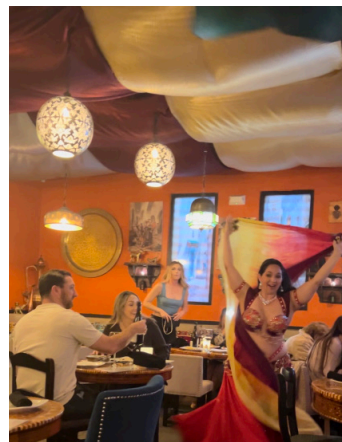


# TASTE OF THE TOWN



From left: Casablanca The Restaurant's dining room; couscous dish on an intricate wood table; tea; and belly dancing performance

## SPICE THINGS UP

TAKE YOUR TASTE BUDS ON A FLAVORFUL CULINARY ADVENTURE THROUGH MOROCCO, ALGERIA AND SPAIN AT CASABLANCA THE RESTAURANT.

BY ASHLEY RYAN

Tucked away on the edge of town lies Casablanca The Restaurant, an exotic eatery hidden in plain sight. The intricate exterior offers no window views to the inside, adding to the air of mystery as you step inside.

Diners will rejoice as their eyes take in the authentic decor, from the metal and glass lanterns and colorful tapestries hanging from the ceiling to intricately patterned pillows resting on the seats and golden plates adorning the vibrant red walls—all set to the sounds of traditional music that is thousands of years old.

But the excitement doesn't end there. One of the most compelling aspects of dining at Casablanca, which got its start in Costa Mesa before moving to the western end of Newport Beach a year ago, is the live entertainment. Enjoy belly or flamenco dancing or piano music on Friday and Saturday nights, adding an extra special touch to the meal while further delving into the cultures represented at the eatery.

The captivating interior will make you feel right at home as you peruse the menu, which will take you on a cultural journey with cuisines hailing from Morocco, Algeria and Spain. Start with a Champagne cocktail, like the Velour d'Abriocot, which combines the sparkling wine with a

### CASABLANCA THE RESTAURANT

6800 W. Coast Highway

949-423-7038; restaurant-casablanca.com

Hours: 4-9 p.m. Sunday and Tuesday through Thursday; 4-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday (with entertainment beginning at 7 p.m.); closed Monday

cognac-marinated apricot, or the Nightingale, which infuses hints of black raspberry. You can also opt for a glass of high-quality French wine or fruity Iberian sangria.

Prepare your palate for the meal ahead with a bowl of the harira soup, a flavorful blend of lentils, chickpeas, tomato, lemon and cilantro. Pair it with the Algerian Kemiya platter to sample a little bit of everything: grilled merguez, a sausage made from lamb; marinated olives; bourek, which are fried pastry rolls stuffed with beef or vegetables; eggplant puree; cucumbers; carrots marinated with cumin; hummus and fresh-baked pita bread. Everything here, in fact, is made from scratch, ensuring that you get a healthy meal that is both pleasing to the senses and authentic to the culture it represents.

When it comes time to tuck into the entrees,

the restaurant presents two types of signature dishes. Its tagines, which hail from North Africa, are cooked in a special earthenware pot—similar to a Dutch oven—in order to slow braise the meat in its own sauce. Casablanca offers varieties such as lemon chicken, vegetable lamb, and fish, but the tender honey lamb is a favorite among guests, simmered in sweet honey and spices along with apricots and prunes.

Traditional couscous dishes are also served, centered around proteins such as chicken, beef, merguez sausage, lamb shank or shrimp. But you can't go wrong with the Couscous Royale, which allows you to taste a variety of meats by layering grilled beef and chicken skewers plus merguez and stewed vegetables over the pasta (which has a rice-like texture).

For a sweet finish to the meal, there are three options. Try the creme brulee with an optional shredded coconut topping, whole dates stuffed with rich almond paste or baklava, an Algerian version of baklava that contains layers of flaky dough with ground almonds, drenched in honey after baking. Don't be surprised if a steaming pot of tea makes its way to your table as well, ending your night with the same warmth and comfort you'll find throughout your Casablanca experience. NBM