



OWNERS OF MODEL CITIZEN, DEREK AND BLAKE ULRICH



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PHOTOS BY GRAHAM DUNN



MODEL CITIZENS

Two Ojai Brothers Stage a New Dining Experience

“In a restaurant, there’s a major element of theater,” explains Ojai’s Derek Ulrich, who with his brother Blake recently opened Model Citizen in Ventura. The show begins backstage, with months of training and rehearsal. The hours right before opening night are a bustle and blur: last-minute details, coordinating the cast of players, the anticipation of finally welcoming an audience.



ITALIAN HONEYMOON COCKTAIL

SCALLOP CRUDO WITH PICKLED GREEN STRAWBERRIES



“You open the front door,” says Derek, “and it’s very similar to the curtain coming up.”

A diner’s experience at Model Citizen unfolds in acts. “It’s definitely not your typical appetizer-entrée model,” Derek observes. “It’s mostly small plates designed to be shared among everyone at the table. Part of the fun is that you can try more of the menu that way. You get a much more active read on what the restaurant is trying to do.” At Model Citizen, this means elevated culinary technique applied to the best ingredients to create an ever-changing menu of fresh vegetables and (mostly) seafood. The theatrical side shines in how these plates are presented, how the food and cocktails look, how the servers play their parts with knowledge and genuine warmth.

“There were a lot of details to be worked out,” says Blake, “from the interior design to our whole approach to hospitality. Our goal is to be a neighborhood restaurant, friendly and welcoming. It works as a date night or a place to go on your birthday, but also a spot for regulars.” The menu changes frequently, so there are always new tastes to try. “We already have people coming back night after night.”

Of course it’s the chef backstage who creates these experiences. That would be Gabriel Lindsay, a tousle-haired, easygoing guy from Florida. Incredibly, he is only 27 – but he has been honing his craft since age 15 in high-caliber restaurants in New York City and Nashville.

When Model Citizen was in the planning stages, Blake and Derek ran an ad in the food industry version of Craigslist. After interviewing Gabriel, they arranged a tasting, a standard procedure before hiring a chef. It was held at the house of one of their hospitality consultants in Los Angeles. Gabriel cooked six or seven dishes by himself in the home kitchen, and the audition turned into a dinner party. “Our consultants said it was the best tasting they’d ever had,” recalls Blake, “including chefs from Michelin-starred restaurants. They were absolutely blown away. Gabe has worked with us ever since, developing the menu.”

The small plates are surprising and original. Few people love beets, but Model Citizen’s take — beet, satsuma, ricotta, pistachio, and mint — earns rave reviews. Dishes often combine fresh ingredients with things preserved by the chef, such as the Broccoli di Ciccio with fermented green garlic, horseradish, and Tillamook cheddar. Large plates might range from “Whole Sea Bream, Kelp BBQ, Sea Bean Mignonette” to “30-Day Dry-Aged Flannery Ribeye.”



BABY GEMS SALAD

naud). Blake went on to graduate business school, specializing in entrepreneurship, while Derek got a law degree and worked for a firm in the Bay Area.

But how did these two young guys from Ojai, a place not exactly known for elevated restaurant experiences, develop refined, educated tastes in food and drink?

For Derek, living in San Francisco introduced him to the art of food. “I was in my mid-twenties, and my biggest hobby was going out to restaurants with my friends. In the back of my mind, I thought I’d love to do something like this one day.” His law training is now of limited use, he says, basically for deciphering the legalese in contracts. “Most helpful is that law school trains people to look at all the different ways a scenario can go wrong – so you guard against all those possible outcomes.” It’s a useful mindset when advance-planning a restaurant.

For Blake, living for a while in China and on the East Coast showed him that there are unlimited options in the bigger world, and also that urban competition makes you up your game. The brothers complement each other nicely. “Derek is a lot more extroverted than I am,” says Blake, “which is great; he does the parts of the business that are customer facing, like greeting people as they come in the door. My business school training helps with the operational stuff. Our skill sets work really well together.”

The two partners started their business with Prospect Coffee, a roasting company launched in their mother’s garage and now supplying both wholesale customers and their flagship Prospect Coffee shop in Ventura. Like Model Citizen, it’s a neighborhood spot. “We have a huge base of regulars,” says Blake. “Most of the people coming in the door are there five days a week.”

Their new venture, Model Citizen, with its small-town warmth and big-city professionalism, is now having a star turn. The audience takes its seats and really enjoys the play. At the end of the evening, when the curtain falls and the lights go down, a happy crowd goes home – planning their next night out and thinking “Encore!”

I think a lot of restaurants put one too many ingredients in their dishes,” Derek observes. “Our food is relatively simple and straightforward, just highlighting good quality ingredients.” Adds Gabriel: “I don’t like to over-flavor things or make fussy tweezer food. Keep it simple!”

Dishes are accompanied by light-bodied wines from around the world, and preceded by cocktails that offer interesting spins on classic drinks. “The margarita has Italian amaro in it,” notes Blake, “which you wouldn’t expect to work but somehow it still has that classic margarita profile.” He also points out a few curveballs on the cocktail menu such as the Italian Honeymoon, made with two rums, infusions of herbs and aromatic botanicals, and lots of fruit juice, served over pebble ice. “It’s like an Italian tiki drink,” he says. The tall glass almost glows pink, a dramatic effect.

The artistic look of everything at Model Citizen is no accident. Derek explains that in building the restaurant from scratch, in an empty shell of a building, they had a definite vision for the interior design, inspired by many varied sources. “We wanted elements of a mid-century steakhouse, to have it feel kind of Palm-Springsy. But we also wanted some Northern European minimalism, and something like a 1950s Italian Amalfi Coast kind of thing. I think we got subtle elements of all those, but also a contemporary look. The booths are like you see in old Italian steak restaurants, really comfortable, while the lighting is very mid-century Italian.” A section of original brick wall adds charm, creating an interior that’s modern and yet surprisingly warm and comfortable.

BOTH BLAKE AND DEREK

were born in the Ojai hospital, attended Villanova for high school, and graduated from Pitzer College in Claremont (also attended by a third brother, Reid, and their mom, Suzette Re-

Model Citizen
70 S. Oak Street, Ventura
www.modelcitizenvt.com
Open Thurs.-Mon., 5-10 p.m.

