

RESTAURANTS



THROUGH THE
LOOKING GLASS:
The new Ivy at the
Shore is a swell
place for seeing

The Ivy League

Known best for their stars, paparazzi, and pottery, our popular twin restaurants are more about fame than food **by Margot Dougherty**

THE IVY IS AN INSTITUTION. Google it and the entries go on in perpetuity. Whether in German, Japanese, French, or Spanish, the message is catechismal: Go there and you will see a weathered white picket fence, faded chintz pillows, and, *guaranteed*, Hollywood celebrities. These are Ivy absolutes and have been from the minute that Lynn von Kersting and her partner, Richard “Ricky” Irving, opened the stone cottage on Robertson Boulevard in 1980. The restaurant quick-

ly became a neighborhood canteen for ICM and CAA agents and served as the hieroglyph for power lunching; it played itself in *The Bodyguard* and *Get Shorty*. It is still the venue of choice for pop culture icons to announce their emergence from one chrysalis or another. If, for example, a jilted actress wants the world (and/or her ex) to know (or think) she’s moved on, she need only have her publi-

cist book her a table on the Ivy’s patio and alert the paparazzi. Looking her best, laughing heartily but not inappropriately with friends over an Arnold Palmer while picking at a grilled vegetable chopped salad (they claim theirs is the original), the actress is in effect executing a press release: *I’m off the booch, lost the weight, and couldn’t give a toss about what’s-his-name*. If an agent or director or producer wants the world to know (or think) he’s working with a hot talent, a meal at the Ivy with the player in tow starts the bush telegraph. No other venue in Los Angeles provides this service with such efficiency.

While the Ivy on Robertson is more conspicuous by dint of geography and architectural layout, its Santa Monica sibling, the Ivy at the Shore, plays its own role in the culture of socio-fabulousness. Relatively discreet, and five years younger, this is where celebrities are more apt to go in the interlude between projects, spouses, or magnificent significant others.

While other star-powered restaurants have relocated, expanded, or simply withered and died, the collective Ivy is a beacon of consistency. So it could be construed as big news that the Ivy at the Shore recently moved two doors north on

Ocean Avenue to the trio of rooms that formerly housed Zenzero and, briefly, Fu Lin. Von Kersting, an interior designer with a furniture store, Indigo Seas, adjacent to the

Ivy on Robertson, has kitted out the place with a hodgepodge of homespun decor that has become an Ivy trademark. Hers is an insouciant approach. At the Robertson restaurant, fabric akin to tea towels is tossed over win-

THE IVY
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CLAWS ARE OUT: Alaskan king crab legs are an Ivy staple

dow rods to suffice as makeshift valances, bravely mismatched with the curtain panels below. There are four dining areas, and they fit into a distinct hierarchy. First class: the patio. Second class: the adjacent fireplace room. Steerage: the room en route to the

loos and the one with the swinging door leading to the kitchen.

The Ivy at the Shore has only three rooms: an enclosed patio, which allows the hordes flocking to the Santa Monica Pier to get a good gander; a large inside dining area; and a light-filled back enclave, which seems the most civil environment but may well be for losers. The walls are painted a princess pink with sea foam green trim. Model wooden ships are perched in the rafters, and a big painted panel that looks like a refugee from a Gauguin South Seas scene hangs high in the back room. A trio of stark white children's mannequins dressed in Ivy T-shirts, their heads

bound in bandannas, stand sentinel at the entry to the rest rooms. The shirts can be purchased for \$15.

The menus at the two Ivys are identical and as prone to change as the markings on the Rosetta stone. Even the specials are stan-

dard. The sauces and condiments for both restaurants are made from identical recipes. It is the beverage menu, a large affair upholstered in a jungle fabric, that comes to the tables first. Along with fresh juices—pineapple, carrot, orange—serious cocktails are offered. The Ivy is famous for gimlets swimming with fresh mint, for margaritas made with Cuervo Gold, and for Cajun martinis whose Swedish vodka has been steeped with peppers. It's not a bad idea to start with any one of these. The purpose of the Ivy, after all, is to celebrate the fact that you're there.

MORTAL DINERS don't go to the Ivy for the food, even if they have favorite dishes. They go because it's the Ivy, and it signals their ability to hobnob with a social elite. Even the waitstaff, dressed in white Levi's, white sneakers, and white (at the Shore) and pink (on Robertson) oxford shirts with floral ties, pledge allegiance to Ralph Lauren models. The cottage on Robertson could be parked in Northeast Harbor, on the Main

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Line, Martha's Vineyard, or in any number of blue-blood enclaves and be mistaken for one of the old kids on the block. Celebrities just add contemporary fizz. That the food is not particularly good is inconsequential.

The cuisine has been termed Cajun and American, but I'm not sure either is apt for a menu that runs from raw oysters to tostadas to enchiladas to tandoori chicken to fried chicken to hamburgers to pizza to pasta to Cajun prime rib to milk shakes to black cows. One notices that many ingredients are versatile: chutney for most of the chicken dishes, a tomato sauce for the flash-fried calamari that makes the tomato sauce on a bowl of spaghetti seem quite familiar. Like the decor, the menu is appealing because it's cozy. Ricky's Fried Chicken, named for Irving, is something your aunt or nanny or camp counselor might have made. It comes on the Ivy's beautiful pottery, all of which, from the creamers to the platters, is signed on the underside by von Kersting and is for sale at Indigo Seas. Dining on regally presented comfort food at a revered institution might just

be Hollywood's version of making a debut; lifting a fork at the Ivy is like lifting a kid-gloved hand to an escort before entering into society. On these patios, everybody knows they're Somebody; otherwise they wouldn't be paying \$20.95 for pancakes at brunch, \$26.75 for a bowl of penne with tomato sauce, or \$45.75 for grilled lamb chops.

Service is lickety-split, because the staff is large and turnover is no doubt encouraged, and because much of the food is preprepared. Steer clear of the house salad, which comes on a cold plate, apparently straight from its berth in the fridge. It's made of vegetables slow to show their age: fennel, beets, corn, cukes, and a modicum of shredded lettuce. At brunch the crab eggs Benedict is rife with crabmeat, but the hollandaise lacks flavor. In lieu of an English muffin, the Ivy's trademark brown anadama bread is served. Even soaked with egg yolk it is peculiar, lashed with molasses but still sour. On the upside, pastas are good, served piping hot with a variety of sauces. Tandoori chicken at the Shore has no hint of the tandoor but is a nicely char-grilled

breast and leg served with mango chutney, coriander sauce, enough rice for three, and "whipped summer squash." (On Robertson, the tandoori chicken has the pinkness of the traditional marinade and comes with a spicy curry sauce.) The signature grilled chopped salad, made with shredded lettuce, roasted corn kernels, avocado, tomatoes, fennel, cucumber, and the option of grilled chicken or shrimp, is still the standard-bearer for chopped salads the world over. It is quintessential grazing food, glorious roughage.

Ivy desserts, like the killer cocktails, appeal to the self-celebration idea: Why *not* a banana split! The restaurant's version is a supersize soda fountain fantasy: five scoops of house-made ice cream (more Breyers than Häagen-Dazs) smothered with chopped banana, pineapple, blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries and served with hot fudge and caramel sauces, roasted whole almonds, and whipped cream. Other entries, like the lemon cheesecake, don't require a Little League team to polish them off. The berry crumble, though, is disappointing, its crum-



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BRING IT ON: The Ivy's extreme banana split

ble flat, the fruit seemingly picked long ago. The chocolate chip cookies, on the other hand, are superb.

What's remarkable is that the Ivy has never lost its cachet. Von Kersting and Irving have created an impressive Hollywood habitat where tourists and celebrities happily coexist and the food doesn't distract from the scene. The restaurant is a status symbol that's both exclusive and attainable for all. A recent Friday lunch at the Robertson restaurant showed the Ivy at the top of its game. It was just after Paris Hilton had announced her engagement to Paris Latsis, and she had come to dine with her mother, Kathy, whose new TV series, *I Want to Be a Hilton*, was about to debut. The paparazzi were out in force to greet the ladies, who'd booked a table on the patio, which is raised just high enough above the sidewalk to serve as a public stage. After a respectable spell, sufficient time for the shutterbugs to get the before shots, mother and daughter retired to the Ivy's fireplace room. After lunch Kathy emerged first, in essence alerting the photographers. Paris, her hair in farm girl braids, perhaps to mitigate the effects of the wind she endures at the wheel of her convertible Ferrari, followed. Standing languidly on the patio, she took a moment to arrange her features just so—cocked head, half-mast eyes, slow I-want-you-but-you'll-have-to-work-for-it smile—and made her deliberate exit straight into the phalanx of flashbulbs. The mob, and all eyes at the Ivy, followed her down the block. Our waiter allowed himself a half laugh, shrugged, and poured more iced tea. He'd seen it all before.

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