

Wine & Dine / Ceviche

Creating the Cure

ENJOY FRESH FARE THIS SUMMER WITH THESE LOCAL CEVICHE VARIETIES.

By ASHLEY RYAN



Ahi tuna ceviche, marinated in lime, at South of Nick's

Mention raw fish and most will certainly think you're talking sushi. But as ceviche continues to gain popularity, prepared using a variety of different types of seafood, you'll find that it's all over the menus in Laguna Beach.

Though technically not "uncooked," the dish typically uses citrus to cure the fish, which breaks apart the amino acids in the protein without heat and also allows the ingredients to absorb the juice's sweet-and-sour essence. Plus, it's nutritious and easy to enjoy on-the-go.

"It's a health-conscious choice, low in fat and calories yet rich in protein and nutrients—perfect for Laguna's active lifestyle," says Omar Gonzalez, executive

chef at South of Nick's.

Unwind while sampling fresh ceviche at these local eateries, all of which offer views of the sparkling ocean, or take your meal to go and eat right on the sand as you soak up the summer sun.

SOUTH OF NICK'S

Among the lineup of Mexican favorites, from tacos and taquitos to enchiladas, is a hidden gem: the ahi tuna ceviche. Wild-caught tuna is marinated in lime then prepared as ordered with baby heirloom tomatoes, serrano peppers, diced red onion, cucumber, sliced avocado, pickled onion and another squeeze of citrus. Finished with micro cilantro, olive

oil and a sprinkle of French sea salt, the recipe was inspired by the traditional ceviche served in Gonzalez's hometown of Michoacán, Mexico. "Highlighting local flavors, our ceviche [also] provides a taste of the region," he says. "... Whether enjoyed at a beachfront restaurant or a picnic by the shore, our vibrant ceviche enhances the relaxed dining experience that Laguna Beach is known for." (949-715-3717; nicksrestaurants.com)

THE DECK ON LAGUNA BEACH

The Pacific ceviche at The Deck is a light yet satisfying option to enjoy from the eatery's patio. Listen to the waves crash as you indulge in this vibrant dish,



made with local halibut marinated in both lemon and lime juice. "That is the key to this ceviche: utilizing the freshest fish and marinating it to order, then finishing it with fresh tomatoes and [shaved] onion," says Rainer Schwarz, The Deck's executive chef and partner. "When you're dining on the sands of the Pacific, you want to dine on the freshest ocean-to-table fare, and this local halibut doesn't get any fresher." A classic presentation, the halibut definitely stands out with a coating of cilantro-lime dressing to pack it full of fresh flavor. (949-755-8788; deckonlaguna.com)

COYOTE GRILL

For a unique take on this trend—especially for those who have trouble deciding what to order—try the ceviche trio at Coyote Grill, which allows you to taste all three of the eatery's offerings. Each version is marinated in lime juice and presented in its own dish alongside crisp corn chips. The refreshing



Clockwise from bottom left: octopus ceviche at Bodega Laguna Cocina & Cantina; halibut ceviche at The Deck on Laguna Beach; Coyote Grill's ceviche trio; white shrimp and crab ceviche at Las Brisas

shrimp variety mixes pico de gallo, onion, cucumber and serrano chiles with the shellfish before it's topped with cilantro and fresh avocado while the blue crab iteration contains red snapper and pico de gallo as well as a cucumber garnish. However, the main attraction is the fresh Baja ceviche. "This was my father's favorite ceviche—[it's] his recipe," says Desiree Gomez, owner of the family-run establishment. It also features red snapper, a type of rockfish, but is topped with a healthy dollop of sour cream. (949-499-4033; coyotegrill.tv)

BODEGA LAGUNA COCINA & CANTINA

Spanish octopus has long been gracing menus up and down the California coastline, typically served grilled as an appetizer accompanied with other fresh and flavorful ingredients. But at Bodega Laguna, it's the star of a ceviche dish crafted with cucumber, red onion, cilantro and lime as well as habanero chile and other peppers that add a little heat. "The octopus is cured in lemon juice and left to sit for a few hours," says chef Angel Velazquez. "Then we toss the octopus and chopped ingredients and spices in a bowl, adjust the seasoning to

taste and serve chilled." Presented with tortilla chips for scooping all of these mouthwatering elements together, it's a fun twist on classic fish or shrimp varieties, combining tender octopus with sweet, zesty and spicy flavor profiles. (949-715-1002; bodegalaguna.com)

LAS BRISAS

A table at Las Brisas is always in demand, especially given its locale atop the bluffs above Main Beach. But the cuisine speaks for itself, and that includes the house-made white shrimp and crab ceviche. Perfect as a shareable plate, starter or snack, this bright dish is especially ideal on hot summer days. According to chef Samantha DeLeon, the shrimp is blanched in a liquid made of fresh lemons and oranges, whole black pepper and spices, then tossed with jicama, pickled onion and avocado in a spicy sauce made from cucumber, lime and serrano chiles. The finishing touch is a topping of pickled red onion and cilantro. "The jicama in the dish gives it a delightful crunch and sweetness," DeLeon says. "The crisp texture contrasts nicely with the softness of the seafood, adding another layer of dimension to the dish." (949-497-5434; lasbrisaslagunabeach.com) ■

ASHLEY RYAN

TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF THE DECK ON LAGUNA BEACH; MIDDLE AND RIGHT: ASHLEY RYAN; BOTTOM LEFT: SAMANTHA WHARTON