

805 LIVING

Holiday
Cheer

Restaurants Reimagined

DINING CONCEPTS TAKE NEW FORMS IN RESPONSE TO THE LATEST MOTHER OF INVENTION.

Even during the best of times, opening a new restaurant or bar requires a leap of faith. During a pandemic, it takes added measures of passion, commitment, and perseverance. Four food and drink purveyors have opened new venues locally, each offering a distinctly different dining concept but all displaying the confidence and creativity needed for these unusual times.

Chef Brian Dodero and certified sommelier Andrea Girardello, owners of the new **Aperitivo Wine Bar** (aperitivosb.com) in Santa Barbara, met while both were working at the Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara. Dodero was lead line cook at Tydes restaurant at the resort's Coral Casino Beach & Cabana Club, and Girardello was restaurant manager. After leaving The Biltmore, each was looking for a new project, and when a perfect-for-their-needs restaurant space became available just off State Street downtown, the two joined forces.



Although food is absent from the name, the menu at Aperitivo Wine Bar is a sophisticated collection of light bites, such as ahi sashimi (below), and heartier rotating pasta specials, like Squid ink Spaghetti alla Chitarra (below left).





Aperitivo owners (above from left) Andrea Girardello and Brian Dodero hope to encourage the Italian tradition of unwinding with drinks and light fare for which the wine bar is named; the 72 Hour Burrata, enhanced with seasonal fruits and honeycomb (below) is a great way to start.



The Santa Barbara-raised Dodero attended culinary school at Apicius International School of Hospitality in Florence, and during his time in Italy enjoyed the Italian tradition of *aperitivo*. “We wanted to bring that custom of gathering with friends or stopping by yourself after work for a glass of wine and some small bites,” says Dodero. “You can plan your evening while whetting your appetite for dinner nearby, or turn it into something longer and make a meal of it.”

The wine bar’s clean, modern decor is in keeping with the constantly evolving new-Italian menu by Dodero, who sources fresh ingredients at the Santa Barbara farmers’ markets and the Santa Barbara Fish Market. “I love comfort food in the fall and winter months, especially as the Italians do it with a few simple but top-quality ingredients,” he says.

A case in point is the selection of Bruschette made with *pugliese*, a rustic Italian bread, baked specially by the next-door Oat Bakery. (The bakery offers an array of organic handmade breads, but the *pugliese* is exclusive to Aperitivo Wine Bar.) One version is topped with *porchetta* (slow-roasted pork), which Dodero complements with fresh arugula, Parmigiano,

citrus, and herbs. The flavor-packed ‘Nduja & Mussels iteration features chopped rosemary-smoked mussels, cured pork spread, and pickled fennel, and gets a kick from Calabrian peppers.

Italy and Santa Barbara come together deliciously in the 72 Hour Burrata. “Our *burrata* is from Puglia, Italy, and makes it to us within three days of being made,” says Dodero. “I like to highlight its freshness with fruits in season and enjoy changing it up.”

Fresh crudo options vary by season and availability and might include Santa Barbara bluefin tuna sashimi, *hamachi* (yellowtail), or Octopus Carpaccio. One house-made pasta special is always on the menu, and although it changes frequently, a recent star was Squid-ink Spaghetti alla Chitarra (literally *by guitar*, it means square-cut using a stringed tool). Another satisfying cool-weather dish is the handmade Sweet Potato Gnocchi with brown butter, sage, and toasted pine nuts, topped with a crumble of amaretti and *mostarda* (candied fruit in white wine-mustard syrup). Dodero’s vision for warming winter menus includes *agnolotti* (meat- or vegetable-filled pasta), ravioli, and tortellini *en brodo* (in broth).

To complement the food, Girardello curates a list of Italian and Santa Barbara County wines, with a focus on biodynamic and organic selections, available by the glass or bottle. Additional beverages include Italian and local beers and wine-based cocktails, like the Aperitivo Spritzer made with Cappelletti, Bordiga vermouth, and prosecco.

Meanwhile, **Blackbird** restaurant at Hotel Californian (hotelcalifornian.com) spread its wings and reopened as a cocktail bar in November after being closed for several months due to COVID-19 restrictions. Located on the ground floor of the hotel, the sleek space blends art deco and mid-century design and features lounge-style seating that suits the new beverage-focused atmosphere while allowing for proper social distancing.

Executive chef Travis Watson offers a new menu of small plates of comfort food with a creative spin. “The new menu stays true to our mantra of seasonality and sustainability,” says Watson. Tantalizing options include Memphis Style BBQ Chicken Wings with sweet corn fritters, ranch dressing, and pickled red onions; Roasted & Spiced Beet Hummus with Tunisian-spiced lavash and Laura Chenel goat cheese; and the BB Smash Angus beef burger with American cheese, caramelized onions, and pickle aioli on a brioche bun. For dessert, try a cookies and cream ice cream-filled macaron sandwich.

Inventive cocktails by mixologist Devon Espinosa and an extensive list of local wines and craft beers provide plenty of drink options. Signature cocktails include the cheekily named Tekila Mockingbird, made with Milagro tequila, mezcal, orange blossom >



Hotel Californian's Blackbird restaurant (above) takes on a new persona as a cocktail bar serving creative small plates, while Passion Empanadas (right) launches as a local delivery service with plans to take to the road in a food truck in the near future.

water, honey, cherry juice, muddled jalapeño, and Chateau aloe liqueur; and Baby It's Cold Outside, a warm drink of Buffalo Trace Bourbon, Grand Marnier, and lemon juice, spiced with clove and cinnamon and sweetened with honey. There's something to suit every mood, and Blackbird's location makes it an ideal place to start or cap off an evening of exploring the steps-away Funk Zone.

In another example of creative pivoting, **Olio Bottega** (olioelimone.com/olio-bottega) opened in October, bringing a delicious little taste of Italy to downtown Santa Barbara. Executive chef Alberto Morello and Elaine Andersen Morello are husband and wife owners of Olio e Limone Ristorante and Olio Pizzeria. Their Olio Crudo Bar, next door to the Ristorante, was sidelined by the pandemic, and the Morellos were uncertain when they would be permitted to reopen the small space. So the couple decided to transform it into a casual Italian breakfast, lunch, and retail spot, serving *schiazzate* (focaccia panini), small bites, pasta, bottled cocktails, beer, and wine, which better lend themselves to walk-up takeout and outdoor patio seating.

I grew up going to the corner store for items like these," says Alberto, a native of Sicily. He designed the menu to offer quick, top-quality Italian specialties.

For breakfast, the Bottega offers a selection of sweet and savory Italian croissants, scrambled egg dishes,

and espresso drinks. Lunch options include grab-and-go sandwiches and made-to-order panini featuring house-made olive oil focaccia. The delicate Capretta enhances prosciutto and thin slices of fresh pear with Italian goat cheese and walnut cream.

Under Caldi (hot items) look for the vegan *panelle* (chickpea fritters), a popular street food in Palermo and Arancine, mouthwatering deep-fried Sicilian rice balls stuffed with meat sauce, mozzarella, and peas. Don't miss the *dolci* (desserts), especially the *cannolo*, a tube-shaped Sicilian pastry shell filled with chocolate chip-studded sheep's milk ricotta cream. Complete the experience by picking up some otherwise hard-to-find Italian gourmet products, meats, and cheeses to take home.

Launched in September, **Passion Empanadas** (Instagram @passionempanadas; 818-208-0099) is aptly named: owner Gabriel Gandelman has an infectious enthusiasm for the golden, baked turnovers



with savory fillings. The business operates out of a commercial kitchen in Westlake Village, where Gandelman makes Argentinian-style baked empanadas for local delivery (with a minimum order of one dozen) to Westlake Village, Agoura Hills, Oak Park, and parts of Thousand

Oaks. Customers enjoy the versatility and convenience of the empanada, which makes a quick and easy breakfast, lunch, appetizer, or snack, and a satisfying dinner with a salad.

Gandelman grew up in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in a food-loving family. "I was fascinated by the way my grandma's empanadas used to come out, and I eventually learned and perfected my own," he says. "I discovered my passion for empanadas and decided to share it."

Family recipes form the basis for Gandelman's empanadas, but he adds his own twists and uses local ingredients as much as possible. Popular fillings are the chicken, lamb, short rib, and ground beef. A vegetarian mushroom-and-potato version is a new menu addition. Gandelman is partial to the ones filled with spinach, ricotta, Parmesan, and fontina cheese. "When I take a bite of that, it takes me back to my childhood," he says. "It's comfort food."

The reach of the business will broaden with Gandelman's acquisition of a custom food truck, due to arrive this month. Check the company's Instagram posts for updates and food-truck routes.

As the hours tick by toward 2021, these inspirational community examples of invention and re-invention call for raising a hopeful glass to the New Year. ♦