

# Café Tu Tu Tango Still Tempts Taste Buds for Less

## Spanish Menu Served Up in Boho Indy Style

People always ask restaurant journalists: "What is your favorite restaurant?"

All of us have different favorites for different moods and occasions, but certain ones blur the lines, putting them on my preferred list.

**Café Tu Tu Tango** at the Outlets in Orange has piqued my taste buds and my happy emotions since its inception in 1998, and I am still enticed by its delicious, easygoing Spanish-American tapas-style food. Inventive Pan-Asian items will be added to the menu this month, so that's more research for all of us.



### EXECUTIVE DINING

Fifi Chao

There's unique ambiance, great service and entertainment, and a menu with a preponderance of items priced under \$10, making this a place where smiles ace the experience.

Think of this as a Bohemian indy restaurant, a singular entity that stands out in a sea of chain operations

and competes boldly with other one-off places. It suits the most casual diner and the entrenched foodies looking for an ultra-interesting menu. It's a draw for locals, tourists and many celebrities—**Will Ferrell**, **Adam Sandler** and **Mike Trout** frequent it.

It says everything on the menu is made from scratch. Good products have always been sourced, but this year, owner **Jim Hall** and the executive chef have incorporated "fresh and responsible" into their purchasing



Sangria: a Café Tu Tu Tango specialty

vocabulary, building a farm-to-fork thread through the interesting plates.

Café Tu Tu Tango will always be famous for its tapas and acclaimed sangria, but it strives to keep the food up-to-date and fasci-

nating. This year, it's added a perfect heirloom tomato and mozzarella salad with basil chiffonade over baby arugula, all drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil and balsamic and sprinkled with Himalayan salt. Order the Cajun chicken eggrolls—crispy exterior encasing roasted corn, cheddar and goat cheese with a Creole mustard dipping sauce; the taunting mango-duck quesadilla; roasted pears with pecan crisps; or picadillo and cheese empanadas to start a meal. I love the duck salad on caramelized onion flatbread.

The loaded Paella entree joins steamed clams with chorizo; steak skewers over cold sesame noodles; blackened lobster skewers; filet mignon with sliced bleu cheese and poblano mashed potato cake; and the hand-tossed margherita pizza as recent repeats for my palate. The latter is one of the superb pizzas the kitchen turns out.

"This Jersey boy will put our pizza up against anybody's," Hall says.

A gluten-free menu is also available.

The Bohemian loft feel keeps with the jaunty theme of "food for the starving artist," encompassing an ongoing parade of local artists who create their pieces live in the restaurant, where the artworks are for sale.

Many of you know **Michael Godard**, a well-known artist who sold his first piece at Café Tu Tu Tango! Other local artists are on location creating the pieces. Some of the longtime resident artists include **Steve "SKE" Ellis** and **Capt. Ron Henderson**. All local artists are welcome to ply their talents at the restaurant.

There's the stability and warmth of brick here, a casual meandering of tables inside and outside on the ample patio that overlooks the central courtyard of the attractive multiuse center. The "residents" art displayed on many of the walls and a feel-good atmosphere is unmistakable. I like that there's an energy here but in a subdued sort of way that allows for the wonderful flow of conversations.

Featured are strolling entertainers, such as tango, salsa and belly dancers. It's fun to discover **Danny Magic**, known for his Magic Castle appearances, walking up to your table

to perform a little sleight of hand. Entertainers are scheduled primarily in the evening. Artists are on location sporadically throughout the day.

This is a place that lends itself to having an enjoyable drink. Besides that sangria, there's a cocktail or wine for everyone. Their mixologists are currently incorporating several pre-prohibition cocktails, such as the Old Fashioned, made here with Whistle Pig 100% rye, orange bitters, a sugar cube and the deeply complex Luxardo cherries. You will also find Tito's Handcrafted Vodka, a product from Austin, Texas that's used to make several cocktails with herbs and vegetables, such as cilantro, basil, jalapeños and cucumbers, as enhancements.

The restaurant has also gone local with some of its brews, including Stone IPA. Sculpin and Calico brews from Ballast Point Brewery. It's currently selecting a special beer from an Orange County brewery to further fortify the local connection. For the wine connoisseurs, it's added "Jim's Reserves" to the fun wine list. Labels include Cakebread, Opus One, Ovation and Silver Oak.

Café Tu Tu Tango loyalists will say it has the best happy hour in Orange County. It runs every day from 2 to 7 p.m., and Thursdays through Sundays there is an additional happy hour from 10 p.m. to closing. Theatergoers and those who love the night as I do are quite happy we can have our cocktails and nibbles until 1 a.m. Sunday through Thursday and until 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday. Some food items are discounted, and an ample list of drinks and wines by the glass are \$4.

It partners with many charitable organizations within the community, as well as many youth sports organizations, for which it gets added respect from me.

When you consider the prices are downright inexpensive and the food is downright interesting, this is one of my winner restaurants.

Café Tu Tu Tango: 20 City Blvd. W., Orange (714) 769-2222

### Get It While It Lasts!

Don't linger too long before taking **Fleming's** up on its offer of prime rib at only \$29.95 on Sundays and Mondays until Sept. 1. Patrick and I just indulged and will be taking advantage of this grand bargain again this month. It's a big and delicious meal, and you have so many choices of side dishes to go with it.

You begin with a choice of salad, including the New Wedge—the epitome of an artisanal wedge salad that is utterly delicious—or modern caesar, followed by Fleming's prime rib au jus with creamy horseradish and Dijon sauces, served with a choice of one side.

The sides include Fleming's potatoes, with their subliminal hint of jalapeño; grilled high-country asparagus; signature onion rings stacked gloriously high and as good as onion rings can get; or sautéed or creamed spinach. You end this culinary feast with a choice of dessert, such as chocolate lava cake or fresh berries with chantilly cream.

Hurry, hurry.

Fleming's: 455 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach, (949) 720-9633

### New Kid in Town

**La Vida Cantina** is the new restaurant on the top level of The Triangle in Costa Mesa that has replaced **El Corazon**, which lasted only a year. It was a pretty good-looking space, but the new owners—who also own **Sutra** in that same center—have further embellished it.

The patio still plays a big outdoorsy part

► Fifi 13

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