

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

### Marché Moderne just raised the bar for brunch

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I know it seems like I just wrote about Marché Moderne. But this needs to be said.

When Amelia and Florent Marneau operated their swanky French bistro in the penthouse at South Coast Plaza, the daytime meal was integral to the restaurant's identity. When they moved to Crystal Cove nearly two years ago, they stopped serving daytime meals. They initially said the decision was temporary, until they got up to speed at the new location. Tick tock.

Well, as of a few weeks ago, they now serve Sunday brunch — and this is officially the best brunch in Orange County, or at least that's my takeaway after just one long, leisurely Sunday visit.

Whereas Florent is the obvious star at dinnertime, brunch is where Amelia takes the spotlight. She is

probably the best pastry chef south of Beverly Hills, and the brunch menu has her signature all over it.

She's baking beautiful croissants (plain, almond, hazelnut...), sticky buns, cannelés, raisin bread, Breton butter cakes and scones. A slice of French toast rises nearly four inches tall. There are tartines (toasts) slathered with ricotta and tomatoes or avocados and yuzu. There are pancakes smeared with lemon curd. And I haven't even gotten to dessert yet.

Florent is busy, too, of course. He's the one leading the kitchen during service after all. And he has resurrected a few classics from the old lunch menu, like the

roasted lobster salad, which is a petite head of baby romaine lettuce topped with more than a pound of lobster meat along with hearts of palm and an absolutely perfect (and very French) tarragon dressing. This is an extraordinary salad, the ultimate indulgence on a menu in which every dish is an indulgence.

He's also making the croque-madame to end all croque-madames. This "sandwich" is stuffed with truffled French ham and sweet, nutty Comté cheese and a thick slice of portobello mushroom, all of which is topped with a sunny-side-up egg.

That's about as far as I've gotten. At this point I had room for only one dessert, so the only one I can officially vouch for is the blueberry clafoutis brulee, which is like a cross between a soufflé and creme brulee. Baked to order, it is fluffy and creamy and vanilla-y and absolutely brilliant.



PHOTO BY BRAD A. JOHNSON

Roasted lobster salad on the brunch menu at Marché Moderne in Newport Beach.