

Brave New Eateries

THREE LOCAL RESTAURANTS BOLDLY LAUNCH IN THE MIDST OF THE PANDEMIC.

If restaurateurs had been able to gaze into a crystal ball, they may not have planned to open restaurants in 2020. Timing, as we've learned this year, is just as important as location and quality. Sometimes, though, having both determination and confidence in a dining concept can still win the day. Despite the odds stacked against them, three new restaurants have opened locally, and the talent running them have chosen to pursue their dreams.

In fact, the team behind **Nella Kitchen & Bar** (nellakitchen.com), located inside the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn in Los Olivos, is thankful they decided to take the plunge and launch their long-planned eatery. Years of experience in the hospitality industry helped smooth the way for Nella, headed by owner-partner Luca Crestanelli, who is also owner-partner and executive chef of S.Y. Kitchen in Santa Ynez. Along with his capable lineup, the restaurant is a collaboration with the Fess Parker family.

"Locals and Santa Ynez Valley visitors are looking for an indulgent escape these days, something to look forward to," says

Crestanelli. "We kept getting questions about when Nella would be opening. The anticipation was real. We could have held off a bit longer but decided to take the opportunity of Santa Barbara County's phased reopening plans to slowly go through our own opening phases."

The restaurant and bar, currently in a soft opening phase, offers dinner Thursdays through Mondays. It will add full lunch service, expand the dinner menu, and open seven days a week when conditions allow.

Nella draws Santa Ynez Valley locals as well as





Comestible relief at Nella Kitchen & Bar in Los Olivos (from opposite, far left): Open-air porches provide for elegant outdoor dining. Menu items like Battuta di Tonno, which features pounded ahi, showcase local ingredients. The earth-toned bar serves up wine, beer, and cocktails. The Wheelbarrow, made with Beefeater Gin, Lillet Blanc, and Giffard White Crème de Cacao, is one of the specialties.



roasted baby carrots to Nidi, a rolled pasta dish with béchamel, prosciutto *cotto* (cooked), mushrooms, parmigiano, and mozzarella. Seafood options might include such dishes as Arctic Char punched up with cilantro and lime and served with creamed corn.

Overseeing the notable beverage program is William Perbellini, who curates a classic and

weekend wine tasters and road trippers, who enjoy outdoor white-tablecloth dining on the airy front and side porches, amid heaters and flickering candlelight. The restaurant's interior, designed by the owners with partial assistance from Pearson McGee at Santa Ynez General, combines big-city sophistication with a rustic wine country-chic aesthetic. Earth tones and warm woods hold sway in the dining room and bar, which feature a pleasing mix of mid-century modern pieces, vintage finds, and soft leather chairs by the fireplace in the adjoining lounge.

The menu highlights the region's top-notch ingredients and will evolve while continuing to deliver elevated comfort food through a contemporary Italian lens. Handcrafted Roman-style pizza, or *pinsa*, is crispy, light, and perfect for sharing. A standout is the Bianca pinsa topped with mozzarella, parmigiano, and challerhocker cheeses and caramelized blonde onions.

Among the satisfying starters are grilled blue prawns with frisée, avocado, grapefruit, and mint and the simple but perfectly executed take on a Caesar salad with chopped hazelnuts, bleu d'Auvergne cheese, and lemony Caesar dressing. Also offered is an extensive cheese list, with charcuterie options from both Italy and Alle-Pia Fine Cured Meats in Atascadero.

Main dishes range from melt-in-your-mouth Wagyu Short Ribs with creamy mashed potatoes and



The Pastrami Smoked Salmon Sandwich is among the creative menu offerings at the recently opened Peasants Feast in Solvang.

specialty cocktail list that has something for every taste, along with creative zero-proof cocktails. A house specialty is the refreshing Parker Spritz made with prosecco, Aperol, Amaro Nonino, passion fruit, and hibiscus tea. The wine list spotlights Santa Barbara County as well as international vintages, and beer from the Central Coast and Italy is available by the bottle or on draft.

Another opening to take note of is **Peasants Feast** (peasantsfeast.com) in Solvang, which represents >



a dream come true for owners Michael and Sarah Cherney. Though some restaurateurs might have shied away from starting out during a global pandemic (and on April 1 to boot), the Cherneys forged ahead and haven't looked back.

"Opening during a pandemic, we really had no idea what to expect from one day to the next," says Michael, the chef. "But luckily, we had the support of our community to get us through this period and the opening of our restaurant, one day at a time."

Chef Cherney, whose résumé includes stints at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon in Las Vegas and work in the WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) program, has high standards for quality food made with a farm-to-table devotion. He buys bread from bakers in Solvang and Los Alamos, produce from nearby farms, and sustainably caught fish from Santa Barbara fishermen.

Located in a glass-paned former greenhouse in the heart of town, the restaurant started with takeout and recently added patio dining. The current menu offers tacos (local sea bass, carnitas, and mushroom options), burgers, sandwiches, salads, sides, and family meals like Whole Fried Free-Range Chicken. The chef plans to introduce more dinner entrées and shareable plates as conditions allow. Don't forget to try the ice cream sandwich with ice cream made by the Cherneys' daughter, Reina.

Opened in late September in The Commons at Calabasas, **Porta Via Calabasas** (portaviarestaurants.com) became the third outpost of the popular California bistro and bar with locations already in Beverly Hills and Pacific Palisades. The restaurant is open daily for lunch, dinner, and weekend brunch. Outdoor dining on the spacious patio, takeout, and delivery are offered for now, with the addition of indoor dining when permitted.



At the new Porta Via Calabasas, most seating is on the outdoor patio, which was designed to evoke a vacation spot. The Seafood Salad (above, left) features local sustainably sourced ingredients.

"We are so excited to open our doors to the Calabasas community and are grateful to our loyal family of patrons for their continued support throughout these troubling times," says restaurateur and co-founder Peter Garland.

The name Porta Via, Italian for "take away," is apt, as the restaurant's lively vibe and decor can shift diners into vacation mode. The design, by Sophie Goineau, blends eye-catching black-and-white tile floors, colorful striped cushions on large banquettes, wooden tables, and ceiling fans. Most of the fixtures were sourced from small business vendors throughout Southern California, in an effort to help them rebuild during the COVID-19 era.

The menu draws upon Italian culinary inspirations while spotlighting locally sourced produce, meat, poultry, and sustainable seafood. Breakfast and brunch highlights include Huevos Rancheros and Grand Marnier French Toast, and lunch and dinner hits are the Organic Kale & Quinoa Salad, Grilled Ōra King Salmon, and Grilled Skirt Steak.

As if opening a restaurant at any time isn't hard enough, these three new establishments represent the dedication to craft and business that restaurateurs are bringing to our neighborhoods during exceptionally difficult times. And like any other time in history, a new favorite dish might just be waiting at any of them. ♦