

Volume XVI, Issue 4, October 2011

PENINSULA PEOPLE

Little Company CEO Liz Dunne
The business of Toys, Bernie Baird-Brown
Human Space Activity Madhu Thangavelu
Checks vs. Bonds Stuart Chaussee
King of the Courtroom Bob Courtney
Attorneys Guide
Real Estate Out Guide

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Senior executive chef Robert Bell.
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Mar'Sel executive chef Michael Fiorelli. Photo courtesy of Mar'Sel



Executive Chef Enrico Okubo.
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Senior executive chef Jesse Souza.
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The Peninsula palate

Local chefs find Peninsula diners health conscious, but easily seduced

by Richard Foss

Taste buds are as individual as fingerprints. This might seem to indicate that predicting what people will order at restaurants is doomed to fail. Nevertheless, there is such thing as regional flavor and I thought it might be interesting to ask local chefs if there is a South Bay taste.

Michael Fiorelli

Michael Fiorelli of Mar'Sel at the Terranea in Palos Verdes has been surprised at how well exotic meats have been received — with one exception.

"I'm selling all sorts of things — pork cheeks, octopus. The surprising thing that sold like mad was lamb tongue. I put it in a salad, and people went wild. We put liver and onions on the menu one night, just as a retro thing. We couldn't make them fast enough. What have I tried that

didn't work? Head cheese. We were trying to add charcuterie to the restaurant, cured meats, liver mousse, and most of it went very well, but we just couldn't give away the head cheese. It was the biggest flop I had."

Fiorelli thinks that he and other South Bay chefs are benefitting from media that have put obscure dishes under the spotlight.

"People are so into food these days — they see these shows on the food network, everybody is reading about chefs and watching shows about cooking, about traveling all over the world for food. They're getting educated, and they're excited about dining. TV does misinform them sometimes, but it gets them interested."

Diners are also health conscious, right up to the point where they actually order something.

"We have people who look over the menu before coming in and tell us they want to be

sure they can eat healthy. They want to see things with no fat, lots of vegetables, but when I put something fried on the menu, it's the biggest seller. They like having options, but what people say and what they do can be very contradictory."

Asked about introducing new items to the relatively conservative Peninsula dining scene, Fiorelli reveals a careful strategy.

"We're bringing out new ingredients and getting people accustomed to them. People in Palos Verdes, you have to give them a fastball down the middle, not a curve ball. I'll get an idea for something and I'll introduce pieces of the dish, and then bring them all together. I can do that because I have a lot of repeat diners - I've built up a rapport, I can say trust me and try this. About 75 percent of our customers are locals, not hotel guests."

"We're gradually moving toward grazing, but in Palos Verdes it will take longer. Many times we're hosting people who haven't seen each other in a while, and they like to order something that they share around the table. I think it builds a sense of intimacy, somehow."

"We sell a lot of desserts, mostly rich chocolate items. Fruit based items sell too - a fresh plum sorbet, a blueberry crisp, something delicate rather than just a bowl of fruit. On the other hand, this summer we offered a bowl of iced cherries with mint chocolate chip ice cream, and it was one of our biggest sellers. My manager Neil convinced me to do it. I doubted it would sell, but decided, okay, I'm willing to prove you wrong."

Robert Bell

The restaurant that has been at the forefront of local dining trends for decades is of course Chez Melange, where chef Robert Bell has made hits of some very unusual items. Bell also heads up the kitchens at his gastropub Bouzy's, that shares space with Chez Melange in Riviera Village and Mama Terrano's in Rolling Hills Estates.

"If things are priced moderately, people will order them just to see what they are. I can sell fried watermelon rinds at Bouzy's, and people freak out over them, they love them. Same with fried pig's ears. We have found that if we call the pig's ears chicharones, they sell better than when we call them pig's ears. We wanted to play around with them because they are available now - five years ago if I called my meat company and said 'send me some pig's ears', they would've hung up. It's one of the only upsidies of the recession - chefs being creative and using the whole animal, taking advantage of exotic but inexpensive cuts."

Bell has a current passion that unfortunately hasn't caught on with diners.

"I'm really into savory cupcakes right now - things like spaghetti and meatball cupcakes, eggplant parmesan cupcakes, falafel and chicken cupcakes. I've done shrimp hash quesadilla cupcakes, a meatloaf cupcake with piped potato on the top sprinkled with vegetable confetti - it looked just like a cupcake. I'm having a lot of fun with those and they're

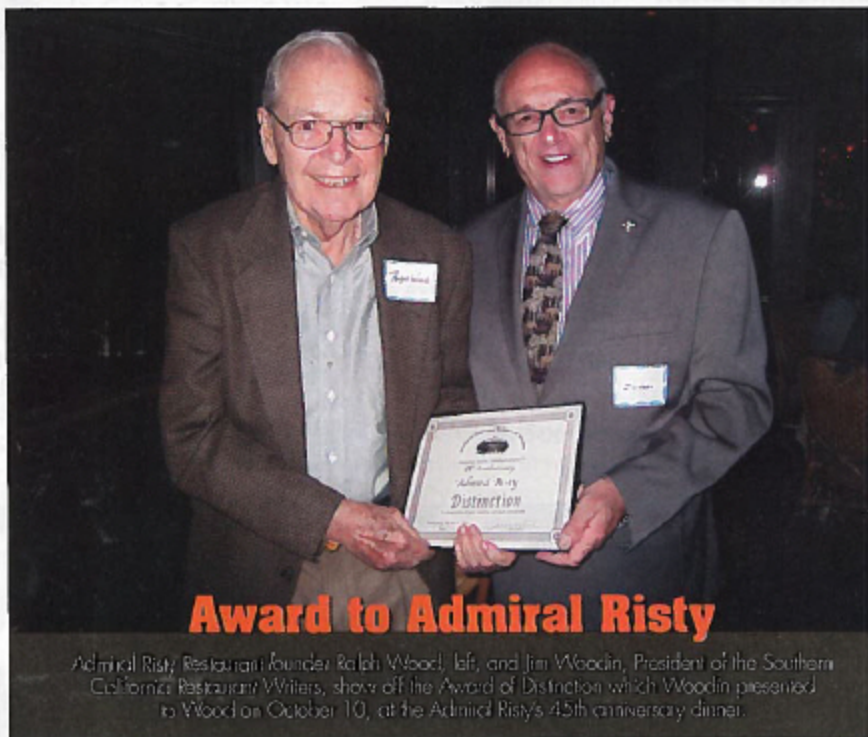
really delicious, but people just don't get it. If I serve them as a party or a charity event, people just freak out over them. Maybe if I changed the name, they'd sell."

Bell has also noticed the South Bay's wariness about salt, and he has an answer.

"When I'm in Europe, or for that matter in New York, the food is almost always too salty. I think that a lot of West Side chefs who have trained in Europe or faithfully follow traditional recipes might carry over that tendency. At my restaurant Mama Terrano's I don't have salt and pepper shakers on the tables; I

serve them on cornmeal crepes, with blackberries on the side. I knew a few people would like it, but I had no idea it would take off like this. People who wouldn't normally order duck try it because they're intrigued by the preparation, and we sell out frequently."

"Last year we ran a special for restaurant week. We brined a chop and then coated with spices and cane sugar and glazed it with maple and Dijon. We called it sugar and spice pork chop, served it with homemade apple sauce and bacon and potato hash. We sold many and got so many requests that we h



Award to Admiral Risty

Admiral Risty Restaurant founder Robert Bell, left, and Jim Woodlin, President of the Southern California Restaurant Writers, show off the Award of Distinction which Woodlin presented to Bell on October 10, at the Admiral Risty's 45th anniversary dinner.

put what I think is the right amount of salt in it, and I want people to at least taste it first."

Asked about the South Bay palate, Bell said simplicity is the future, at least in the short term.

"I think people in the South Bay are becoming more conservative about what they eat, not less. In times of worry, of economic stress, they go to comfort food - meatloaf, steak Diane, lasagna - those are selling now. I think people expect to get a little sizzle, a little twist on the traditional version, but people are looking for things that they recognize. That may not be what I want to be making, but that's where I see the public going, at least right now." Pen

Jesse Souza

Adventurous dining at a Redondo waterfront hotel restaurant might seem strange, but Jesse Souza of Baleen says that the stylish items are the big sellers.

"We make carnitas using duck meat and

to put it on the regular menu."

"I think the duck carnitas would work up Melrose, but the pork chop wouldn't. It's what I think of as uniquely South Bay, an unfamiliar take on a meat and potatoes dish. It satisfies the traditional appetite that many of our diners have, but very forward in its flavors. That's a key to the local palate - something with roots in American food, but bigger flavors."

Souza doesn't think that Redondo is particularly interested in the wilder edge of contemporary cuisine.

"The culinary world went with things like lobster corn dogs and molecular gastronomy but we haven't tried to do any of that here doesn't fit our restaurant or this vibe. I like riff on American classics, but not to the point of something campy like lobster corn dog. We've used a few of those techniques, but some sweet items and made them savory, a vice versa." ER