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Jalisco Cantina carving its own niche in Oceanside



The intimate 50-seat Jalisco Cantina in Oceanside is a combination tequila/mezcal bar and regional Mexican restaurant. (Courtesy photo)

When Dave Pike opened [Jalisco Cantina](#) in [Oceanside](#) last summer, he and his team expected it would be a tequila bar that served a little Mexican food. Instead, the food at the 50-seat venue on North Coast Highway has become just as popular as its drinks.

Michael W. Brown, who serves as head chef for Jalisco Cantina as well as Pike's three Barrel Republic restaurants, said everyone was surprised when Jalisco's food sales equaled those at the bar, which serves more than 75 varieties of tequila and mezcal.

Brown attributes the menu's success to the fact that while Oceanside is chockablock with taco shops and traditional Baja-style Mexican eateries, there's nothing like the "fresh Mex" concept he's developed at Jalisco Cantina.

"Oceanside is growing with a big culinary scene," Brown said. "Downtown San Diego may have some great cocktail and tequila bars but there's nothing like what we're doing in Oceanside. We're a standout up here."

Jalisco Cantina, which shares a wall and part of a kitchen with Pike's Oceanside Barrel Republic bar, doesn't have a freezer. So, all of the dishes on the 20-item menu are prepared from scratch each day.

Brown's menu is inspired by the regional dishes of Jalisco state, but with a modern twist. An example is his take on elote, a popular Mexican snack where an ear of grilled corn is brushed with a mix of mayonnaise, sour cream and spices and then sprinkled with Cotija cheese. Brown's saladlike elote dish comes in a bowl filled with fire-roasted corn freshly cut from the cob mixed with veggies and topped with a mayo mix, a dusting of chile spices, Cotija cheese and fried tortilla strips.



An elote corn off-the-cob salad at Jalisco Cantina in Oceanside. (Pam Kragen/San Diego Union-Tribune)

Other specialties are a spicy shrimp guacamole, topped with jalapeno olive oil poblano chiles and Cotija and the fresh-corn tamale bites, which are a corn/masa mixture prepared in tamale style but then rolled and fried in bite-size balls. There's also a Spanish-inspired meat and cheese board.

Jalisco Cantina is one of many tequila-centric bars that has opened in San Diego County in the past year. It offers a full bar, custom cocktails and nine margaritas, but the focus is on two Mexican spirits, tequila and mezcal.

Tequila made from blue agave plants grown only in Jalisco, Tamaulipas, Nayarit, Michoacán, and Guanajuato. Mezcal, often characterized as having a smoother, smokier flavor, can be made from any of up to 30 kinds of agave grown in a larger area of Mexico.

Jalisco Cantino serves the spirits in margaritas and cocktails, but many customers order them in shots, which start at \$5 and range up to \$75 for the Herradura Seleccion Suprema Tequila Extra Añejo, which is cask-aged for four years. Brown said Jalisco Cantina is the first bar in San Diego County to serve CaliFino Tequila, which is made in Jalisco state.

The bar also sells the spirits in flights, where patrons can sample three different brands of tequilas or mezcal or do a vertical tasting of the different aged grades, from the youngest, blanco, to the middle-aged, reposado, to the oldest añejos.

Jalisco Cantina is open for happy hour and dinner on weekdays and for lunch and dinner on the weekends. There are plans to expand the restaurant next year by adding a rooftop dining or cocktail deck that will offer a sunset view over the ocean.

There are no immediate plans to expand Jalisco Cantina beyond its original location in Oceanside, but Barrel Republic is set to grow in 2019. Pike opened his first Barrel Republic — which is known for its self-service beer taps — in 2013 in Pacific Beach.

In 2015, he opened his second location at 215 N. Coast Highway in Oceanside, which has 60 taps, including 48 beers, eight wines and several non-alcoholic drinks. A [Carlsbad](#) location followed in November 2016 at 2461 State St. Brown said future locations are planned next year in Escondido and Temecula.

Because the liquor license for the Oceanside Barrel Republic required food be served on the premises, Pike brought in Brown, a 30-year restaurant industry veteran who previously worked for a Tucson company with 14 restaurants.

Just as he did at Jalisco Cantina, Brown came up with dishes for Barrel Republic that couldn't be found anywhere else. His seasonal Barrel Republic menu, which has also been introduced at the Carlsbad location, features unusual dishes like a house-smoked shrimp chowder and a vegan wild mushroom French dip sandwich.

Jalisco Cantina

Hours: 5 p.m. to midnight Mondays-Thursdays. 3 p.m. to 1 a.m. Fridays. 11:30 a.m. to 1 a.m. Saturdays. 11:30 a.m. to midnight Sundays.

Where: 213 N. Coast Highway, Oceanside

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