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THINGS TO DO > COAST MAGAZINE

Taste: Croque Monsieur caps a stay at Hotel Joaquin



Hotel Joaquin's restaurant Saline sizzles. Chef Leo Bongarra's Croque Monsieur is a delectable way to welcome the morning. (Photography by Ralph Palumbo)

It's a stormy winter's day, but you are in a cozy surf cabin. The fireplace is roaring as you peer out to the dark roiling ocean and place a vinyl record onto the turntable. What could be better? How about adding a mindfully tended full bar and a kitchen manned by a brilliant chef ...

So it was in January in Laguna Beach at the newly opened [Hotel Joaquin](#) and its 44-seat restaurant Saline, under the direction of Chef Leo Bongarra, sous chef Ko Teguchi and general manager Reinhard Neubert, each of whom welcomed us with a spirit of genuinely warm and expansive hospitality. The hotel and restaurant opened in October on a quiet residential strip of Coast Highway north of downtown Laguna. The boutique operation eschews a formal lobby in favor of a "living room," featuring a sofa, throw pillows and the aforementioned turntable and record collection, a feature also included in each of the guest rooms.

The restaurant and bar are only open to hotel guests. We highly recommend the regularly offered overnight specials that include dinner. An overnight stay for us included a Spanish-themed four-course dinner orchestrated by Bongarra, with wine pairings presented by Ted Gibson of Rabble Wine Co. of Paso Robles.

Our evening was magical: Dinner began with tapas of shrimp and mussels spackled with caviar, paired with a Rabble rosé. Alaskan cod in a romesco of toasted almonds and bell peppers came with a light sauvignon blanc in tow. A perfectly grilled Patagonian lamb chop on a bed of charred broccolini, served with an excellent grenache, appeared in advance of the seafood paella. Composed of tiny grains of black forbidden rice, studded with fresh peas, clams, mussels and tender baby squid, it matched the wintry seaborne evening perfectly. A lightly seductive hazelnut chocolate mousse in tandem with the Rabble merlot provided a harmonious final note to an excellent meal in a unique and unlikely coastal setting. We hobbled off to our room in a sweet fog of contented satiation.

By morning the skies had cleared and we resumed our place at the table on the terrace, now in feeble sunshine. While Saline's daily menus trend to the health-driven as befits the casual surf-spa atmosphere, as Chef Leo proclaimed, "I like yummy stuff! It has to be yummy!"

Hence our order of his croque monsieur, a richly layered homage to the classic French bistro dish. Each bite evaporated in a deceptively light pool of sauce gently spiked with serrano pepper. Yummy, indeed. ... Or as they say in the native land of croque monsieur, délicieux!

CROQUE MONSIEUR

Sauce ingredients:

1/4 cup mayonnaise (homemade)
2 egg yolks
1 whole egg
1 teaspoon chopped serrano pepper
2 finely chopped garlic cloves
1 tablespoon gruyere cheese (pinch)
Salt and fresh ground pepper to taste.

Assembling:

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Whisk together ingredients in order as listed. The consistency should be thick but still a little runny.

Place a slice of gruyere cheese on each side of a split brioche.

In a hot pan, sauté slices of ham to heat thoroughly.

Use butter or oil as needed.

Place ham on top of cheese and spread around 2 tablespoons of sauce on top, then close.

In a hot pan on low-to-medium heat add 1 tablespoon butter and 1 tablespoon oil, sear bread on both sides until golden brown.

Leave croque monsieur in pan and spread sauce on top generously. (A little dripping off the sides is OK!)

Place in oven for about 3 to 5 minutes.

HOTEL JOAQUIN – 985 N. Coast Highway, Laguna Beach 949.494.5294 :: hoteljoaquin.com

<https://www.ocregister.com/2019/03/04/taste/>