

SBLS

Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

May/June 2023



Vol. 11 Issue 3 | \$5.99



CHASING THE SUN

DUSK *til* DAWN

BAJA-INSPIRED TAPAS AND TEQUILA BAR DUSK REVIVES SANTA BARBARA'S NIGHTLIFE SCENE WITH A NOVELTY MENU OF FLAMBOYANT CRAFT COCKTAILS

BY *Alexandra Lee* | PHOTOGRAPHS BY *Silas Fallstich*

The building was an enigma to passersby, its facade quiet and still as the evening scene came crawling to life along Santa Barbara's busiest promenade. The witching hour, when twenty-somethings emerge from their dens to secure strong drinks for midnight adventures ahead, gave no clue as to the mystery occurring behind its closed doors. Locals knew of 524 State Street as the former Church of Scientology, before its purchase in 2020 by a commercial real estate team, and from then on it lay shut to visitors. "Every local knew of the establishment, but what went on inside was very mysterious to outsiders," says Lila Boyce, designer at local firm Anacapa Architecture, who transformed the building.

Come February, minimalist modern luxury hotel Drift gave the space a new life, its moody open-air cocktail bar Dusk drawing inquisitive glances from visitors strolling State Street—though this time, for different reason. This new enclave of sophisticated spirits is understated in its design, a handsome respite from bright interiors and bougainvillea. Should passerby choose to give in to its gravitational pull, they'll be dazzled by the unbridled creativity that Dusk has dared to unleash in its novelty mixology. As its namesake hour would suggest, an evening here is a departure from expectations, an invitation to the unknown. Same building, different mystery...and long overdue that we discover what's inside.

"Our inspiration was to keep the mystery alive and do the unexpected," says Lila, in regards to the building's peculiar history. "We used black as our main accent, with concrete coming in a close second, and then warmed it up with wood." Accomplishing the unexpected has always been a trademark of Drift properties. Its primary location in San José del Cabo is a refreshing pause from towering family resorts and crowded pools, in exchange for desert-toned minimalism and tranquility. Their in-room showers, for example, are a playfully bold choice meant to push expectations for hospitality and design. In its partnership with Anacapa Architecture, which specializes in bespoke, non-traditional structures, Drift Santa Barbara pays

homage to its Baja soul while staying true to California's laid-back lifestyle. Flowing natural light, woody accents, and rattan light fixtures are staples within its aesthetic. Dusk's menu, similarly, is heavily inspired by Baja's raw seafood cuisine, serving up oysters and mouthwatering ceviche tostadas with a curated selection of non-name brand mezcals and tequilas.

So, let's get shaking! At first glance, the leather-bound menu's cocktail constituents pique my curiosity. Tomato water. Basil vermouth. Pink peppercorn tequila. Kiwi salt. Each unconventional item adds another layer to the mystery, and I'm eager to investigate. An endless lineup of multicolored syrups adorns the black bartop, and instantly the intention behind Dusk's minimalist atmosphere is clear—it's a seamless backdrop to let their kaleidoscope of drinks do the talking.

To ease into the heavier stuff, I start off with a Fine Fine Fine, a neon-green mix of midori, vodka, lime, cucumber cordial, and housemade kiwi salt. Our lively and charming bartender Claudia, whose hair is dyed an electric purple (you can't miss her) advertises this beverage for those who don't enjoy a strong alcoholic taste—sure enough, it tastes like those thirst-quenching agua frescas you'd crave at the beach as a child. I'd liken this drink to your unproblematic friend—sweet, refreshing, and uncomplicated, a reliable bet. Enjoy on a hot afternoon for a soft sense of euphoria, much like sipping an ice-cold lemonade in the dead of summer.

I'm feeling fine fine fine, having now graduated from lighter drinks to more complex flavor profiles. The Smoke 'Em If You Got Em is Claudia's favorite drink, so I know I'm in for a real treat. Mezcal fans, this is for you! The bestseller is smoky on the nose, balanced with a half-and-half mixture of mezcal verde and tequila, and a smoke-salt rim to match. Softer elements of smoked honey and ginger complement a red-hot chile de árbol tincture. This drink is everywhere at once, balancing spicy, sweet, and smoky elements with poise—for anyone looking to liven up a Friday night.



Warning: for those who enjoy a spicy margarita, the Picante Amante is addictive. The sister beverage to Smoke 'Em, she packs a punch without the potency of smoky mezcal. Her fiery fuchsia hue evokes a daunting habanero heat, as passionate as the name would suggest (translated from Spanish, "spicy lover"). Prickly pear shrub rounds out the spice with a syrupy sweetness, contrasting its housemade pink peppercorn-infused tequila and matching rim salt.

If semi-sweet, tequila-centric drinks aren't striking your fancy, don't be deterred. Dusk does it all. Strong and savory signatures include the Sip On This, an Old Fashioned-inspired concoction of mezcal reposado, fortaleza tequila, tamarind syrup, and bitters. Perhaps their most technical drink is a caprese-inspired martini (yes, caprese) dubbed the High And Dry, made with olive oil-washed vodka, basil vermouth, and house-filtered tomato water. Move over, dirty martini with a lemon twist! That's so 2022.

To credit this menu's genius, thank mastermind John Hardin, a community beverage master whose favorite color is pink, and whose colorful dreamlike concoctions are very much inspired by the vibrant hues of Palm Springs. How fitting that Drift opened its most recent location in downtown Palm Springs this March? The Dusk team is as lively as their drinks, emphasizing that the menu is all about having fun and stretching the limits of mixology. I mean, who else would invent a caprese martini?

With two spicy beverages lingering on my palate, it's time to tackle the heat with a tropical elixir. The Loves Train, a gin, pisco, guava, and pineapple concoction, is as refreshing as it is intriguing on the tongue. With primary flavors of summery fruit, the sweetness is rounded out by a bitter zing of prosecco on the finish. I find the duality of this drink to be extremely unique. One sip and your soul is swinging on a hammock in the Bahamas—it's tropical and flirty, an instant vacation for your tastebuds.

It's getting to that point where my cocktails are feeling lonely without some Baja bar bite company. The daily Ceviche Tostada features the freshest catch (in my case, a delectably tender sea bass) topped with chile, lime, and red onion. An off-menu favorite is the Ahi Tuna Tostada, a spicy, zesty, flavor-packed delicacy that has me savoring the last morsels. If you don't want to spoil dinner, opt instead for quicos, an addictive Mexican-style corn nut

snack dusted with sea salt and lime tajin—the perfect salty nibble to balance out sweeter drinks. Other bites include a fresh seafood cocktail, street cart fruit cup and vegan-friendly avocado tostada.

The time has come for the grand finale, a showstopping neon blue creation I've had my eye on all evening—as a product of the Instagram generation, I'm susceptible to anything with extra flair. Into The Sky holds as much star power in its presentation as in its unique flavor profile. Claudia describes it as essentially a kaffir lime-infused margarita with pistachio syrup and blue curacao, but its most interesting element is the bubble of rosemary smoke that hugs the top of the coupe glass. After it bursts, an eerie flood of smoke unfurls around the bartop, attracting wide-eyed reactions from all in the vicinity. This drink is for those who crave a little extra drama—or, who prefer their nightcap with a show.

When it comes to details, none are too tiny for Dusk. The team produces all of their rim salts in-house, from kiwi to pink peppercorn, a multi-day long process involving dehydrating the ingredient, crushing it, and mixing it in with salt. Even the tomato water in the High And Dry is house-filtered, and each of the tequila infusions and syrups are made by hand. It's a quality you can taste, and that ensures these bespoke creations truly cannot be found elsewhere.

This wizardry, however, is not even Dusk at its very best. The cocktail menu is not set in stone, subject to change as soon as every three months to keep the bar's creativity on high and its regulars on their toes. My insider intel also hints at a coffee-cocktail collaboration with Dawn, its third-wave coffee shop neighbor, also a project of Drift. Bartenders may even offer their own individual drink of the month—what they will concoct leads us back to the mystery.

As twilight begins to fall and darkness creeps through the open-air facade, I sit with my collection of rainbow-like cocktails, observing the after-hours scene come to life. An Into The Sky bubble pops to my left, and my eyes meet those of nightcrawlers beginning to traipse State Street in search of adventure. They have no idea where the evening might lead them, another enigma yet to be solved. My night is just beginning, though I'll remain here at Dusk long after the sky has faded to black. *

