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VANGUARD ISSUE



# CASUAL ELEGANCE

DOWNTOWN FULLERTON'S MATADOR CANTINA COMBINES  
CULINARY DELIGHTS WITH INVITING AMBIANCE

by **KATIE PEGLER** photography by **MARK SACRO**

hair/makeup **DOMINIQUE LERMA** wardrobe styling **LEILANI LACSON** model **KENDA PEREZ**

Buildings in Orange County typically don't serve as the main source of inspiration for the décor of a restaurant by its owners, yet Matador Cantina had the advantage of being housed in a two-story brick structure that is the oldest building in Fullerton. Dating back to 1889, it was the city's first general store and then added on to with a feed store. From the main entrance in the back parking lot, the original haystack door remains on the second floor. The venue also holds the title for the longest running establishment for continuously serving liquor in Fullerton — since 1959. The current incarnation of Matador now offers a fusion of Mexican-inspired cuisine in a rustic, classy setting.

Whether entering the back entrance on Harbor Boulevard or the main entrance, two vibrant “Matador” signs glow above, and guests then enter into an ambiance that is casual yet sophisticated. Themed Spanish after its namesake, one of Matador's most inviting aspects is its exposed brick walls. “The bricks carry a lot of warmth and character,” says Rob Hallstrom, co-owner of Matador Cantina, along with Mario Marovic and David Bailey. “All we did was build off its existing charm and incorporate a blend of rustic and modern décor with rich dark woods, custom wrought-iron fixtures and flickering candles.”

Patrons then have the option to enjoy close interaction with others and the mixologists at one of the longest bars in Orange County — 50 feet — and watch a game on the multiple built-in 50-inch plasmas, cozy up with friends or a date in the leather booths against the opposite wall or enjoy an evening in the lounge. One of the centerpieces, according to Hallstrom, is the wrought-iron bullhead statuette commissioned to a local artist in Guadalajara.

For the menu, there is an array of delights. Executive Chef Dave Dennis, a Southern California native, had a natural penchant for Mexican food and put his own twist on them. With training from Scottsdale Culinary Institute in Scottsdale, Ariz., he honed his skills at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse and King's Fish House. However, it was living near



Puerto Vallarta, Mexico and working as a private chef on a chartered yacht in Panama that gave him first-hand knowledge and experience with Mexican cuisine.

“Everything is absolutely fresh, from the fruits, vegetables, the meats to the fresh catch of the day,” Dennis says. “It's all about fresh and natural flavors and seasonings. What I now apply to my own recipes was initially developed from generations of cooking methods straight out of a Mexican kitchen.”

Some of Dennis' favorites on the menu include the Steak ala Plancha (a flat steak grilled with cilantro chimichurri sauce and pickled red onions, served with black beans and fresh grilled vegetables), the Chile Relleno (a poblano tortilla-crust chile stuffed with marinated chicken, Oaxaca cheese, cream cheese and green chilies, served with roasted tomatillo avocado salsa, rice and beans) and Chorizo Ravioli (housemade raviolis stuffed with a blend of housemade spicy chorizo, beef and cotija cheese and served with our own chipotle cream sauce). Desserts are also aplenty and incredibly delicious, but a definite standout is the Enchiladas de Chocolate, two crepes stuffed with caramelized bananas and a side of vanilla bean ice cream.

Whether it's a power lunch, dinner with a significant other or seeing what the mixologists can whip up to suit anyone's fancy, Matador Cantina is a must try. Just be careful, the cocktails are strong and so delicious that a dinner reservation might turn into an entire night there once the DJ comes on.

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[www.thematador.com](http://www.thematador.com)

## DRINK TIPS BY BARTENDER AND MIXOLOGIST NICK ELLIOTT

### Mango Dulce

Very popular among girls. Like the name suggests, it is very similar to a Mexican mango candy covered in chili. We use mango vodka and rum with some puree and coat the rim with a sweet chili candy that balances the spice and the sweetness of the drink. The color contrast between the orange-ish yellow and the bright red rim will make everyone around want to ask whoever orders one what they are drinking. Plus, it's nice to get a drink that has something else on the rim besides salt or sugar.

### Jalapeño Martini

This is a perfect gateway to get the population in Fullerton to try to experiment a little more with the cocktails that they are drinking. By letting jalapeno sit in tequila for a little over a week the spiciness from the jalapeno really carries over into the cocktail. By adding fresh squeezed lime in every drink along with a splash of our home made sweet and sour the spice is not overpowering and leaves more of an aftertaste.

### Elderflower Pear Rickey

An amazingly refreshing drink that has a floral taste without the sweet pucker taste that usually comes with a drink like this. Pear vodka, Elderflower Liqueur and lime juice are combined and topped with soda water. The floral aroma of the drink has more of an earthy flavor than what you would expect.