

805

LIVING



The Drinks Issue

From Bean to Cuisine

LOCAL INGREDIENTS SHINE THROUGH A SOUTHERN LENS AT VENTURA'S MODEL CITIZEN, A NEW RESTAURANT AND BAR FROM THE BROTHERS BEHIND PROSPECT COFFEE ROASTERS.



At the onset of a bustling dinner service at downtown Ventura's **Model Citizen** (modelcitizenvta.com), co-owner Derek Ulrich takes a moment to reflect on the hospitality industry journey that led him and his brother Blake to open this new upscale, neighborhood restaurant. The two Ojai natives started out roasting coffee in the family's garage in nearby Solimar Beach before launching Prospect Coffee Roasters in Ventura in 2014 and Prospect Coffee Bar soon afterward.

While Model Citizen required plenty of careful calculation and patience, the impetus was simple. "We looked around and asked ourselves what would we want to see in this town where we are raising our families," says Derek. "Where would we want to hang out to enjoy a good meal?" Their vision crystalized when they discovered the talents of Gabriel Lindsey, a recent Nashville transplant who became executive chef.

Lindsey's signature plates marry Southern cuisine with California's year-round farm finds and ocean treasures. "I wanted the dishes on this menu to be relatable," Lindsey says, "like our Chicken Piccata. It's familiar, but there's also a little something else going on." The opening menu offers a variety of cocktail-friendly nibbles: platters of crudités with whipped feta and dill, pimento cheese spread ignited with a hint of fermented Fresno chiles, and a bold and delicious combination of whole Spanish anchovies and bright Meyer lemon salsa served with local Headwinds Bake Club bread, which in a flashback of Old Town Ventura, is still delivered daily by bicycle.

For a small plate of Scallop Crudo, thin slices of the sweet, tender mollusks are arranged in a green pressed juice, made from apples, celery, and jalapeño, and draped with pickled green strawberries in a nod to nearby strawberry fields. A drizzle of fragrant makrut lime oil the color of emeralds tops it all off. In the same category, the Blue Crab is similar to a gratin. The main ingredient is paired with quartered Hakurei turnips and served in a rich, creamy *beurre blanc* beneath a coating of toasted sourdough bread crumbs seasoned with Old Bay, a distinctive Southern flavor that Lindsey admits he could not do without. It's also a featured flavor in the large plate of gulf shrimp served with Rancho Gordo cranberry beans, sofrito, and kombu seaweed, slow cooked in a Dutch oven. Vegan and vegetarian offerings appear throughout the menu, as well.

Co-owners Derek Ulrich (above, left) and his brother Blake head up the new restaurant and bar with the help of general manager Matt Bourne (opposite, bottom). The bar turns out creative refreshments, like the Italian Honeymoon, made with Wray & Nephew Rum, Luxardo Bitter Bianco, Bordiga Vermouth Bianco, Contratto, lime, and mint.





Tables are set for dinner (above, right) four evenings a week and for brunch on Sundays. Executive chef Gabriel Lindsey (right) oversees his menu of creative and comforting plates, such as (clockwise, from top) Artichoke Antipasti with sopressata (Italian dry salami), sun-dried tomato, provolone, Nicoise, and mint; Whole Spanish Anchovies With Meyer Lemon Salsa; and Headwinds Bake Club bread with preserved lemon butter.

Other large plates for sharing include the aforementioned Chicken Piccata, a half-bird, deboned, its hefty portions of both dark and white meat thickly sliced and crisp-crust. The result is topped with preserved lemon, beurre blanc, salted capers imported from Italy, and lightly dressed frisée and bitter greens. In another entrée, a salad of baby gem lettuce and soft herbs is tossed with a lip-smacking vinaigrette made from fennel pollen and a special late-harvest zinfandel vinegar from Napa Valley’s Katz Farm. It’s finished with a generous shaving of ricotta *salata* (salted dry ricotta) and edible flowers.

The Whole Fish dish is a charcoal-grilled sea bream served with what Lindsey calls “a mop up,” a Southern-style barbeque sauce he reinvents by steaming harvested sea kelp and blending it with black garlic, sherry vinegar, and preserved tomatoes. Preserved sea bean and fresh mint and parsley mignonette round out the plate.

Steak aficionados will appreciate the dry-aged Flannery beef, an extremely tender Holstein variety popularized in recent years by chef and “slow food” devotee Alice Waters as a sustainable alternative to Black Angus and other more common breeds. Model Citizen is one of the first eateries in



Ventura County to offer Flannery cuts, including hangar steak au poivre with Japanese turnip, sunchoke, and spring onion; and the 30-day-aged rib eye, priced and ordered by the ounce. On the side, standouts include the brown butter carrots with sumac yogurt and the tender asparagus with green garlic aioli and shaved cured egg.



Libations at Model Citizen include rotating domestic lagers on draft and wines by the glass or bottle. The cocktail menu offers selections like the refreshing Bitter Spritz with Sirene bitters from the Amalfi Coast, Bordiga Vermouth Bianco, Italian Bay Laurel Liqueur, and prosecco; the Super Good Vodka Cran made with house cranberry-and-makrut-lime syrup; and the Model Margarita with Cimarron Blanco Tequila, Amara D’Arancia Rossa Amaro, and yellow Chartreuse Liqueur.

“We’ve got lots of great producers on the spirits side,” says the restaurant’s general manager Matt Bourne, “and great wine producers, like Terre des Dames, mother and daughter winemakers in Languedoc, France; and Argyros, a dry-farmed Assyrtiko vineyard in Santorini, Greece.” Also on hand are several noteworthy eastern European finds from Hungary, Georgia, and Slovenia, as well as Santa Barbara County producers Lieu Dit and Sandhi.

Among after-dinner sweets offerings are the Sour-dough Crème Brûlée and the Vanilla Bean Ice cream with apple compote, toasted pine nuts, salt crystals, and fresh *shiso* (an herb in the mint family) leaves.

“My brother and I are first-time restaurant owners,” says Derek Ulrich. “Gabe is a first-time head chef, and Matt is a first-time GM. But, we are making our way. Gabe delivers the elevated concept we were looking for, and we’ll see what kind of influence or mark this region will have on him. I think it will be exciting to watch.” ♦