

# PRODIGAL SON RETURNS

## Acclaimed chef Darren Weiss of Cafe Catalina is back with Darren's in Manhattan Beach

> BY MERRILL SHINDLER

It was back in 2001 that I first wrote about chef Darren Weiss and his remarkably good, and remarkably undiscovered, Cafe Catalina.

In part, what I wrote was: "The place is the culinary equivalent of a mackerel in the Mojave. In a mall dominated by a Carl's Jr. and a Green Burrito, it remains the odd man out. Which is a pity. For the cooking at Cafe Catalina is quite fine, created by a chef who works out of a kitchen up a flight of stairs, and a waiter who keeps in shape by going up and down, up and down, up and down, all night long. The chef, in my experience, does not appear in the dining room. For all I know, he's conjuring up the food with incantations and spells. He works in the culinary equivalent of a garret, a (probably well-fed) starving artist giving his all for a mere 11 tables down below. ...

"The menu is brief, focused, easy to negotiate. This is California Cuisine as interpreted by chef Darren Weiss, whose vision of our local cooking style wanders from plain and simple to relatively ornate."

After describing the dishes in some detail, and noting the chef's obsession with multi-flavored mashed potatoes (garlic, wasabi horseradish, Japanese mushrooms, gorgonzola, shallots), I summed things up with the observation that, "... this is a restless spirit. Given time, anything is possible."

In time, Cafe Catalina went the way of all flesh. And Weiss went on a culinary hegira, appearing at Villa Sorriso in Pasadena, I Cugini in Santa Monica, and La Bahia at the Horseshoe Bay Resort in Texas.

But just a few weeks ago he came back, the Prodigal Son returned, to the South Bay, where he took over the space that was last home to chef Christian Shaffer's Avenue. He fluffed it up a bit, adding a handsome polished wood partition to separate the dining room from the bar, installed some snappy green and silver wallpaper, and started cooking his food again, in the beating culinary heart of Manhattan Beach.

Weiss is at a far more palatable intersection than he was when he ran Cafe Catalina.

Talia's and Towne are both across the street. Mama D's and the Sun & Moon Cafe are next door. Mucho and Fonz's are down the block. Cafe Pierre, Twelve Highland, Rock 'n Fish and La Creperie are nearby. There isn't a Green Burrito in sight, though there's plenty of sushi and risotto to be found nearby.

If you're going to eat well, you could do a lot worse than head for the intersection of Manhattan Avenue and Manhattan Beach Boulevard. And Darren's restaurant is right in the middle of it.

Weiss' menu has grown since Cafe Catalina, but not so much that he's abandoned some of his best dishes from back in the day. He still serves his ravioli stuffed with shrimp, shiitake mushrooms and goat cheese, drizzled with white truffle oil; why would he get rid of such a soul satisfying creation? His chowder of lobster and sweet potato flavored with coconut milk persists, though apparently gone is the duck flavored with Japanese mirin and Portuguese port, and the pork tenderloin glazed with ginger.

Replacing the pork tenderloin is a trio of pork dishes, all served together — braised pork shoulder, pan-seared pork loin, and pork confit; you like the taste of the pig, this is the dish to get.

And though the duck is gone, there is duck on the menu, in the form of a duck confit salad, made with baby spinach and gorgonzola. (Generally speaking, confit is a protein that's been cooked in fat to preserve it. After the meat cools, the fat solidifies, allowing the duck, pork or whatever to intensify, without going bad. Confit is a good word to see.)

At present, Darren's is a dinner-only restaurant — a pity, for I have a sense the chef would create some very interesting sandwiches.

He certainly does some fine salads. Along with the duck confit, there's a snappy Caesar made with croutons fashioned out of brioche bread; and a swell baby arugula salad, made with candied pecans, chubby medjool dates, and a blue cheese from Bavaria in Germany called Montagnolo, which is reminiscent of Cambozola, only riper.

There's a very simple salad of mixed greens as well, dotted with croutons flavored with goat cheese. The fascination Weiss had with mashed potatoes at Cafe Catalina seems to have been replaced by an obsession with croutons.

If you're not of the salad persuasion, you might consider beginning with the beet carpaccio, which is dotted with good Humboldt Fog goat cheese (perhaps it's cheese that's replaced his fascination with mashed spuds instead), and sprinkled with a pomegranate-flavored vinaigrette. And yes, I know the term "carpaccio" doesn't really apply to beets; it's a dish made with raw beef, veal or, in an alternative version, thinly sliced fish.

More than a few food writers have railed at the notion that beets can be a carpaccio. More than a few food writers have too much time on their hands. If chefs want to call thinly sliced beets carpaccio, it bothers me not at all. It tastes good — that's what matters.

There are some properly chunky crab cakes on the menu, along with a classic presentation of smoked salmon (with blini and creme fraiche), which goes very nicely with either the Paras Viognier or the Miner's Viognier; I have rather a Viognier jones — I think it's the grape of the decade, so crisp, so perfect with most everything.

Most everything at Darren's includes his well-turned free-range half chicken — it arrives just gushing juices, with a side of what the menu describes as heirloom fingerling potato confit, which may be a fancy way of saying mashed potatoes.

Though I don't usually like nuts on my fish, I'll give a pass to Weiss' peanut-crusting salmon with its Thai-ish lemongrass sauce. In this case, the nuts don't obscure the flavor of the fish. If anything, they add texture.

There's also a jumbo bouillabaisse of local seafood — Mexican shrimp, clams, mussels, lobster, white fish, fennel and potatoes. Purists may wail. But once again, it's too good to complain about.

Ditto the paella, made with rice-shaped orzo pasta — orzo has a wonderful, yielding texture. It tastes fine tossed with lobster, shrimp, duck, mussels, clams, sausage, peas and peppers. It's a dish that takes time to make. But as I wrote, "Given time, anything is possible."

Darren Weiss takes his time — and the results are just fine.

Merrill Shindler talks about restaurants from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays on KLSX-97.1.



### review >

#### DARREN'S

> **Address:** 1141 Manhattan Ave., Manhattan Beach.

> **Phone:** (310) 802-1973.

> **Cuisine:** New American.

> **Hours:** Dinner, Tuesday-Saturday.

> **Details:** Extensive wine list. Valet parking. Reservations essential.

> **Prices:** Appetizers, \$8-\$15. Entrees, \$20-\$34.

> **Cards:** MC, V.

> **Our rating:** ○○○

### on the menu >

Caesar Salad \$9

Baby Arugula Salad \$9

Beet Carpaccio \$10

Duck Confit Salad \$12

Sweet and Spicy Lobster Chowder \$14

Twin Dungeness Crab Cakes \$15

Rock Shrimp Ravioli \$13

Free Range Half Chicken \$20

Thai Peanut Crusted Salmon \$26

Sea Scallops \$28

Pacific Halibut Cheeks \$25

Seafood Bouillabaisse \$29

Venison Tenderloin \$32

Pork, 3 Ways \$28

Braised Lamb Shanks \$26

Pan Roasted Rib Eye Chop \$34

Orzo Paella \$32