

# Last Impressions / Lindsay Smith

# 10

## MINUTES WITH Lindsay Smith

THE CHEF-OWNER OF  
NIRVANA KITCHEN & PANTRY  
REVEALS HOW SHE TRANS-  
FORMED THE RESTAURANT  
TO ALLOW FOR MORE TIME  
WITH HER FAMILY AND  
HOW YOU CAN ENHANCE  
YOUR HOLIDAY MEALS WITH  
FRESH INGREDIENTS.

By ASHLEY RYAN



Lindsay Smith, chef-owner at the new Nirvana Kitchen & Pantry, with some of her dishes and a handmade cutting board

It's been 15 years since chef Lindsay Smith opened Nirvana Grille in downtown Laguna, blending her classic French cooking style with an array of fresh, organic ingredients. But in November, the fine dining space was transformed into the more casual Nirvana Kitchen & Pantry, allowing her to offer healthy, delicious options at affordable price points while also spending more time at home.

Diners can grab a menu, find a seat (either in the spacious dining room, where each wooden table was handcrafted by Smith, or upstairs on the oceanview Bliss patio) and, when they're ready, order at the counter. Stations offer glass bottles of water, extra plates, napkins, silverware and more, while a pantry area offers grab-and-go options like ready-to-cook ravioli and pre-made proteins, soups, sauces and desserts. Soon, build-your-own charcuterie station will also be incorporated to complement the wooden boards Smith is crafting and selling.

But even with the more casual environment, Smith says staff will bring your food, piping hot, to your table, as she knows the value of great service. "The part that I don't ever want to escape from us is the hospitality of it," she explains. "I'm not trying to follow a trend. I still want people to feel cared for."

Smith spent her childhood in town, but has since moved to Laguna Hills. "We have a lot of space, a lot of comfort," she says. "But there are things that I am sorry that my kids won't get to experience like I did. There's a different sense in having a walking town to grow up in. And the community is so unique."

As the holidays draw near, keep an eye out for Nirvana's a la carte, family-style meals: Mix and match the dishes you'd like. Check out her tips below for creating your own fresh dinner.

**LAGUNA BEACH MAGAZINE:** *Why did you decide to transform the restaurant into Nirvana Kitchen & Pantry?*

**LINDSAY SMITH:** I'm a single mom and I want to be able to maintain my kids' lifestyles—you know, get them from school, get them to bed, do the whole mom thing. ... [Now,] I get to design my business around my life, not my life around my business.

**LBM:** *What do you enjoy most about Laguna Beach?*

**LS:** I think what's really unique about it is you would never know the wealth of most people here. ... We all just want similar things. We want to be loved, we want to make a difference, we want to know that what we do matters, and Laguna, I think, captures that in a very holistic way.

**LBM:** *Where do you visit around town?*

**LS:** It's usually with my kids and my dog. I have a 2-year-old lab, so we often go to the dog park here in town. We go to the beach, usually to Divers Cove or Fisherman's Cove. ... We really like going to Oliver's [Osteria]—[chef] Erik [De Marchi] is a good friend of mine. My mom's birthday is on Sunday so we're going to South of Nick's. And sometimes Starfish [Laguna], we'll go to for lunch or dinner, if we're going out.

**LBM:** *What tips do you have for at-home holiday meal prep?*

**LS:** It's all in the planning of what you can prepare in advance—not of the food, but of the ingredients that go into the final product. ... [For Thanksgiving,] we started brining our turkeys on Monday night, ... and Monday and Tuesday, we were prepping our veggies for the stuffing. ... My task list is what can be done today, what can be done two days before and what can be done the day before or day of. Then just work through that list.

**LBM:** *How can home chefs incorporate fresh ingredients into holiday dishes?*

**LS:** When I plan my menus, it's always around the seasons, and my routine is I make a list in categories of grain, of vegetable and of protein, of the things that are in season naturally. ... Start with your protein so it's like the main star of it and then rotate things around it that will pair well—pomegranate seeds or dates or figs, those little elements that can fit in. ■