

FOOD & STYLE

Tallula's



118 Entrada Drive
Pacific Palisades
310-526-0027
tallulasrestaurant.com
Price: \$\$\$

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It isn't often that a neighborhood eatery rouses a firestorm of internet controversy, yet when local restaurateurs Zoe Nathan and Josh Loeb first opened the doors to Tallula's—a gourmet, Mexican cantina housed at the former Marx Tex-Mex joint off Pacific Coast Highway—those opposed to change charged up their iPhones for a wearying battle of digital dissension.

"It's too expensive for a neighborhood restaurant," claimed some nearby Santa Monica Canyon residents who share the restaurant's picturesque view of the Pacific Ocean (and subsequently similar property taxes).

No, if it's the ubiquitous \$2 taco you're in search of, you're not going to find here.

What you will find, however, are items like grilled *Grilled Swordfish Tacos*, crafted lovingly with soft, blue corn tortillas, Mexican sauerkraut, malt aioli and *epazote*—an absolute must-try for any first timer—I'll surely be back for seconds; *Yellowtail Ceviche*, a traditional Peruvian dish made with raw seafood—in this case yellowtail—that's tossed in an acidic marinade with cilan-



Tallula's friendly host Tristan Smith

tro, radish and aguachile; and the *Rollo de Ojo Steak Tostada*, made with tender chuck-eye that's piled high with Thao Farms jicama salsa, red onion and fresh mint.

From its bold menu to its Aztecian-meets-bohemian-chic decor, there's no denying it: Tallula's is loud and its clientele can be even louder. A typical weeknight here fills up quickly: Families gather around large wooden tables to hash out the day's details between scoops of salsa and guacamole. In the corner, a couple gazes longingly into each other eyes over a third round of wine, while a group of reunited friends chat away as they sip margaritas at the front bar.

From its exposed kitchen to the sunny tiles and hanging plants, Tallula's feels like home.

And despite what some naysayers may grouse about the

price—or the restaurant's mandatory 19 percent service charge, a rule that allows the restaurant to pay both the front and back of the house employees higher hourly wages alongside healthcare benefits (a rarity in the service industry)—there's no denying that the fare served up by Tallula's is on par with the sundry of Italian and American contemporary fine dining establishments in the area, which then leads me to pose the question: "Do white linens and lace regulate our willingness to open our pocketbooks or have we just become too accustomed to the quick taco joints set up for the working class lunch-goer?"

Opening daily for dinner at 5 p.m., Tallula's offers large plate items such as *Pan Roasted Branzino Filets*—or European seabass—which comes marinated in a citrus mojo and brushed with *pasilla*



Grilled Swordfish Tacos



Nachos "Sencillo"



Drinks from the bar



Pan Roasted Branzino Filets

chile before leaving the kitchen atop a piping hot broth of shaved fennel and kalamata olives. Popular in high-end seafood restaurants, Tallula's sells the intricate and savory dish for \$29, which is consistent with the nation's recommended \$28 menu price for the Mediterranean fish.

Other entrées include *Roasted Organic Half Chicken* with fig mole, fingerling potatoes and house-made duck fat flour tortillas (true connoisseurs of Latin American cuisine can appreciate that a complex mole can be as difficult to get right as any delicate French sauce), and *Cascabel-Garlic Shrimp Scampi*, served with mus-

tard greens, sunchoke artichokes and fried *masa*.

Be sure to save room for dessert, particularly the *Tres Leche Cake*, a decadent take on the Mexican staple, prepared with honey, chamomile cream and fresh berries.

The restaurant's wine list houses an eclectic mix of European, South American and Californian reds and whites, with the Bow & Arrow, Rhinestones Gamay/Pinot Noir running for \$16 a glass and a 2004 vintage of Tuscan winemaker Podere Salicetti's Brunello de Montalcino capping the menu at \$180 a bottle, respectively.

From the bar, cocktails are fashioned into colorful works of liquid art that reflect the restaurant's frenetic dining environment. *The Canyon*, a locally inspired libation crafted with Selvarey Rum, Plantation O.F.T.D. Rum, lemon, fresh pineapple, homemade turmeric syrup and Angostura bitters, is a boozy house pleaser that starts off sweet and ends with a bite.

In true Mexican fashion, margaritas are king at Tallula's, and if you arrive early enough for a seat at the bar, you can order a glass regular, spicy or mezcal version during the restaurant's \$8 Happy Hour.

Bottom line: Tallula's has taken the neighborhood cantina and propelled it into an indisputably upscale, ingredient-driven direction. Be prepared to see more places like this spring up as our Latino neighbors continue to gain affluence in our communities. City demographics—and subsequently the type of clientele restaurateurs market toward—are shifting: For those who can't hang, there's always Chipotle—but good luck getting a beer with your burrito.

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