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Review: Outer Reef is the best restaurant to open in Dana Point in years

Critic Brad A. Johnson says the dining room looks familiar but make no mistake: Chef John Tesar's elegant cooking stands apart from anything else in south county at the moment.



Scallops with celery root ravioli at Outer Reef in Dana Point (Photo by Brad A. Johnson, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **BRAD A. JOHNSON** | bajohnson@scng.com | Orange County Register

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“Deja vu.” The dining room at Outer Reef, a new surf-and-turf restaurant at the Laguna Cliffs Marriott in Dana Point, strikes me as pretty but feels eerily familiar: the combination of white wainscoting, light hardwood floors and navy upholstery and accents. The raised booths, the decorative shelving, a breezy patio with lounge chairs and fire pits. The waiters are even dressed in similar style with button-down shirts and long aprons.

Then it hits me: “Coastal Kitchen! Yes, this looks exactly like Coastal Kitchen,” a restaurant literally just up the street. It’s as if someone took the interior designer to Coastal Kitchen, waived their hands in the air and said, “I want this. All of it. Only bigger and a tad fancier. But don’t make it formal. Keep it super casual. And loud. Just like this.”



The dining room at Outer Reef in Dana Point (Photo by Brad A. Johnson, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The designer nailed it, mostly. Although technically pretty, it feels oddly cavernous and cold. The entire dining room here is awash in natural light, as if it were meant to be an oasis of ferns, palms, monstera and ficus. Perhaps the nursery’s delivery truck got lost en route. There is a beautiful green lawn at the edge of the patio, though. Plus the elephant in the room: an expansive ocean view. Understandably, reservations at sunset are difficult to come by on weekends.

Our server drops by to say hello, and after a few seconds of hearing him rave about the chef and menu I’m overwhelmed with another *deja vu*.

“Hold on a minute,” I say, stopping him mid-sentence. “Didn’t you work at another restaurant in South County somewhere? Or maybe we met you somewhere else recently?”

“I used to work up the street at Coastal Kitchen,” he says, and then we share a laugh about the near identical designs.



It's not until the amuse bouche arrives that I realize just how formal this place is going to be. In a dining room as casual as this, an intricate amuse bouche is the last thing I was expecting (or second-last; more on that in a minute). "Compliments of the chef, a lobster roll," the waiter says, placing the candy-sized treats in front of us. Each "lobster roll" is two dainty bites at most, a diminutive slice of toasted brioche topped with nubs of lobster tail and a swirl of creme fraiche scented with lemon verbena. Or was it lemon balm? It all happens so fast and my attention has shifted to a beautiful bread basket and a wonderful Chablis.

The chef is John Tesar, a name that might ring familiar. Based in Dallas, he's starred on a few reality TV cooking competitions. He operates a couple of luxury steakhouses in the Dallas area called Knife, plus a glitzy surf and turf restaurant, Knife & Spoon, inside the Ritz-Carlton in Orlando. Outer Reef, from what I gather, is meant to be a more casual blend of those two concepts.

I've learned to be skeptical of chefs from out of town (or state) who breeze into O.C. and open a restaurant only to return in person two or three days a year at most. "Be honest, how often is the chef here," I ask a server.

"A lot," he says, sounding not just sincere but excited. "He's here right now. He's been here nearly every week, before and after opening. Would you like to meet him?"

"Oh, no, I was just curious," I say, feeling reassured for the time being.

You'll probably want to start with seafood. Consider the urchin. Tesar drapes San Diego uni atop housemade blood sausage and garnishes it with caviar. Each little bundle is a mouthful of intrigue. Sweet. Salty. Creamy. But mostly savory and unctuous.

You'll see something called king crab scampi, and you'll conjure the wrong the image in your mind. The crab leg, barely cooked, tastes richly of butter as it luxuriates in a pool of parsley puree while a cloud of garlic foam floats overhead.

Or you could choose tuna. It's been dry-aged and pounded thin, which makes it look like a pink fruit rollup. Hiding underneath you'll find several slices of duck liver terrine and melba-toast-like croutons. Make sure each bite includes some of each.

Any of those choices would good ones but none is a more satisfying way to begin than the diver-harvested scallop, nearly three inches across, that arrives with shaved black truffles, soaking in a warm mushroom dashi.

Or you could save your scallop indulgence for the entree and savor instead a bowl of three scallops with a wrinkle free-form raviolo filled with silken celery-root puree — easily one of the best things I've eaten this year.

The turf portion of the menu pays homage to both Texas and California beef, focusing mostly large cuts meant for sharing. The cheapest steak on the menu is an 8-ounce filet for \$62, and prices rise exponentially from there. There's no denying the quality, though. Tesar obviously knows how to select and cook a prime steak.



There is no one else in Orange County cooking quite like this. Other than the duck liver, Tesar doesn't serve any poultry or fowl. And nothing here comes cheap. Pastas are the only main courses costing less than \$40. Terrific hand-rolled garganelli are showered with Australian black winter truffles, currently at their peak, so \$32 seems a fair price to pay for a stark presentation of pasta, parmesan, butter and tuber melanosporum. (Australia's are the same species of truffle more famously associated with Perigord, France.)

After several visits, the only dish I haven't loved is a crock of spinach too heavily imbued with kimchi, which I had ordered to accompany one of the large-format steaks. I love spinach. I like kimchi. But I find this dish difficult to embrace in this situation because it completely obliterates the flavor of the steak. Everything now tastes like garlic, including the wine. (There's a much lighter, more delicate use of kimchi involving halibut. I enthusiastically recommend that.)

Desserts are all as lovely to look at as they are to eat, and if Instagram is a proper guide, they appear identical to the ones served at Knife in Dallas. I've simply been too full most nights to finish them. "You know, you don't really need dessert," a waiter whispers to me one night, reading my mind as I'm studying the dessert menu. "You have complimentary mignardise coming."

Ah, the mignardise. Here's that other thing I least expected from a restaurant that appears at first so casual. Mignardise, for the uninitiated, are those wafer-thin sweets that arrive at the end of a lavish meal, compliments of the chef, a final unapologetic flourish — in this case a fruit gelee, a macaron, a shortbread, a miniature tart — to remind you that you are indeed living the good life.

Outer Reef

Rating: ★★★

Where: Laguna Cliffs Marriott, 25135 Park Lantern, Dana Point

When: Dinner only, Wed.-Sun.

Cost: Starters, \$18-\$150; entrees, \$28-\$220; desserts, tk; complimentary valet parking

Phone: 949-487-7555

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0 = poor, unacceptable

★ = average, may have some noteworthy qualities

★★ = very good, above average, a neighborhood gem

★★★ = outstanding, exceptional quality, a regional standout

★★★★ = transcendent, world class in every detail



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Brad A. Johnson | Critic

James Beard Award-winning restaurant critic Brad A. Johnson has been writing about food for more than 20 years. A prolific traveler who has dined around the world, he joined the Orange County Register in 2012 to help readers find the best steaks, the strongest margaritas, the freshest sushi, the hottest Thai curries and more. Brad dines incognito and pulls no punches. Although he has yet to find a local restaurant to merit a perfect four-star rating, he remains ever hopeful as the quest continues.

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