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# Times Weekend

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## Beach life suits Marché Moderne

JONATHAN GOLD  
RESTAURANT CRITIC

The original Marché Moderne may have been the perfect neighborhood restaurant, if you stretch the idea of "neighborhood" a bit: a sprawling French bistro reached by a short ride up the very swankiest escalator in the toniest corner of South Coast Plaza. You could stop by after an afternoon of shopping for a glass of Champagne and a few oysters if you leaned that way, have a long, winy lunch with sweetbreads and a composed salad, or come in at night for what was probably the Southland's most compelling bouillabaisse.

Amelia and Florent Marneau, the proprietor and chef, seemed to know everybody in their restaurant, and you occasionally felt as if Florent's dark, musky coq au vin existed as a personal favor to you rather than as one of the most popular things on the menu. You always felt like sipping Calvados after a slice of the apple tart. The cheeses were pretty much the same ones you saw at any other ambitious French restaurant in town, but they always came to the table at the proper ripeness. It always felt like a secret, this lovely bistro hidden in its giant mall.

Marché Moderne closed last January, set to move to more palatial quarters in the Crystal Cove area of Newport Beach. The wait lasted until September. A friend took to driving by the place, in the space that used to hold the posh Indian restaurant Tamarind, to figure out when it might open.

Did it translate to the beach? The new Marché Moderne has all the accouterments of a grand modern restaurant, the vast open kitchen and the oversized flower arrangements; the enormous bowls of crushed ice holding Champagne; the heavy Laguiole steak knives and the vintage red Berkel, the '50s-era meat slicer that every chef knows is the most glamorous way to shave transparent curls of meat from a well-aged ham.

Important courses are rushed to the table in gleaming copper saucepans, which most of the customers have probably priced out at Williams-Sonoma. Tablecloths are ironed and white. The high, beamed ceilings are of the sort you might expect in an Aspen ski chateau. Most of the customers valet park although there is free strip mall parking literally three steps away.

Have you ever wondered who buys those pale dresses at South Coast Plaza, the ones that somehow combine a bodycon countour with the dreamy floatiness of Stevie Nicks' stage wardrobe circa 1983? They're at dinner here, wishing there was a bit more fennel pollen on the roasted beet salad and picking at the tuna tartare.

Everybody is happy enough at Marché Moderne, which is just across the highway from a lovely beach and minutes from a swift private toll road. There are well-iced



Photographs by ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

**THE REOPENED** Marché Moderne in Newport Beach is an expansive space with the accouterments of a grand modern restaurant.

### Marché Moderne

The French restaurant from chefs Florent and Amelia Marneau reopens in a shopping mall across the PCH from the ocean.

**LOCATION**  
7862 E. Pacific Coast Highway,  
Newport Beach, (714) 434-7900,  
marchemoderne.net.

**PRICES**  
Charcuterie \$11-\$33; salads and  
starters \$8-\$29; main courses  
\$26-\$49; desserts \$11-\$12.

**DETAILS**  
5-10 p.m. nightly. Credit cards  
accepted. Full bar. Valet and lot  
parking.



**PERFECTLY** grilled hanger steak with crisp French fries.

#### RECOMMENDED DISHES

Suckling pig with beans; crab risotto; coq au vin; grilled hanger steak; rabbit in mustard sauce.

oysters, radishes with seaweed butter, and a chopped salad with feta, mint and avocado, plus just enough kale to convince you of its ultimate healthfulness. The wine list is on a leatherbound e-tablet. The music is discreet. The detailed menu entries are in English, spiked with short French translations at their end, in case you'd rather order *canard fumé* than smoked duck.

Marneau spent nearly his entire career cooking in high-end Orange

County French restaurants, at Pascal, Aubergine and Pinot Provence before opening the first Marché Moderne in 2007. He acknowledges his past in the opening menus at the new restaurant — a nicely charred octopus glazed with puréed Spanish chorizo from the first Marché Moderne in 2010; smoked duck breast with honey and turnips from Aubergine circa 1994; and a rich, wintry dish of rabbit and chunky handmade noodles braised with mustard and cream

from Pascal in 1991. One imagines he would be comfortable with haute cuisine.

Still, he seems most comfortable as a polished bistro chef. You will find the briefly seared hamachi, the shishito peppers with white miso and the Thai-ish coconut-inflected salmon that you might expect from a modish small-plates restaurant. But clearly his heart is in classical French preparations, things like properly roasted marrowbones drizzled with thick, winy demiglace; a celery-root soup poured around a carefully composed arrangement of crabmeat and hazelnuts; or crisp-skinned duck confit with a splash of Banyuls vinegar and burnt-edged caramelized figs.

A hash of grilled scallops, tiny fried potatoes and quail eggs? Of course. Tuna tartare with yuzu and avocado sorbet, or ravioli stuffed with a gamy mass of foie gras? You'll find better. The mussels, both times I've had them, have been slightly tired. The risotto is the French kind, swamped with butter, richer than you can imagine — I liked a small, delicate version with crab that was a special one evening, but the risotto with uni and langoustine can be overwhelming.

You will always find foie gras at Marché Moderne, in the form of a smooth, cool terrine with preserved cherries, a bit of gingerbread and a dusting of Sichuan

pepper, and also sautéed, perhaps perched on a chunk of cakey bread, topped with a tangle of shredded turnip pickle and sauced with velvety puréed parsnip.

But the grilled USDA prime hanger steak is wonderful, crusted and crisp but a perfect, drippy pink inside, served with a bowl of skinny, perfectly crisp French fries. There is a kind of schnitzel of pounded pork with tiny roast Brussels sprouts and a sticky sauce flavored with apple Calvados. And that copper pan of coq au vin, wine reduced with mushrooms, tiny onions and chunks of bacon to near-blackness, is as splendid as it ever was in the mall.

Do you forgive the blancmange with green tea, lime and pungent mango for being much closer to a layered crème brûlée than to the classic French nursery dessert? You do — its comfort comes from a different place, but it is no less lovingly made.

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Go online for "Jonathan Gold's 101 Best Restaurants" from 2017, as well as more of his Counter Intelligence reviews.

GADGETS



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