

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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By **BRAD A. JOHNSON / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER**

Review: 370 Common keeps it real, fun



When I arrive, my guests are already seated and enjoying a glass of wine. I notice a mysterious bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. "What are we drinking?" I ask, thinking the Wine Collector has brought something special from his cellar. I reach for the bag. "Don't look!" he says. "That's part of the deal." "Deal? Who made a deal?" I ask. "Well, apparently tonight is the brown bag night," he says. "The waiter offered us this bottle for \$15, but we don't get to see what's inside." He grabs the

bag and cinches it tightly around the bottle's neck so that I can't see the label, then he pours me a glass. The color is beautiful, like liquid rubies. It has great structure, too. A California cabernet, perhaps? It's a bit young. Oh, how I hate guessing games. It tastes like it should be worth a lot more than \$15. Our server walks by as I'm filling my glass. "Did you peek yet?" she asks.

Three Seventy Common at Laguna Beach is fun like that. A playful spirit permeates not just the service but the menu and overall ambience. Aesthetically, the loud two-story space feels more like a pub than a serious restaurant, with high tables, tall chairs and an



abundance of hard surfaces in the main downstairs dining room. I like to begin with smaller bites: a sweet spicy chicken wing, a miniature grilled cheese sandwich, a beautifully charred prawn, a shishito pepper stuffed with goat cheese and cheddar and tempura-fried – all of which are sold by the piece, not by the platter. It's a sort of build-your-own amuse-bouche, and it's a fun way to get things started. The tempura shishito bite is wonderful, but there's an even better way to eat the Japanese peppers here. Further down the menu in the appetizer section, there's an entire bowl of charred shishitos. The funny thing about these peppers is that no more than one in every dozen is spicy. The rest is totally bland. Duds. Blanks. But it's always fun to order a batch just for the game of chance. Every once in a while, there's a nice little payoff.

I'm sharing this bowl with some friends, and my first two peppers taste like warm grass, except saltier, with an undercurrent of lime and smoke. I pop another pepper into my mouth and "Bingo! I got one." My mouth is on fire. My tongue is throbbing. I've never felt so much heat from a shishito. It's an exhilarating rush, as if I've just chomped into a serrano. Tears well up in my

eyes. My comrades see my reaction and reach in unison for the bowl, hoping to repeat my luck with their final draw. Alas, there's only one firecracker in the mix tonight. If you like the heat, don't worry – there are lots of spicy surprises on the menu. Chef Ryan Adams slips chilies into a number of dishes: the calamari, a potato soup, a side of corn, a cocktail made with ghost chili, the burger ... The burger, by the way, is a mammoth heap of high-quality beef topped with a fried egg, poblano chilies, cheddar cheese and thick bacon. They call it a 10-napkin burger, and that's an apt description. So I'm confounded as to why they don't automatically serve it with a stack of napkins. I find myself dripping with grease and blood and egg yolk, wondering how and where to wipe my hands, my face, every knuckle. My one and only napkin is protecting my lap, catching the river of juices that flows from my chin. A waitress eventually senses my distress and brings me one extra napkin. Just one? Are they trying to torture me?

The service here is otherwise superb. The seemingly intentional napkin tortures aside, the staff is remarkably intuitive and attentive. I'm often on the fence about poutine, which is what everyone calls french fries these days whenever they decide to smother them with any sort of gravy. When the fries are made from scratch and as perfect as these here, why muck them up? But then I take a bite and I realize that if the mucking involves a short-rib ragout as nice as this, I'm OK. Life is good. Bring on the coma. Fortunately, not everything induces a food coma. The chef is equally deft in restraint. A dish of raw kampachi dares to be delicate and subtle, with just a faint whisper of yuzu-kosho. And the clams are classic, a large bowl filled with shells so hot they're hard to handle, with innards so plump they could almost be classified as scallops. Bone marrow has become the new foie gras, and the marrow bones here are superb, slathered with chimichurri and charred until bubbly and crisp, then topped with a little salad of parsley and onions. There's a nice yin-yang in the pork belly appetizer, as the crispy fatty pork balances the sweet-tart thrill of fresh apricots. The meatloaf is beautiful. Yes, I realize that sounds weird, but the meatloaf really is gorgeous. It's a whole individual log wrapped in bacon and crisped. The river trout is impressive, too, topped with a haystack of green beans. The rib-eye is fine. It's not going to make my list of best steaks in Orange County, but I don't think anyone will be upset if they order it. Desserts rarely disappoint. The most popular at my table has always been The Presley, a large piece of cinnamon toast topped with bananas and peanut butter ice cream. And although it's very good, I'd rather have the stone-fruit cobbler, which is served straight from the oven, bubbling and fragrant. The chocolate bread pudding is great too, so supple it quivers when you look at it the right way. Really the only dessert that fails is a new offering of ice cream sandwiches. The cookies are simply too hard, forcing the ice cream to melt and squirt in every direction as I try to take a bite.

My only real complaint about this place is the noise. It's loud. It gets really, really loud. Yes, I get it, this is a gastropub, a place to come and drink and eat and laugh and have a good time. But still. It shouldn't have to be this loud.

Three Seventy Common

Rating: 3 stars

Where: 370 Glenneyre St., Laguna Beach

Hours: Sundays and Mondays, 5-9 p.m.

Tuesdays-Thursdays, 5-10 p.m.

Fridays and Saturdays, 4:30-11 p.m.

Good to know: Tuesday is the brown-bag wine night. Wednesday is prix fixe wine dinner night.

Sunday is family-style supper night.

Don't miss: Clams, shishito peppers, burger, meatloaf, harissa barbecue pork loin, stone fruit cobbler.

Best place to sit: Corner window seat downstairs, or the upstairs booths.

About the noise: Extremely loud downstairs. Slightly mellower, more private upstairs.

Cost: Appetizers, \$3-\$25; entrees, \$16-\$36; desserts, \$8.50; corkage, complimentary.

Phone: 949-494-8686

What the stars mean:

0 = poor, unacceptable

1 = fair, with some noteworthy qualities

2 = good, solid, above average

3 = excellent, memorable, well above norm

4 = world class, extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.