



More Smart Moves

by Phyllis Ann Marshall

Last month I compared choosing a local landmark for a new restaurant location to a smart opening move in the game of chess, where the right moves in the right combination greatly improve our chances of success.

The following are good examples of this strategic move: the reincarnation of the **Cannery** in Newport Beach, the transformation of Tortilla Flats into **Mozambique** in South Laguna, the total redesign of the Crown House into the handsome craftsman-style **Salt Creek Grille** in Dana Point, the old Maxwell's in Huntington Beach rebuilt as a double venue for **Duke's** and **Chimayo**, and finally, the soon-to-be-completed renovation of Laguna's Pottery Shack into a complex of shops and a restaurant named **Laguna Sapphire**.

But talk about smart moves! Any listing of popular and recognizable landmarks must be headed by our renowned 100-year-old National Historic Landmark, the Balboa Pavilion. A great community vote of thanks goes to Dave and Doug Salisbury for realizing the dining potential of this waterfront location and transforming the Tale of the Whale into the **Harborside Restaurant and Grand Ballroom**. And thanks even more recently to Leo Gugasian also of **21 Oceanfront** and the **Doryman's Inn** for purchasing the building and preserving this essential piece of our local heritage. This celebrated, Tivoli-lit, monument has remained a beacon on the Bay through its many incarnations: as a train stop for the Red Car, a post office, bowling alley, art museum, gambling casino, and dance hall — where the Balboa swing dance, a relative of the 30's jitterbug, was invented.

Another smart move, much later in the game, is to redefine a restaurant concept that has enjoyed great success in the past but needs to be refocused

and up-dated to meet new dining clientele and trends.

My favorite example of this mid-game move is the rebirth of a long-time local favorite, **The Claim Jumper**. This former mining-camp "saloon", reminiscent of the gold rush era, was created by Craig Nickoloff and his Dad. After years of success, they shrewdly saw the opportunity to advance in the game by replacing **Birrepreotti's** at South Coast Plaza in its prime location right at the start of the Bristol bridge. The timing couldn't have been more perfect and Nickoloff made the necessary moves, putting into play many of the ideas he had been developing for a long time. One was to refocus and upgrade, moving from the rustic mining camp concept to a more sophisticated but still casual Arts & Crafts style California Lodge. The kitchen was opened up to introduce exhibition cooking with a wood burning oven and rotisserie. The menu has maintained the same generous portions, but now the cooks build and dress the huge salads on the interactive cook line rather than the guests making their own at the salad bar. This new look, feel, and upgraded menu that includes prime steak has become so popular that the restaurant has spread rapidly outside of California to Arizona, Colorado, Washington and Nevada. And soon, with the help of a private equity firm, the Claim Jumper will storm Chicago and the Midwest before heading to the southeast.

Marie Callender's is testing a new proto-type in Westminster that is another study in the natural evolution of a brand. The process of refocusing and updating, which older restaurants eventually need to consider in order to remain relevant, is impressively moving ahead in Westminster under the guidance of CEO Philip Ratner and Chef Armando Veliz. Their new ideas are definitely challenging the concept that

made Marie Callender's a local favorite years ago. In the late 1940's, Marie's baking business combined with her son Don's coffee shop to create the popular Marie Callender's Pie Shoppes that eventually expanded to 150 restaurant-bakeries throughout ten states. The all-new Callender's Grill will shift the focus from Marie and the pies to the Grill and the Bar. The menu still offers a variety of classic American foods but with today's flavors and visual attitude. Items like the hand carved 14-hour Slow-Smoked Tri Tip with Bourbon BBQ Sauce, the Rare Seared Ahi and Coconut Shrimp, and from the bar, Havana-style Mojitos are just a few of the Grill's new features. The impressive combination is working, with sales and check averages to show for it.

Onotria, (Italian for Land of Vines) is a *ristorante* featuring Wine Country Cuisine that has so completely transformed the former Manhattan Deli on Bristol in Costa Mesa that it's hard to remember the deli was ever there. Owner & Executive Chef Massimo Navarretta who was raised in Campania where "Wine Country Cuisine" is everyday cooking, is living his dream. His "farm" is a small vineyard neatly lining the front of the building, and the winery-like spaciousness and high ceilings transport the guest if not directly to a winery in Italy then definitely to Napa. The menu is an Italian culinary treat to read. I am carb-counting, so I passed on the pasta and polenta in favor of the savory legumes — the butter beans, fava beans and cannellini got my immediate attention. Choosing from small plates of authentic Italian combinations like Parma Prosciutto with Arugula and Pecorino and pairing them with wines from Massimo's impressive cellar, make dining here a pleasure. Prices are modest but ingredients like the regional artisan and imported cheeses and the homemade Canoli are superior. Onotria

offers the kind of casual Italian neighborhood dining experience we've been waiting for in Orange County.

Stonehill Tavern, which replaced Aqua at the St. Regis Hotel & Resort, is Michael Mina's witty take on the classic tavern. It is upscale and hip, with a good bit of whimsical humor. The restaurant is located where Stonehill meets PCH in Dana Point, but other than that, the name, Stonehill Tavern, is a misnomer—and a deliberate one—but it's all in fun. Forget your fieldstone country tavern with tweedy patrons sipping pints of Guinness in dark wooden booths by a peat fire. True, there is some stone, but it's highly polished granite and strips of marble, ironically juxtaposed with contemporary treatments of glass and chrome. And yes, there's a bar and a fireplace, but they're not in the same room. Booths are spacious and open, and the bar is center stage, a well-lit focal point and a great place to see and be seen. Designer Tony Chi has organized the interior into a series of small dining rooms, cozy alcoves, and comfortable seating areas. Horizontal rows of wine bottles in shiny glass and chrome cases welcome the newcomer; gone are mugs, beer taps, and rows of single malt Scotch. I love being in this stylish space. It makes me feel famous just being part of the crowd. And the food is both serious and playfully fun. Each dish on the appetizer menu is a tasting trio; I like the "riffs" on lobster: lobster carpaccio with a classic bisque chaser and the big crowd pleaser — lobster popsicles — luscious bacon & shiso wrapped fritters crammed with big chunks of lobster meat. I'm going back for a whole lobster baked in guerande grey salt, but I have to get a new dress with an attitude first.

There are many more smart moves in Orange County...

Check out **Maestro's Steakhouse** on Anton in Costa Mesa at the site of the old **El Torito** or David Wilhelm's fabulous new **French 75 Brasserie** in the space that was **SensAsian** in Tustin off Jamboree.

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THE SPICE RACK



Peppercorns

with Chef
Gabriel Caliendo



Standing at the top with salt, peppercorns are kings in the spice world and are grown throughout the world in tropical regions. As is the case with all spices, it is best to keep the peppercorns whole and grind them as needed in a mill for optimum flavor. There are several different colors and types of commonly used peppercorns:

Black peppercorns are picked when they are still green and enzymes turn them black as they are dried. The black peppercorn is the most pungent and common of the peppercorns, used to season meats, game, poultry, vegetables, marinades, stew, sauces, and are also used whole in items such as stocks and brines.

White peppercorns are harvested when fully ripened and then soaked to remove the reddish outer skin. White pepper is slightly milder than black peppercorn and is regarded by some to be

the best of the peppercorns.

It is generally used in applications in which the black peppercorn color would detract from the finished product. For example, a béchamel or cream based sauce would look better without the black specs.

Green peppercorns are the same under-ripe berries used for the black peppercorns only they are usually pickled in brine or vinegar instead of dried and are also found freeze-dried and dehydrated. Their flavor is less pungent than the white or black peppercorn.

Pink peppercorns are also more mild than black or white peppercorns and are actually not in the peppercorn family. They come from the Baies rose plant and have a paper outer skin. These are usually either pickled or freeze-dried.



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