



CHEF CRAIG CONNOLE

K'ya Bistro

1289 South Coast Highway

Laguna Beach

949.376.9718

www.kyabistro.com

K'ya Bistro, the Rooftop Lounge (both in La Casa del Camino in Laguna Beach), House of Big Fish and Ice Cold Beer, Marine Room Tavern (also in Laguna Beach), plus Palapa Bar and American Tavern Eatery and Drink (part of Hotel Ménage near Disneyland) vary widely in their menu themes. About the only way they're similar is that people love the food to an uncommonly fervent degree. It's as if each establishment, from the Hawaiian-themed Palapa Bar to the microbrewery and classic seafood-focused House of Big Fish, to the much-feted, uniquely sophisticated K'ya Bistro, holds the secret to anticipating what the public wants before the public even knows, doing it in such a way that it draws and satisfies veteran gourmands as well as "regular" folks. That is the true distinctive trademark of Craig Connole, executive chef for Casa Resorts and overseer of the menus at all six establishments above. Enormously innovative and creative, Connole, who grew up in Newport Beach, honed his skills cooking in bistros and resorts in San Francisco, Las Vegas, Hawaii, and Southern California. He's had a profound impact on local trends; the small plates of eclectic, internationally inspired, ultra-fresh and comfortably affordable delights that he introduced to K'ya Bistro several years ago helped set an exciting new culinary course in bistros and bars throughout OC.

What's the biggest challenge in your role of re-inventing restaurants? Part of it is figuring out the appeal and clientele of the particular restaurant and looking at trends to create a mélange without making too much of a hodgepodge. With a place like Big Fish, people associate it with a Monterey Bay style. Then you can mix it up with East Coast style chowder and Louisiana jambalaya, regional things everybody loves. Most important is respecting that people will go to a place more often if you give them value for their dollar. Everything I've successfully reinvented has really revolved around being a good value.

Surely your food is loved for more than being a good value! Well, you also need the right blend of variety. If you're too specific to a genre, it narrows the appeal. It's finding the right balance plus a niche of creativity and inventiveness and being really demanding about freshness. For instance, we partner with Alegria Fresh [hydroponic farm in Laguna Beach] for sustainable pesticide free, super-fresh produce. Freshness and quality contribute hugely to value.

What's the most underrated ingredient? Chicken! People kind of look down on it, but it's delicious and so versatile.

What's the most underrated quality of a good chef? A lot of people think being a chef is all glamorous, that you just hang out and create wonderful dishes. But 95 percent of this work is doing things like dealing with employees, keeping things clean, and budgeting to stay profitable. Most people never even think about that side of being a chef.

