



[[FOOD & DRINK] REVIEW

FIRE AND FLOW

CHIC, MOD AND SEASONAL, AESTUS IS MAKING A BIG IMPACT ON SANTA MONICA.

By Lesley Balla
Photography by Dylan + Jeni

When I throw open the door to Aestus, a late sunlight glow filters into a mostly empty dining room. I assume it's where I want to be: There's a small sign outside, and the entrance seems to be the only one that doesn't lead to the apartments in the slightly nautical-looking Arezzo building. Once seated along the windows—which border most of the space—I sink in, envying the midcentury modern furniture around the room. In 30 minutes, the entire place is full.

On most nights, the vibe feels like a dinner party at a friend's house. Just about everyone at the bar knows each other, even if it's just in passing at the weekly farmers market down the street or the Santa Monica stairs. And everyone at the tables and booths, from the family with three teens to the casual technorati businessmen, are probably neighbors. That's a great sign for a new restaurant, especially one near the tourist-haven Third Street Promenade. The locals love it.



With its seasonal, always-changing menu, fresh cocktails and excellent wine list, Aestus opened in the right place at the right time. It's been bustling from the go-go. For all of the restaurants that fuel the Santa Monica scene, there just aren't enough really great ones. There are plenty of chains and casual spots for the tourist crowd and downtown shoppers, all-day hotel restaurants and oceanside spots along the Pacific Coast Highway, and a few longstanding high-end rooms for special occasions. For anyone looking for a place that's both a neighborhood hot spot and a quintessential Southern California experience, Aestus fills that niche.



CLASSIC COOL Clockwise from top left: The roasted carrots small plate with kumquats, goat cheese and argan oil moles for a vibrant dish; Executive Chef Alex Ageneau; the Old Fashioned-esque Fancy Free and gin-based Pink Lady cocktails.

Thank owner Kevin O'Connor for that. The former Spago wine director and co-founder of California's popular LIOCO Wine Co. lives in Santa Monica, and he saw the need for more places that he himself would like to frequent. The location couldn't be more perfect—on Wilshire Boulevard close enough to the Promenade and hotels but also bordering the tony residential enclaves—to capture hungry diners from both camps. Designed by Ana Henton from MASS Architecture, the streamlined room makes a big impact in a small space. From the sleek furniture to the busy little bar and marble-framed open kitchen, it all just sort of flows.

O'Connor found a first-rate team to lead the charge here. Executive Chef Alex Ageneau, who cooked with Theo Schoenegger at Patina and David Feau at The Royce, has created a straightforward, California-focused menu with a few French and Italian touches. And with the recent closing of JiRaffe, Raphael Lunetta's French-leaning seasonal restaurant that lived around the corner for 18 years, there's more room for that than ever on this side of town.

"Aestus," Latin for both "heat" and "tide," is fitting. Not only is the restaurant named for its proximity to the ocean, but also for the collection of small plates and entrees with seafood, seasonal vegetables and sustainably raised meats cooked over an open-flame grill. Ageneau, who finds inspiration at the local



...CONTINUED farmers markets but also taps into his upbringing in the Vendée region of France, definitely knows his way around a charcuterie board. The slabs of pork rilletes and terrine, housemade duck prosciutto and pink ribbons of cured ham, along with a salad and a glass of wine is the perfect summer meal. I also love the "sea'sar, a deconstructed Caesar salad of sorts. Take a spear of crisp baby gem lettuce; dunk it into a pool of creamy dip topped with bright red roe; and then add a dash of salty bottarga. It's briny and cool yet utterly fun and delicious.

Ingredients change often, so accoutrements will vary with a lot of the dishes. One week the warm octopus salad might have shaved fennel, radishes and clementine, but something entirely different the next time. What doesn't change is the tender octopus itself, which is cooked so perfectly, it doesn't matter what it comes with. Ageneau also likes to layer things, but not in an outdated, towering way. The beef tartare is a good example. At first glance it looks like a plate of sliced beef with a bright egg yolk in the middle, but peek underneath and you'll find the meat. Seared branzino sheathed in thin rounds of celery root is the

same. It doesn't take away from anything; it's more like unearthing a surprise.

The chef keeps things light, like the golden quinoa bowl with beets and almonds, or roasted and shaved raw carrots with creamy goat cheese. Even the meats, like a grass-fed flat iron steak or tender chicken, aren't heavy; both kissed with char from the grill. For dessert, millet pudding, a dreamy whipped cloud of deliciousness, is based on a recipe he learned from his grandmother. It could be topped with any variety of fruits, but strawberry jam and rhubarb was my favorite.

When O'Connor is in the house, which is often, let him choose your wines for you. The list features both New and Old World selections, all food-friendly varietals like crisp German rieslings, surprising albariño from Sonoma County and pinot noir that comes from everywhere from Burgundy to the Santa Rita Hills.

Like the name, Aestus billows with passion, both from the bright and friendly staff, to Ageneau's cooking and O'Connor's vision. The kitchen is as much a part of the dining room as the bar, feeling both communal and special all at once. It fits the casual-chic Santa Monica scene to a tee. **A**

What to Drink

The cocktails are as fresh and balanced as the food and wine, especially gin and housemade tonic, or the frothy gin and apple brandy Pink Lady.

Where to Sit

There isn't a chef's table per se, but the few tables right next to the kitchen pass allow a perfect bird's-eye view of the cooks in action.

Brunch and Lunch

The room is bright and sunny for daytime eating. The potato wedges alone are worth getting the burger.

Aestus

507 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, 424.268.4433, aestusrestaurant.com

Hours: Lunch, Tue.-Fri., 11:30AM-2PM; dinner, Tue.-Sun., 6-10PM; brunch, Sat.-Sun., 10AM-2PM

Prices: Snacks, \$10-\$22; small plates, \$11-\$25; mains, \$25-\$38; sides and dessert, \$8



ON THE INSIDE Clockwise from left: The interior of the new Santa Monica hot spot; ferretto with fava beans and shitake mushrooms is topped with a poached egg; the charcuterie board features five daily housemade selections and comes with grainy mustard, pickled veggies and grilled, crusty bread.

