

Business



LETTUCE WRAPS WITH chicken, cucumber and cilantro at the Coliseum Pool & Grill at the Resort at Pelican Hill. The hotel is out to attract locals as well as overnight guests.

Not just chasing tourist trade



Photos by Scott Smeltzer | TimesOC

CHEF JONAH AMODT prepares barrel-aged acquerello risotto with forest mushrooms at the Andrea restaurant at the Resort at Pelican Hill.

The Resort at Pelican Hill courts the local crowd in addition to overnight guests in a new initiative by the upscale hotel.

BY KATHLEEN LUPPI

Nearby residents may think The Resort at Pelican Hill caters only to tourists, but in the last six months the upscale Newport Coast hotel has launched initiatives aimed at attracting neighbors for dinner, drinks and activities.

"At the resort, we have our locals," said Managing Director Tom Donovan. "We want people to celebrate their special occasions with us, but we also

want customers to come in on a regular basis, where the atmosphere is relaxed, a bit understated and so fun that they want to come back for that great meal."

"To be successful, it has to be approachable."

Preparing to cater increasingly to locals meant holding a meeting with resort staff, chefs and executives to research consumer demands and see

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SIGNATURE PRETZEL BREAD from the Pelican Grill.

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Tom Donovan

PELICAN

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potential for new directions.

The result: Diversifying the menus at the seven restaurants and cafes by catering to customers' changing flavor, ingredient and wellness preferences, cutting prices 10% and offering select specials and complimentary desserts or appetizers.

Many local residents perceive Pelican as catering only to out-of-town guests or skilled golfers, Donovan said, adding he and the staff are working to demystify the resort and its offerings.

A guest may arrive, drop off car keys at the valet for complimentary parking, stroll the grounds for panoramic views and dine at one of the award-winning restaurants with menu options priced similarly to nearby competitors.

Donovan, who joined the Irvine Co. resort in March, has more than two decades of luxury hospitality experience, having worked as managing director of Grand Wailea, a Waldorf Astoria Resort in Maui.

There, he led a \$30-million renovation in 2014 and 2015.

"People want to go into a place with energy, eat an easy meal of familiar food, pay a good price and have it (be) memorable," he said.

According to Avendra, a Maryland-based hospitality procurement services provider, customers are looking for locally sourced food options, plant-based dishes and selections that cater to restricted diets, such as plant-based, paleo, vegan, gluten- and allergen-free. This means a partial transition from traditional menus rooted in proteins and carbs to vegetables, legumes and unprocessed fare. (Protein-based comfort foods continue to be served alongside contemporary offerings.)

Current offerings include a \$22 poke bowl at the Coliseum Pool & Grill served with edamame, cucumber and brown rice, a \$13 plate of lettuce wraps with chicken, cucumber



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THAI FETTUCCINE PASTA with Angus beef, oven-dried tomatoes, shiitake mushrooms, onions and curry sauce at the Coliseum Pool & Grill.



POKE BOWL with brown rice, cucumber, avocado, edamame and scallions.

and cilantro, and a \$13 grilled vegetable wrap at Pelican Grill & Bar prepared with portobello

mushrooms, zucchini, romaine leaves, ricotta and sundried tomato pesto. Aimed at locals, Pelican

Grill & Bar offers a burger or pizza and beer for \$15 Mondays through Thursdays through Sept. 30.

Patrons may order wood-fired pizzas or new burgers — one is prime "1855" beef and garnished with dill pickles, lettuce, grilled onions, cheddar cheese and house special sauce — and pair it with a local craft beer.

They also may try the Coliseum Pool & Grill's happy hour from 3 to 7 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, where select cocktails, beer and wines by the glass priced at 50% off.

Andrea, the resort's up-scale Italian restaurant featuring handmade pasta, offers a new lunch "Menu Espresso," two courses served in 45 minutes or less with a complimentary glass of Prosecco for \$28 per person.

The goal is to brand each restaurant and be in the regional rotation for locals who often dine out, Donovan said.

Exclusives and discounts also can be found on each restaurant's website.

The resort plans to have more special events planned around seasonal changes or athletic events. In May, it hosted a sold-out Kentucky Derby Party. In June, it presented its first clambake.

The enhancements have been well-received, as the hotel has seen a guest demographic stretch from Northern San Diego County and Laguna Niguel to Newport Beach, Long Beach and Santa Barbara, Donovan said.

"We want people to experience all the senses — taste, sight, touch, smell and hearing — during their time with us," Donovan said. "We want them to feel relaxed and come back time and time again."

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