

New eateries again outpace closures in Orange County.



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For the second consecutive year, the number of restaurants in Orange County is on the rise as a legion of hipster food concepts have lined up to replace stale eateries that have closed their doors.

Orange County dining establishments increased to 8,096, up from 8,070 in 2010 and 8,042 in 2009, according to data from the county's Health Care Agency.

Although 26 more restaurants doesn't seem like a huge jump in a county that boasts 34 cities, consider the big picture. Over the past two years, the Register has documented more than a 120 restaurant

closures in the county. And, those are just food businesses we've been able to verify. Dozens more have likely gone dark amid a brutal economy.

But spaces in great locations are not staying vacant for too long. Modern, chef-driven concepts are opening in high-profile locations from downtown Brea to Pacific Coast Highway in Newport Beach. Restaurants earning buzz among finicky, educated foodies include Bruxie in Brea, Pizzeria Mozza in Newport Beach and The Playground in Santa Ana.

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Is Orange County seeing "survival of the fittest" when it comes to the restaurant industry? Write in and let us know at fastfood.ocregister.com.

DINING

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"I don't think people are thinking about the recession or money. They are just looking for something good to eat," said Amar Santana, chef-owner of Broadway by Amar Santana.

Santana, the former executive chef at Charlie Palmer's at Bloomingdale's in Costa Mesa, opened his ultra-sleek Laguna Beach restaurant in the fall. At first he was nervous about starting his own business.

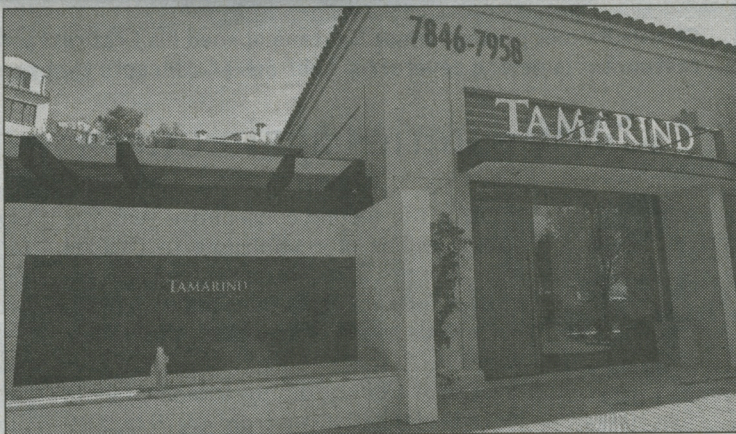
But the Laguna Beach location, formerly home to Five Feet, has become the perfect venue for Santana's modern California fresh cuisine, he said. Tables are full every weekend, and no one is complaining about paying \$38 for a wild mushroom crusted filet mignon.

"People are spending money," he said. "Things are going great. We are not complaining, at all."

The uptick in Orange County reflects an overall positive shift in the restaurant industry. A national monthly index that looks at the industry shows that restaurants are seeing positive same-store sales, a key indicator of a retailer's financial health, according to a report released last week by the National Restaurant Association.

Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research for the association, said restaurant operators are reporting their strongest results in more than four years.

"Operators' outlook for both sales growth and the overall economy rose to their highest levels in seven months," he said.



FILE PHOTO: SAM GANGWER, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Tamarind of London opened in November at Crystal Cove Promenade in Newport Beach. The restaurant's London flagship has earned a Michelin star 11 times since 2001.

Chefs such as Santana and Jason Quinn of The Playground in Santa Ana say successful restaurants in Orange County are ones that provide a palate-pleasing dining experience.

Little surprises also help.

Dishes frequently found on The Playground's ever-changing menu include pork belly, bone marrow and Wagyu hanger steak. Over at Broadway, Santana serves up slow braised octopus and venison chops.

In the fall, critically acclaimed concepts Tamarind of London and Pizzeria Mozza by Nancy Silverton and Mario Batali set up shop along Pacific Coast Highway in Newport Beach, causing a frenzy among foodies. In their opening weeks, both establishments were booked every night.

Weeks later, it's still difficult to snag a table at Mozza – let alone a seat at the pizzeria bar, where diners get a first-hand look at how their fire-singed, blistered-crust pizzas are made.

"Orange County (diners) are

ready to experience good restaurants," Santana said of the boom.

Still, Quinn is well aware that the economic climate in Santa Ana is different compared with Laguna Beach and Newport Beach.

While Santana's restaurant is a full-service, fine-dining establishment, The Playground is a fast-casual operation. Diners order at the bar and sit in communal tables. The setup allows Quinn to serve top-notch, premium-sourced foods at reasonable prices compared with upscale establishments.

Main entrees at The Playground range from \$14 to \$25. Appetizers run \$5 to \$11.

"That old saying, 'People always need food' is very true," Quinn said.

But, he added: "At the same time, it's very clear that people want to feel value when they go eat. We feel that every day."

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