

SANTA BARBARA

LIFE & STYLE

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016

HOME *for the* HOLIDAYS

Vol 4, Issue 8 | \$5.99



To be
Together



Convivo Spritz, Paper Plane, Paloma, Dolcezza

Photographed by Silas Fallstich

Written by Alexandra Sharova



It's a typical fall evening in Santa Barbara—the breeze is a desired 70 degrees, the sky is illuminated with golden hour rays, and my date and I are starving. We arrive at Convivo and are met with a warm, inviting smile from the hostess, setting the tone for the evening. This addition to the local foodie scene is nestled inside the newly-renovated and stunning Santa Barbara Inn, across from scenic East Beach.

Between a lovely outdoor patio that features a fireplace and killer beach view, and the dining room, we opt for a deep-navy hued booth, inside. For the most part the color palette sticks to a relaxing beige with modern hints of blues and wood accents to keep from getting bland. We sit on the same side of the table, enjoying the views of the beach to our right and the busy open kitchen, which elevates the restaurant to modern-cool standards, straight ahead. I dart for the cocktail menu (it's been a long day) and am completely lost on what to order—every drink sounds sublime. With a little help from our friendly waiter, who reassured me it was okay to get a second round, I settle on the Fumo while my date opts for an updated Paloma.

Although the hotel pays homage to the classic Spanish architecture that defines Santa Barbara's aesthetic, Chef Peter McNee turns West, to Italy, for the foundation of the restaurant. The name, Convivo, is no accident; it means “to be together” or “come together,” and while it relates to the rich Euro-fusion influences of the menu, I firmly believe it spreads to a literal sense of the food bringing diners together.

The drinks are flawlessly presented before us. Mine is a thirst-quenching gin, watermelon and basil refresher that camouflages the biting juniper berry flavor with ease, while my man is pleasantly surprised by hints of mescal and guava. We find ourselves impressed by the details Convivo clearly prides itself in, like the mini clothespin securing garnish to the Champagne coup of the La Paloma, and the chandeliers which seem to hint at the specialty uni that's sprinkled throughout the menu.





Being Santa Barbarians, and thus obsessed with fresh fish, we couldn't resist an ahi order. And once again the details prevail, this time in the form of black squid ink-infused chips—a chic alternative to typical wonton crisps. The tartare's light texture melts in my mouth, mixing with an unexpected kick of juicy pickled onions, rich pine nuts, and a subtle pinch of horseradish to complete the app. In the middle of devouring our ahi, the octopus pork belly appetizer is placed on the table—it's sitting atop a bed of wild frisée with a soft-cooked egg blanket keeping it warm. Regardless of whether you think pork belly is overdone or “trying too hard,” this dish is delish.

Two appetizers deep I start to notice a pattern—everything is fresh and natural. No, not in the sense that the ingredients are ripened, raised and paired to perfection, which they obviously are in such a restaurant. I am referring to the lack of over-dressing, over-seasoning and general camouflaging of the components of each dish. Embracing the town's naturey feel and obsession with organic healthy food, the Chef lets true flavors take center stage and shine. My epiphany is interrupted by the second round of drinks (yay!)—the Dolcezza and the Paper Plane. Mine is a delectable blend of vodka, muted-lemon, honey, and the one flavor I can never resist, lavender. His is a full-bodied bourbon with an elderberry flower crown garnish that has a firework-like kick of smoky goodness that keeps on going and going.

Since the cuisine is rooted in Italian classics ordering a pizza went without saying. The Fig, topped with caramelized onions, a creamy fontina cheese, mouth-watering pancetta and of course fresh figs, is authentic in presentation and a hit in taste. For our main course we stick with our seafood theme, perhaps inspired by the ocean view, and order the Pesce Misto. Warning: it's big! Luckily the plate makes up for its size with a light and healthy mixture of everything from clams to octopus and white fish to jumbo shrimp, all grilled in a zesty salsa verde with shishito peppers for a touch of heat. After all that I feel satisfied, but not stuffed, which is likely from the lack of dousing each item in ridiculous amounts of sauces that conceal real flavors.

My favorite part of every meal is here: dessert! Although I typically steer clear of anything with the word “candy bar” in it at a fine restaurant, I reluctantly followed the waiter's recommendation and got the Chocolate Caramel Bar. My goodness it does not disappoint, not one bit. Its luscious consistency paired with a dollop of hazelnut ice cream is heavenly—so much so that I wish I ordered two portions.

After being “brought together” into a cuddle at our booth by an incredible meal and two deceptively-strong drinks we leave with smiling faces and happy bellies, ready to return for the next season's menu.✕



Convivo
901 E Cabrillo Boulevard
Santa Barbara, CA
805-845-6789
convivorestaurant.com