

Orange County Westways

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Lifestyle
Bon Appétit



BEACH CHIC IN LAGUNA: Sapphire Laguna's interior (left) retains the charm of the town's historic Pottery Shack. The sage-rosemary potato chips (top right) and the pan-seared beef tenderloin à la Diane (bottom right) shine on chef Azmin Ghahreman's menu.

Sapphire Laguna

1200 S. Coast Highway, Laguna Beach; (949) 715-9888

**Dinner for two,
food only:**
\$60-\$120

Setting:
Beach chic in the restored Pottery Shack with lattice wood walls, wooden floors with throw rugs, handblown-glass lighting, and a large patio

Service:
Young, efficient, and accommodating

Best dishes:
Pan-seared beef tenderloin à la Diane; house-made sage-rosemary potato chips

Sapphire Laguna is the new darling of the dining set, chic and inspired, yet still Laguna funky. Located in the former home of the iconic Pottery Shack, a Laguna fixture for nearly 60 years, Sapphire has retained much of the charm of the old wooden building, including the "Laguna Greeter" statue out front. Owner/chef Azmin Ghahreman, former executive chef of the St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort & Spa in Dana Point, matches the eclectic design with an eclectic menu featuring flavors from around the globe.

The food is, in a word, intense. Rich, deep, and often complex, Ghahreman's menu is sensually overwhelming. Every dish that leaves the open kitchen is visually stunning, each in its own white porcelain vessel, a splendid contrast in color and arrangement. The aromas alone sate the appetite. Nothing is what it seems on the surface, though. Flavors and textures give way to even richer and more complex layers beneath. The baked Kurobuta pork shank, for example, is fall-apart

tender and explodes in all its juicy splendor, and the pan-seared beef tenderloin à la Diane is equally as exquisite.

Even the seemingly simple chicken potpie, while delicious, literally overwhelms the palate with a rich tarragon cream base. My dining companions were barely able to finish half their plates. As exuberant as we were on the first bite, by the fifth, sixth, and seventh, we were all feeling a little saturated. Don't misunderstand—the food is everything the critics have been shouting about: exciting, unique, and creative. However, sometimes the senses can only take so much. Perhaps the best part of my visit was the simple bowl of house-made potato chips with rosemary and sage.

As intense as the menu is, the ambience is warm and embracing. Dominated by wood and accented with handblown-glass light fixtures, the environment is as comfortable as any commercial establishment can get. Servers and staff are well-trained and disciplined, patient in the face of incredible pressure from an eager and often impatient crowd. You'd be well advised to make your reservations a week ahead to avoid being disappointed at the host's desk. —Pete Johnson