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Santa Barbara's Convivo Serves up 'Nomad Italian' Cuisine

R. Daniel Foster · Tuesday, October 24th, 2023

I originally wanted to have dinner at Convivo, a waterfront restaurant tucked inside the Santa Barbara Inn, but I had to do breakfast instead, which turned out to be fortuitous. Spilling out onto a front patio, the establishment has postcard-perfect views of the waterfront—all framed by swaying palms. The crisp morning was perfect for outdoor dining.

Convivo's entry sign / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The restaurant was created in 2016 by chef Peter McNee and business partner Larry Mindel, a 40-year veteran of the restaurant business who co-founded Spectrum Foods while transforming Los Angeles' failing Chianti restaurant into a prizewinner. Captained by Mindel, Spectrum created 14 trend-setting restaurants in California. Mindel also acquired Il Fornaio, "negotiating the deal on the back of a napkin," according to Convivo's press materials. Il Fornaio eventually operated 22 restaurants that brought in $150 million annually.

Chef McNee terms his cuisine as being "nomad Italian." His sources of inspiration are international, all anchored by a coastal Italian tradition. In 1999, McNee moved to California from Minnesota to attend the California Culinary Academy. During school, he worked at Jeremiah Tower's famed Stars restaurant near San Francisco's City Hall. There, he nurtured relationships with local farmers.

A morning cup of matcha tea with a postcard-perfect view of the Pacific / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

After a stint in California wine country, McNee spent a year in Italy working at Ristorante Campagnola in Salo, and he also worked at Hotel Bel Soggiorno in San Gimignano. During his free time and in between stints, the chef often stayed with host families as he travel-cooked his way around Italy, falling in love with the cuisine.

McNee took all of that experience and poured it into the creation of Convivo, which loosely translates as “feast.”

“We did a complete gut remodel to build this restaurant,” McNee says. “It was a five-year-plus process. The former kitchen was up on the fourth floor, and now we’re on the ground floor, just off the lobby and pool area. The previous restaurant was wholly indoors and carpeted.”

Convivo’s breakfast fare: an exotic assortment / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The Santa Barbara Inn opened over 60 years ago and underwent a complete restoration beginning in 2013, opening back up in 2016 along with Convivo. “When they did that overall hotel redesign, they really went for it, blending in a North African, Casablanca, Moroccan feel. Also Southern Spanish certainly for the hotel’s exterior,” McNee says. “That look spills right over to the restaurant.”

For dinner, McNee recommends the spit roasted Chicken flavored with harissa, charmoula, and olives, and garnished with almonds with a side of cauliflower. The dinner menu also includes wood-fired oven pizza, a variety of fresh seafood, grilled meats, and homemade pasta.

Convivo’s patio dining / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

For breakfast, McNee recommended the Furikake eggs, which we sampled. The eggs are served with shiitake and oyster mushrooms alongside a flaky brioche, baked to perfection. On his advice, we also tried the heirloom tomato tartine—also served with that signature buttery brioche, along with two fried eggs and labneh. Both of the exotic dishes played well off each other. The fare wasn’t the basic breakfast sandwich, which McNee joked not to order. Not because it’s poorly done, but because it’s fairly standard. Still, it’s on the menu because some want it.

Convivo can be booked for private events—either in the 90-seat Montecito Room, the main dining room, or on the outdoor patio with fire features and expansive ocean views.

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