Old Orange County tuna cannery reels in margarita, Moscow Mule crowd

by Chris_Barnett

As a longtime patron of libational theatre, the last place in the world I expected to find an authentic recreation of the classic Moscow Mule was in a harborfront restaurant in Newport Beach, Calif., the heart of Orange County or, as the hot and hip call it, the O.C. But The Cannery at 3010 Lafayette Road (949-566-0060; www.cannerynewport.com) is not where the sleek, bronzed California gods and goddesses park their Beamers and hang, chattering on their cell phones and quaffing Cosmos. No trendoid, Cannery owner Ron Salisbury pays homage to the past. He's a third-generation restaurateur whose grandpa and grandma were dishing up simple Mexican peasant food in Los Angeles for 35 cents a meal in 1923. His dad took over the stoves, then Ron came along, added margaritas to the menu in 1966 and built it into a taco and enchilada empire called El Cholo. A few years ago, thirsting for a new challenge, Salisbury converted a creaky circa 1920s tuna and mackerel canning factory on the Rhine channel into this seafood restaurant, baseball shrine, and upstairs saloon with a spectacular sunny view - even in late February. With Orange County now a sprawling business boomtown, you see a lot of locals, visiting corporate travelers and some venture capitalists here brainstorming on, say, a biotechnology start-up or a new investment house.

Salisbury and his head bartender, Joey Oehrlein, are purists. In a town teeming with Sex on the Beach and Long Island iced teas, "where every bar is trying to out do each other with funny martinis," says the boss, "we're bringing back the great old traditional drinks, mixed properly and not dressed up." The Moscow Mule is a perfect example. This drink, invented in 1941, introduced vodka to America and made Smirnoff an overnight sensation. How? A raconteur named Jack Morgan, who owned the late, great Cock 'n Bull bar on Los Angeles' Sunset Strip, had created a tart mixer called ginger beer. He bumped into John Martin, a sales hotshot for Heublein, a liquor distributor trying to sell Smirnoff. They hatched an idea to mix the two, add lime juice, a mint sprig and lime slice, serve it in an engraved copper mug and call it the Moscow Mule. Martin peddled the concoction nationwide. I met the Mule at the Cock 'n Bull in the late 60s and was instantly seduced by it. The Cannery's version cuts a few corners -- no mint sprig or lime slice -- but it's made with Morgan's original ginger beer and served in the copper mug that frosts up and keeps the old classic good and cold. Price: $9. Oehrlein confesses to another alteration that would have John Martin spinning in his grave. "Sometimes," he whispers, "I use Stoli." Salisbury won't divulge the recipe for the El Cholo margarita that's been transplanted to The Cannery, but it's not the original. "My first margaritas were terrible and a customer told me so," he confides, "but he also taught me how to make a good one - with seven ingredients." Today, he uses a smooth Cuervo 1800 tequila, Cointreau or triple sec and a frozen lime juice that Salisbury claims gives the margarita better consistency than juice squeezed from fresh limes. The drink fetches $9, or $7 during the 4 to 6:30 p.m. happy hours, when most cocktails are $2 off. For $9 (or $7), you can get 16 ounces of L.A. Lemonade, made with three top-drawer tequilas -- Cuervo 1800, Herradura and Sauza Commerativo. A pint of that powerhouse lemonade is a helluva bargain, but two pints -- i.e., a quart -- is a monstrous mistake. Not all the drinks are blasts from the past. The Cannery has some very well-made original cocktails that play to our hedonist side. Oehrlein whips up what he calls the Spa Martini: a quarter-cube of cucumber and two large strawberries muddled together, mixed with a dash of sugar and topped off with 2 1/2 ounces of Ciroc, the French vodka made from green grapes. Tab: $9, or $7 during happy hour. The big draw during happy hour is a self-serve, all-you-can-eat vat of New England clam chowder. Oehrlein and his crew also have a small appetizer menu with such delights as a sauted Kobe beefsteak in a peanut sauce for around $5. Beer and wine lovers have a lot to choose from, by the glass or pint, including some exotic imported drafts. The long, slightly curved bar has 15 high-backed bar chairs, and the colors are as soothing as the sea-soft blues and greens mixed with rich woods. The decor is faintly Japanese with jellyfish seemingly in flight; they set the stage for the sushi bar chefs to work their wizardry in their dance of the sharp knives. If this all sounds a bit too fanciful, rest assured Salisbury has anchored The Cannery in reality. Downstairs there is a "baseball gallery" with museum-quality artifacts from the grand old game. He's even devoted a room to Orange County's most celebrated restaurateur, the late Hans Prager. Remembers Ron: "Hans once told me, 'To be a good friend requires time and effort. Right now, my circle of friends is filled up but I'll let you know if someone dies.'"

Salisbury, who didn't have his first drink until he was 36, has a special place in his heart for bars. He says he once sat next to a woman on a bar stool who was meeting her boyfriend. Having been told by a beautiful

woman he was too timid, Salisbury pumped up his courage and said, "I'd like to visit with you while you're waiting for him," and he ended up marrying her. Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles. Â© Copley News Service

Old Orange County tuna cannery reels in margarita, Moscow Mule crowd by Chris_Barnett