

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Review: In order to eat at Saline in Laguna Beach, you'll need to get a room

The all-day restaurant at the new Hotel Joaquin is one of the best new restaurants in Orange County. But it's strictly for overnight guests only.



Oysters with absinthe jelly and mignonette at Saline, the restaurant inside Hotel Joaquin in Laguna Beach (Photo by Brad A. Johnson, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Breakfast, lunch, dinner... it's all good. Saline in Laguna Beach is one of the coast's best new restaurants, even if most people can't or won't end up eating there.

Technically anyone can eat at Saline, but only if you book a room and stay overnight at Hotel Joaquin. This hotel restaurant is restricted to guests only. No exceptions.

The restriction stems from the hotel's business license, which accommodates overnight guests but doesn't allow the restaurant to operate as a public house for anyone who isn't staying on property. This is not completely unheard of — at least two hotels in Los Angeles operate with the same restriction. The big difference here, though, is that Saline is a [really, really good restaurant](#).



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Oysters with absinthe jelly and mignonette at Saline, the restaurant inside Hotel Joaquin in Laguna Beach (Photo by Brad A. Johnson, Orange County Register/SCNG)



The 22-room hotel opened in September on North Coast Highway just above Shaw's Cove in a former roadside eyesore that passersby might remember as the Motor Inn Laguna Beach. It took two years to strip the property down to its studs and rebuild it.

The hotel's new owners (who also own Palm Springs' Korakia Pensione) lured a very good chef, Leo Bongarra, from The Tower Bar in West Hollywood.

The restaurant is small by any standard. Even if you count the seven stools squeezed around the intimate lobby bar, the total number of seats at Saline adds up to fewer than 30. The dining tables are all confined to a narrow outdoor terrace, which is mostly covered and heated. The terrace overlooks the hotel's inner courtyard, with views of the ocean two blocks away.

My first goal after checking in is to sidle up to the bar and order some oysters. Good call. The oysters are kumomotos from the Pacific Northwest, paired with absinthe jelly and Champagne mignonette.

While not exactly slim pickings, lunch is limited to just a couple of sandwiches, a salad, and a few snacks like the oysters and a bowl of bone broth. I think the hotel expects most guests to frolic on the beach during the day (all rooms are stocked with beach towels and flippers). The most substantial item on the lunch menu is a steak salad, which is a colorful composition of medium-rare beef, heirloom beans and fresh-from-the-garden lettuces — perfect with a glass of rosé and an ocean breeze. The garden, by the way, is on the roof.

Dinner gets more interesting: octopus carpaccio with harissa and black garlic, crab gnocchi with gouda and macadamia nuts, skirt steak with smoked salt and pepper jus, all terrific. Best of all, however, is a [dish of perfectly seared scallops](#) bathing in coconut cream alongside a mound of black rice.

There's a subtle Moroccan undercurrent to some of the best dishes, including a flatbread appetizer, which is some sort of lavash that's heavily charred (imagine tortillas cooked over an open flame) and served with black bean hummus and pistachios.

They only have one dessert the night I dine, and I can't imagine anyone not wanting it: a decadent hazelnut chocolate pudding.

While lunch and dinner are both excellent, breakfast is even better. Breakfast is actually included with the price of a room (which starts at roughly \$220).

I don't usually start my day with a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, but the croque monsieur here is a beautiful sight first thing in the morning. Hidden within all that gooeyness is an unobtrusive hint of serrano chili.

The closest Saline gets to a traditional American breakfast is a plate of fried eggs with pork sausages and toast, but even this isn't quite what I'm expecting. The eggs are dusted with contrasting powders in shades of green and orange. I peg the latter as smoked paprika but the green? I have no idea. And the toast, which looks like dark rye, packs a clever sting of heat, which I attribute to the "cajun butter" slathered on top, but my waitress says, "No, that spice is not from the butter. That's definitely the toast."

The service is charming from start to finish. The same person who pours my coffee this morning is also the same person who checked me into the hotel yesterday afternoon. The person who made my cocktail last night is the same one helping me with my luggage on the way out. It's like visiting a friend's house. And if the music stops, it's up to you and everyone else in the room to get up and go flip the vinyl record and play the other side. The host is busy making drinks.

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