

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

EXECUTIVE DINING

Fifi Chao

New Chefs, Enriched Eateries Offer Fresh Opportunities

Bistro Comes Into Its Own, Plus OC's Best Indian Food

I mentioned two months ago that **Little Sparrow** in downtown Santa Ana had parted ways with its chef.

The sous chef, **Melissa Ortiz**, has guided the kitchen since then and has upped her influence on the food experience at this inviting local spot. Now she has been made executive chef.

She was born in Orange County and served seven years in the U.S. Army, where she found herself cooking with local ingredients for fellow soldiers during deployments in Africa. And a new passion was born.

Chef Ortiz, upon returning to civilian life, enrolled in culinary school. She was lucky enough to then land at the Michelin two-star **Melisse** restaurant in Santa Monica for a time and then at two prestigious hotels—the Emperor Hotel in Nimes, France, and The Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills—before coming to Little Sparrow.

Melissa's menu infuses influences from California and several diverse countries. Five highlights on her current one include: Galbi Hangar Steak with kimchi emulsion, radish, and eggplant puree; Yellowtail Carpaccio with a coconut aguachile sauce; Banh Mi with pork belly, pickled daikon, carrots, jalapeño and cilantro; Loco Moco with ground beef, brown gravy, fried egg and garlic rice; and half a Fried Chicken with spiced bourbon glaze and biscuits.

Dishes such as these are a bit edgy and certainly treats for the taste buds. Do try them.

Little Sparrow, from its debut, corralled the hearts of locals and serious diners will-natural jus.

The views from **Surf & Sand** always add to the majesty of oceanfront dining, just another reason to relish our lifestyle.

1555 S. Coast Highway, Laguna Beach,
(949) 376-2779.

ing to drive a distance for a different kind of food experience—small, unpretentious, sincere in its friendliness and with a menu that rang true about quality and interest. Then came the selection of the restaurant by Bravo TV chef **Tom Colicchio** as one of the 16 best new restaurants in America. Add a bunch of other accolades, a notable reputation for craft cocktails, and above all, chef Melissa's unique food, and you have a Class A dining experience.

300 N. Main St. Santa Ana, (714) 265-7640.

New Chef Cooks Local

Surf & Sand Resort in Laguna Beach has a new executive chef in **Ron Fougerey**.

He graduated from the Culinary Arts Program at Johnson & Wales University, then worked for almost seven years at the famous **Le Bec-Fin** restaurant in Philadelphia. He remained in the restaurant industry in Philadelphia but found the charms of coastal OC irresistible.

He says he's taking advantage of SoCal's abundance of fresh and fine ingredients and mentions a trio of his current dishes on the reworked menu. I'll soon be making my way into the main dining room, **Splashes**, and will try his Tartare of Albacore with pickled strawberries, jicama, cucumber ribbon, horseradish, and strawberry vinegar coulis; Wild King Salmon with black barley risotto, verjus emulsion, apple and watermelon radish salad; and Grilled Lamb Loin with celery root purée, cipollini and apple tatin, julienned Brussels sprouts and vana for me. I indulge in vegetable dishes quickly cooked with paneer, a homemade cheese cut into cubes. Warm Eggplant Salad with chat masala dressing—a spice powder mix; fresh Fish Tikka from the tandoori oven; Fish Malabar with mustard fennel;

Finest Indian Fare

I chose **Royal Khyber** as the Restaurant of the Year a long time ago, and if I were doing one of those special supplements right now, I would be tempted to repeat that designation. It is, you see, one of the best ethnic restaurants in our midst.

We love Indian food and have eaten at most of the Indian restaurants in this county and tried some in London, the home away from India for authentic cuisine of that genre. I like some of the things at various OC restaurants, but overall right now, Royal Khyber wins the prize for our palates and its sense of serenity and beauty.

I've now lost count of the number of non-Indian friends who thought they didn't like Indian food and completely changed their minds after I introduced them to the finesse of the food at Royal Khyber. A big joke is about one group of about a dozen people I took to the restaurant, insisting it would change their minds. They fell head over heels in love with the food, and now it's on their priority list all the time.

Many of the same dishes appear on every Indian restaurant menu, but that doesn't mean they taste the same. And there are specialties, of course, like Khyber's Nectar, which is chef/owner **Arun Puri's** lamb shanks, a truly secret recipe that results in the lamb cooked to perfection after 14 hours over the lowest possible heat.

It's been enthusiastically called an aphrodisiac by others—I simply say it's addictive. Another version of lamb is Rogan Josh, a well-known Indian classic emanating from Kashmir. It features a predominance of aromatic spices and browned onions mingling with the cubed lamb.

You should know that the spices used in Indian food are quite healthful, and when handled with the respect Arun gives them, it's a new day in eating what's good for you that tastes delicious at the same time.

Butter Chicken, high on my repeat list, is one of Northern India's renowned dishes, with a sleek blend of cream, butter and tomatoes in the aromatic sauce. Lobster Tail with carom seeds and a similar sauce is nir-

and Curried Mussels are also dishes likely to appear on my table.

The menu is fairly extensive. A wide variety of lunch plates on weekdays offer a way to taste two or three things at a time. There's an impressive lunch buffet from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Friday. You can taste chicken, fish, an array of vegetables and side dishes for one price. The buffet brunch has another fine selection of foods during the same hours on Sunday.

There are at least 10 kinds of naan—terrific tandoori-baked breads, plain or imbued with meat, cheeses, olives and more. I could make a meal on these alone. Well, perhaps an order of Arun's addictive Mango Chutney would also be likely.

I like that it has a full bar and a wine list very well suited to its cuisine.

I have about a dozen places that are my all-time favorites, restaurants that call to me over and over again. Royal Khyber is one of them. The food takes me to the top of my happy scale, and the beautiful, exotic surroundings deliver the finest version of relaxation.

1621 W. Sunflower Ave. in South Coast Plaza Village, Santa Ana, (714) 436-1010.

Winner Bistro

I'm newly enthused over **Back Bay Bistro** at Newport Dunes.

It surprises the senses with modern, flowing, innovative interior-exterior decor—walls of glass overlooking the water and popular patio seating—and the food of French chef **Bruno Massuger**. It used to be so casual and the food just so-so.

All that gradually changed, and now it's become a very worthy destination restaurant that keeps reeling in guests again and again after, like me, they come away from an unexpectedly swell dining experience.

The menu is as upscale and caringly presented as the food at many fine restaurants scattered about. Chef Bruno works closely with local purveyors, most of them rather close by. To match the food the wine list is now punctuated with about 50 selections from many of the world's best wine-produc-

ing regions. The big plus is that they are kept so affordable.

Picture-perfect plates kept coming to our table at a recent dinner shared with several friends. The Ahi Tower with avocado tucked in here and there; Duck Rillettes, a smooth duck pâté with a clever hoisin/stone fruit sauce; Grilled Asparagus and Burrata Salad; Pan-Seared Foie Gras with cider and shallot reduction; and Shrimp Cocktail with a slightly amped sauce got conversation going and taste buds alerted.

Sea Bass with green curry sauce; Herb-crusted Rack of Lamb; King Salmon with beer-bacon sauce; savory home-style Chicken Pot Pie; and Filet of Beef with the chef's own steak sauce also paraded onto our table. Some lovely little bundt cakes were a suitable finale.

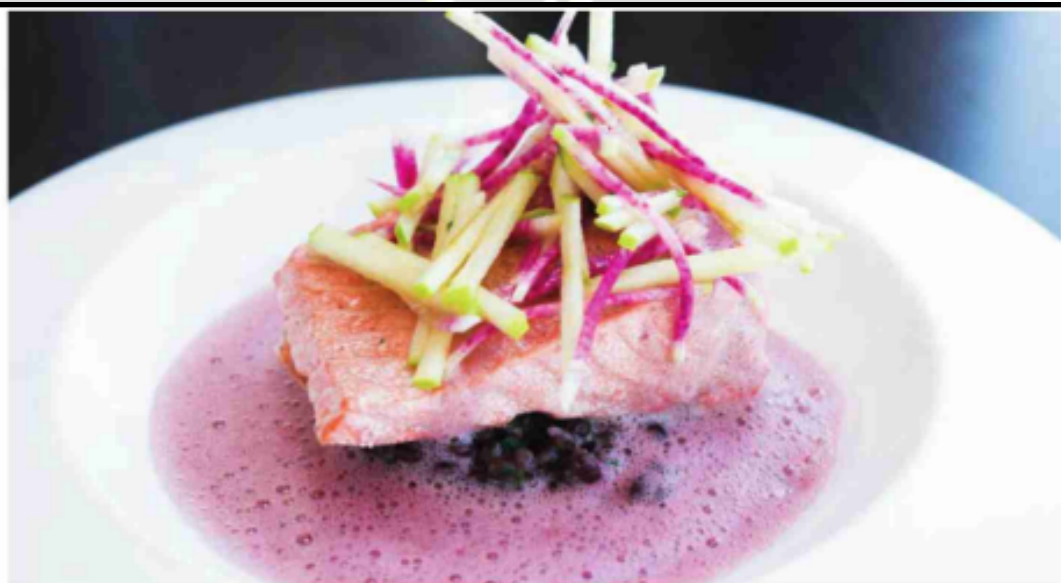
Last time, we dined al fresco on the recently added courtyard with views of the water and that particular California feeling we all love. But other meals have found me relaxing inside in the room with the retractable awning roof and sleek informal elegance. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as Saturday and Sunday Brunch. And you might want to hang out at the Happy Hour featuring a bunch of inexpensive small plates of food, plus discounted drinks.

1131 Back Bay Drive, Newport Beach,

(949) 729-1144.



Ortiz: new Little Sparrow executive chef developed her cooking chops in the Army



Wild King Salmon: Surf & Sand Resort dish with black barley risotto, verjus emulsion, apple and watermelon radish salad