



Photo by Wolcott Schley

The Wooden Spoon

Goes Visiting

Story by
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Carlos Lopez-Hollis, owner of Dos Carlitos

It was delicious and a scenario to die for. There I was, The Wooden Spoon sitting across from a charming young man who was plying me with drink. It was an interview with Dos Carlitos Restaurant owner Carlos Lopez-Hollis and he was the consummate host.

The Wooden Spoon was “visiting” with Carlos and he was making me feel as if I were a guest. Our “drink” was a wonderful concoction of agave nectar, fresh lime juice and soda water over ice. The afternoon was warm and I was grateful for the refreshing thirst-quencher.

Agave nectar was new to me, coming of course from the agave plant, I commented that it would be the perfect sweetener for margaritas, which are made with another agave product, tequila. “We make agave nectar margaritas,” Carlos said. “They’re good,” he added. Hmm, that was all it took to impel me to return for a margarita taste test.

“When I asked where to find agave nectar,” Carlos responded. “You get it in health food stores.” I later found out after quizzing the internet that agave nectar can be used anywhere you would use honey. It’s a great alternative to processed sugar, has a syrup-like consistency and a lightly sweet aftertaste.

Dos Carlitos is on the corner of Sagunto

and Edison Streets in the heart of Santa Ynez. With outdoor dining, nicely appointed interior décor and delicious menu items, Dos Carlitos reflects a love of good food, commitment to quality and a genuine desire to make people feel welcome.

Glancing around, Carlos described Dos Carlitos as “my baby, it’s a hands on project, the first of my own,” he said with obvious pride. Carlos is a second generation restaurateur. His parents own Carlitos on State Street (across from the Arlington Theater) in Santa Barbara and Cava on Coast Village Road in Montecito. Both are long time local “eateries” with solid reputations and a combined 45 years experience.

“I wanted Dos Carlitos to be a hybrid of my parents’ restaurants, to tie the elements of the two and pay homage to my father and forebears by having Carlitos in the name,” he explained. “Our décor reflects the Valley’s cattle, vaquero and ranching history.”

From the chicken wire fronted tequila cabinet that forms the backdrop to the front desk, to the open beamed high ceilings, hacienda style Saltillo tile floors and custom seating, it’s welcoming, homey and geared to the comfort and pleasure of diners. Works by well known Valley artist, the late Channing Peace, distinctive pottery and interesting light fixtures work to create an atmosphere

that is both comfortable and distinct one that sits, in Carlos’ words, at the “intersection of sophistication and casual.”

Carlos’ family includes a sister who lives with her family in New York City. She’s a creative design consultant, so I’m sure Carlos benefits from her influence and input.

Born and raised in Santa Barbara, Carlos (Charlie to his family) attended college in Vermont where he majored in environmental interdisciplinary studies including geology, sociology, anthropology and economics. After ten years out of the area, Carlos said that he was ready to “come back home.”

When not at Dos Carlitos, Carlos likes to travel. He’s been to Italy and, he says, many times to Spain as well as Costa Rica and other countries to the South. Next is South Africa and Ireland, he told me. Future travel plans include the Galapagos Islands as well as Moscow. He’s ambitious and forward thinking in all he does.

He lives in Santa Ynez with Piper, his ten year old “bag pipe” West Highland terrier, plays the acoustical guitar for relaxation and has compiled a CD of background music for Dos Carlitos.

When cooking for himself, Carlos admits to favoring chili, eggs and pasta. He lists carne asada and the chili rellanos as his favorite Dos Carlitos dishes and an eating

out elsewhere preference that leans towards Japanese and Italian cuisine.

Dos Carlitos takes a staff of 35 to keep things running in the restaurant, tequila bar and banquet/special event room. And, Carlos said, they have just signed on to be a host for the upcoming “Tales of the Tavern” series. Sounds like things will be jumping for a long time to come.

With my afternoon well spent, I left Carlos with the promise to return and try out their signature agave nectar margarita.

When I had asked Carlos for a recipe or two, I was astounded when he agreed to share their Margarita and guacamole secrets, instead of one of his at-home recipies.

After returning to taste test them, I can heartily vouch for both. The margarita is well worth any effort needed to find agave nectar and by all means use the tequila called for in the recipe. It’s a delicious drink that’s light on the palate and a total treat. It is served without the traditional salted rim and that avoided a competing taste and made the flavor of the nectar, lime juice and tequila all the more enjoyable.

AGAVE NECTAR MARGARITA

- 1.5 ounces 100% Blue Agave Tequila
- 1 lime freshly squeezed
- 3/4 ounces Organic Agave Nectar
- splash of soda water
- Mix all together and serve over ice.

As for their famous guacamole, they go through copious crates of avocados each week not to mention the tomatoes, chilies, onions and cilantro. Not too hot, this is a real treat. When ordered as an appetizer, this guacamole comes to your table in a molecajete (a lava stone, footed bowl) with homemade blue corn and regular tortilla chips.

DOS CARLITOS GUACAMOLE

- 2 large ripe avocados
- 4 plum tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- 2 serrano chilies, cleaned and minced
- 1 bunch scallion onions sliced
- 1/2 bunch cilantro, finely chopped
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 lime, juiced
- Peel, dice and lightly mash avocado.
- Add rest of ingredients and serve with tortilla chips.

!Olé!

Editor’s note: Elaine Revelle is a free-lance writer who has written a cooking column, The Wooden Spoon, for a variety of local publications since 1971. She is a fourth generation Californian whose great grandparents came to the Santa Ynez Valley in 1880. In Wooden Spoon she features traditional and favorite recipes from the Valley’s best cooks as well as historical notes and anecdotes.



Photo by Elaine Revelle

This jaunty sign leads visitors and locals to the best Blue Agave Margaritas to be found in the Santa Ynez Valley.

DOS CARLITOS

— RESTAURANT & TEQUILA BAR —

Mexican & Latin Cuisine

Indoor & Patio Dining

100% Blue Agave Margaritas

Open 7 Days a week 11 am - 10 pm Serving Lunch & Dinner

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