, clams, ahi tuna and shrimp.

For something to heat you up during these colder months, you can also opt to start with the chicken tortilla soup, an expertly seasoned blend of poblano chiles, charred corn, black beans, avocado and juicy chunks of meat, topped with crunchy tortilla strips.

When it comes to the main attraction, the menu's Entradas section has a number of standouts: the fajitas, available with chicken, steak, shrimp or portobello mushroom; Camarones ala Diabla, with sautéed shrimp in a habanero sauce served alongside seasonal vegetables and cilantro-lime rice; branzino zarandeado, served butterfly-style with a chile-citrus sauce; and enchiladas Vallarta, stuffed with lobster and shrimp in melted mozzarella.

You also can't go wrong with the crispy Laguna Tacos, which feature a shrimp-and-fish sofrito with pasilla chile aioli—a throwback from the old Laguna Fish Co. menu.

In addition, large groups will love the par-rillada platter, which feeds four to six people with a combination of grilled skirt steak, slow-braised carnitas, grilled chicken, warm tortillas and sides like rice, black beans, guacamole, pico de gallo and more.

After your meal, linger with another cocktail or one of the Mexican-inspired desserts: arroz con leche, flan with berries, a churro sundae or deep-fried ice cream, complete with caramel drizzles and cinnamon chips. No matter which option you choose, you're sure to feel embraced by the magic of Mexico in every corner of this exciting new space. ■

BODEGA LAGUNA COCINA & CANTINA

400 S. Coast Highway; 949-715-1002; bodegalaguna.com

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Friday; 10 a.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday; 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday