

JUNE CONCERT GUIDE • IRVINE PARKS RANKED TOP 10 IN THE NATION • FUTURE OF THE GREAT PARK

IRVINE

WEEKLY

JUNE 3, 2022 • VOL. 4 • NO. 7

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TASK FORCE FORMED TO OVERSEE FUTURE GREAT PARK DEVELOPMENT

THE GREAT PARK IS FAR FROM COMPLETE, AND NOW A RESIDENT-BACKED TASK FORCE WILL AID IN FUTURE PLANNING.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

On Tuesday, May 24 the Great Park Board of Directors, in the capacity of the Irvine City Council, unanimously voted to approve the formation of a Great Park Task Force. Once complete, the Great Park Task Force will become a 15 member panel composed of residents from Great Park Neighborhoods. In terms of appointments, each council member will be responsible for his or her process if an application is needed.

For now, once established, the Task Force will be re-evaluated in four months to determine future steps. Ultimately, these Task Force members will help the city add developments to the Great Park with residents' needs in mind.

The Task Force, brought forth by Great Park Directors Mike Carroll and Tammy Kim, was presented in an effort to help quell years of frustration from Great Park homeowners, who pay a special tax, but say there is a major lack of development in terms of retail.

During the meeting, Director Mike Carroll spoke highly of Irvine's master-planned neighborhoods, however, Carroll added that Irvine could do better and that this Task Force has been "much needed" for some time.

"Unfortunately, there is one place in our great city where the promise of the master-planned community and its village system has yet to be fulfilled: Great Park Neighborhoods," Carroll said. "Not only is this area of our city saddled with perpetual Mello Roos taxes set up many years ago for reasons known only to the



PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF IRVINE

creators, but this neighborhood somehow still has no neighborhood-serving retail. Residents are understandably unhappy. They deserve much better than this."

During his comments, Carroll explained that the Great Park Task Force would help evaluate the needs of the Great Park Neighborhoods, and potentially formulate new approaches to help usher in more of the same amenities found at other villages and neighborhoods inside Irvine's master plan.

"The Great Park Task Force would consist, as we proposed, of a total of 15 members, three appointed by each City Council member, who would meet monthly with the city manager. We would empower that for a four month period," Carroll explained. "The task force would return to the Great Park Board to

report its findings and recommendations, presented by the city manager."

Tammy Kim shared her excitement while seconding the item during the meeting. In her comments, Kim said the Great Park has been halted for development for too long.

"The vision of the Great Park has really been held hostage for two decades based on political in-fighting and developers not living up to their commitments," Kim said. "We're here to think about the future. We can start building on the vision of putting the park back into the Great Park, but as we do this, I think it's very important and it's very critical to have the voices of those who will be impacted day to day."

Kim added that in a city with a population of 300,000 there is an abundance

of varying viewpoints, and thoughts on what is best for the city may differ greatly from one neighborhood to another. For this reason, Kim agreed to the non-traditional route of appointing five residents per-council member.

"Great Park residents, all residents of Irvine, voted for each and every one of us here on the dais. They voted for us. We all represent all of Irvine and we are all stakeholders in what happens in this city," she said. "I don't just care about my street, my neighborhood, I care about everything that happens in this city, and I think especially the Great Park, in my opinion, is a missed opportunity – but one that can be corrected."

Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan said she would support the Task Force if the selections were done by an application process, rather than an appointment process.

Councilmember Anthony Kuo agreed with Khan, adding that he would be open to having conversations with any members of the community that would be open to serving on the task force.

"I know people in the Great Park neighborhoods. I think that they would serve this task force and this community well, but that's not to say there aren't others that are out there who would be interested, that I don't happen to know, that I would like to hear from," Kuo said.

Director Larry Agran was in support of a Task Force made up of only Great Park residents, not city wide, adding that he had requested this item be added to the board agenda at least two times, only to not receive a second.

"I'm supportive of this – this is long overdue," said Agran. "It's not like this has not been proposed previously. On two previous occasions – at least two – I, in writing, asked that this matter be put on the board agenda."

Agran added that he feels residents have had "virtually no say in the selection, planning, design and development and operations of multiple million dollar features and amenities at the Great Park."

In fact, Agran wrote to his colleagues on May 25, 2021, urging them to place the item on the agenda.

"Better late than never," Agran said during the meeting. "I appreciate the fact it is on the agenda today, and that we will be moving on a positive direction."

NEWS



Portola View

PHOTOS COURTESY CITY OF IRVINE



Los Olivos



Playground Recreation

IRVINE PARKS RANKED IN TOP 10 AMONG NATION'S LARGEST CITIES

WITH MORE THAN 300 PARKS, 30% OF THE ENTIRE CITY IS DEDICATED TO PARK ACREAGE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Over the years, Irvine has established a well-known reputation for maintaining pristine parks and outdoor spaces. Thanks to this commitment, Trust For Public Land, a non-profit organization focused on ensuring people have access to nature and the outdoors, has ranked Irvine in the top 10 among the nation's 100 largest cities.

This year, Irvine was ranked eighth in the nation and second in California, finishing behind San Francisco.

Specifically, rankings are completed via the ParkScore Index, a scoring system that Trust For Public Land calculates based on multiple categories, including access, investment, acreage and amenities.

The ParkScore Index has become rec-

ognized as a gold standard assessment model, assessing aspects of walkability to parks for residents, access to facilities, and how much space is dedicated to parks within the city.

With a total of 306 parks in Irvine, there is plenty of open space for rest, recreation and exploration. With a median national ParkScore of 19% for total park space, Irvine's 37% of total park space doubles the median of more than 14,000 cities and towns in the ParkServe database.

Out of a total of 100, Irvine received a score of 83 for access, a score of 77 for acreage, a score of 93 for investment, 68 for amenities and 62 for equity.

While ranked highly nationally, Irvine's scores lowered considerably regarding access to park space in relation to race or

ethnicity, or where "residents in neighborhoods where most people identify as a person of color," according to the report.

While white neighborhoods overwhelmingly exceeded the city median at 85% (more access), black neighborhoods fell 25% below the city median, Asian neighborhoods reported 18% less access to parks, while Hispanic and Latinx neighborhoods fell 12% below the city median.

Less obtrusive results were found when comparing nearby park space between low-income and high-income neighborhoods. High-income neighborhoods have just 3% more access, while lower-income neighborhoods fell 4% under the city median.

However, the ParkScore Index scores improved when considering how easily all Irvine residents could walk to a park near their home. TPL found that 89% of Irvine residents live within a 10-minute walk to a park. In terms of access within that space, Irvine has received 100 out of 100 for installing 171 basketball hoops for every 10,000 people. Alternatively, Irvine provides 4.2 playgrounds, and 31 bathrooms per 10,000 people.

In terms of investments, the ParkScore Index also found that Irvine spends nearly \$200 per capita on its parks and open spaces. At \$155 per-capita, Irvine's city agency spending on parks, which is only 85% of total parks spending city wide, exceeds the total national average of \$98 per-capita in parks spending. In total, Irvine spends \$185 per-capita on parks spending.

In a statement, Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan emphasized the importance of open space throughout the city, adding that the city will continue to evolve with the mindset that parks will continue to fit seamlessly into the city's master plan.

"We are proud to be recognized as having one of the top 10 park systems in the nation for the seventh consecutive year," Khan said. "The preservation of natural open space, parks, and trails has always been an essential part of our Irvine Master Plan, and it continues to guide us as we plan for the future. Our parks and open space bolster the ongoing health and wellness of our community and contribute to our excellent quality of life."

BOSSCAT IS BRINGING 'THE WHISKEY ROOM' TO IRVINE

AFTER NEARLY A DECADE IN NEWPORT BEACH, THE OWNERS OF BOSSCAT KITCHEN & LIBATIONS AND ITS SISTER RESTAURANT TEN ASAIN BISTRO PREPARE TO BRING ITS WELL-ESTABLISHED WHISKEY ROOM MOTIF TO A NEW LOCATION AT LAKESHORE IN IRVINE.

BY EVAN J. LANCASTER

Located on MacArthur Blvd. in Newport Beach, on the border of Newport Beach and Irvine, the shared-concept space Bosscat Kitchen & Libations and Ten Asian Bistro has been a hot spot catering to the palate of whiskey aficionados, providing late-night vibes for locals and out-of-towners for almost a decade.

For founders Leslie Nguyen and John Reed, it's been a coming-of-age experience. But with age comes change. Now, with locations in Orange, Houston, and soon-to-be Irvine, the founders are continuing to evolve.

Still, the road to Irvine was not always chill late-night vibes and whiskey flights for the founders. Reed admitted the journey has become a constant learning experience for him and his partner Nguyen.

"One of the biggest things I've learned over the last eight years is that you have to be innovative with your brand, not just your food and drinks," Reed said. "To have staying power you need to be constantly evolving and on the ball at all times."

With the brand's nine-year lease on MacArthur Blvd. expiring in 2023, and the landowner looking to redevelop, Bosscat and Ten are looking to a new venue located at Lakeshore in Irvine.

Expected to open later this summer, Bosscat founders spoke with Irvine Weekly about their learning experiences,



PHOTOS BY WALES COMMUNICATION



with plans for expansion in the works. For Reed and Nguyen, the move to Irvine is being considered a graduation of sorts. As they explain, their early expectations of the MacArthur location were pleasantly exceeded by reality.

Speaking on the genesis for Bosscat,

Nguyen, who is affectionately known as Miss Bosscat and the founder of the Miss Mini Donut concept, said the Bosscat was created through an inspiration for what they loved and believes that inspiration helped anchor its success across the board.

"The brand has evolved so much and we've grown up over the last eight years. For one, we are sober, so that is different, but for me, each location has been a stepping stone to what Lakeshore is going to be. We've truly grown up," she said. "The 'Whiskey Room' has evolved with each location we've opened and is now such a staple, and centerpiece, to our spaces."

Previously, Reed and Nguyen owned the Daily Dose Sports Lounge in Irvine, but the space lacked a kitchen.

"We had dreams of owning a place with a real kitchen, serving real food. We were bourbon drinkers at the time and had a love for the brands, the bottles, the stories and the taste. This inspired us to open Bosscat Kitchen and to have it centered around the spirit we enjoyed," Nguyen said.

In the last eight years, Reed said he learned valuable lessons about how growth and approachability in both the dining and cocktail space have become critical components of business, no matter how close to home you stay.

As an expert in the cocktail space, Reed said he noticed things that hampered growth that he wanted to change through Bosscat.

"For me, eight years ago the industry – specific to craft cocktails – needed an attitude adjustment. It felt pretentious and was heavily focused on craft mixology – it felt unapproachable," Reed said. "Our goal was to create a more welcoming environment for the 'craft cocktail and scratch kitchen' lover."

Still, despite approachability, Reed said it's even harder to predict the evolving trends of customers.

"The growth of the business has been the hardest thing for me to wrap my head around. Across the board, people eat differently, dine differently, drink differently. That was obvious once we crossed state lines in 2017 and opened in Houston," he said. "What I definitely wasn't expecting was that this would also occur 12 miles away, when we opened our location in Orange. People definitely dine differently in Orange. We didn't expect this when we chose to grow in our own backyard, so we're ready and excited to see what will come when Lakeshore opens."

MUSIC

YOUR GUIDE TO LOCAL CONCERTS IN JUNE

Y PAUL ROGERS

With summer upon us, Irvine's FivePoint Amphitheatre is once again the place to enjoy balmy evenings soaking up the world's top touring talent. For more intimate experiences and to catch up-and-coming acts, the clubs and theaters of adjacent cities also have plenty to offer on any given night.

We took a look at just a small selection of the live music coming through Irvine and its surrounds during June, from colorful "surf noir" and conceptual hard rock, to uplifting praise and worship and raging, strep-throated punk.

STARSET @ The Observatory, Santa Ana

Tuesday, June 7

Starset's conceptual, cinematic and symphonic hard rock is both a proggy pre-punk throwback and a timely coming-together of video game imagery, thought-provoking faux backstory,

and Armageddon-ready wardrobe. Staying charmingly in character even in interviews, the core Ohioan quartet is fleshed out by multiple touring musicians on stage, as required by such a multi-dimensional sound indebted to the likes of NIN, Sigur Rós, Deftones, and even Hans Zimmer. Coming on like *Tron: The Musical*, there's something inherently admirable about the sheer ambition of Starset's vision, which is frankly too grand to fully realize in the venues they're currently able to headline. But maybe not for long, as Starset might be the next Rammstein – only with much more accessible songs.

LA LUZ at Constellation Room @ The Observatory, Santa Ana

Wednesday, June 8

Although originally formed in Seattle, nowhere does La Luz's "surf noir" make greater sense than in surf music's traditional SoCal home. The female foursome has been far from idle during the pan-



PHOTO BY KRISTEN COFER

dem, releasing both their eponymous fourth studio full-length and *Live from the Black Hole* last year. They're now back on the road in earnest, including UK shows next month. Alongside a fastidious respect for era/genre motifs,

what sets La Luz apart is a throwback sense of fun, including *Soul Train*-esque dance contests at shows, and international influences including Japan's Takeshi Terauchi. But don't expect cheap kitsch: Shana Cleveland's ghostly vocals washed with her bandmates' crystalline harmonies summon both serious small-hours introversion and welcome, gauzy escape.

CHICAGO, BRIAN WILSON @ FivePoint Amphitheatre, Irvine

Friday, June 10

Chicago isn't a hip name to drop and, unlike some of their similarly mega-selling peers, you won't see their wonderfully '70s logo on retro t-shirts at Target. Yet, commercially at least, this sprawling veteran outfit – 11 members at last count – from the city of the same name is right up there, with more than 100 million records sold and ranked ninth on *Billboard's* list of the 100 greatest artists of all time. Co-headliner Brian Wilson makes this bill almost a nostalgic revisiting of the legendary 1975 "Beachago" tour, when Chicago and Wilson's Beach Boys, complimented by circus acts between bands (seriously), sold out megadomes nationwide, including playing to 50,000 people at Anaheim Stadium.



PHOTO BY FEARLESS

MUSIC

FISHFEST @ FivePoint Amphitheatre, Irvine

Saturday, June 11

Hosted by KFSH-FM (aka "95.9 The Fish"), the annual FishFest is SoCal's largest Christian music festival, augmenting top-tier worship talent with family-oriented speakers, games, shopping and more. The 2022 edition gathers Australia's praise-and-worship staples Hillsong Worship ("What a Beautiful Name") and compatriot evangelist speaker Christine Caine alongside R&B-inflected Texan Tauren Wells; NorCal's Bethel Music collective; and Santa Barbara's Ryan Ellis. Already a prolific songwriter for other artists, Ellis' "Heart of the Father" made a huge splash last summer, boasting nearly 1.4-million YouTube views at the time of writing. In an era of vampiric commercialism and consumerism, FishFest – while far from devoid of these – at least strives for a well-intentioned spiritual component to boot.

Penelope Scott



PHOTO BY TYLER THE GIRL

PENELOPE SCOTT at Constellation Room @ The Observatory, Santa Ana

Wednesday, June 15

Throughout human history, quirky bards have entertained with catchy tunes, smart/smarty-pants topical lyrics, minimalist self-accompaniment, and wry observational humor. Cali multi-instrumentalist Penelope Scott brings this tradition into the era of music-making software and TikTok (and quite literally all over TikTok) with her ultra-relatable,

self-produced hyperpop-adjacent aural distillation of the chaos and contradictions of the Internet and our complex relationship with it. Still her flagship creation, 2020's "Rit" is as much about poetry as it is music – a witty, willingly disillusioned and foul-mouthed farewell/love letter to Elon Musk, and indeed to two-faced tech titans in general Nerdy yet ultra in touch, imagine if you will the musical side project of *Criminal Minds'* Garcia and you're getting close.

AJR @ FivePoint Amphitheatre, Irvine

Sunday, June 19

That these NYC brothers began their musical career busking but got their big break via Twitter is emblematic of an extremely talented trio with one foot in the songcraft of the 1950s and '60s, of the Beach Boys and Simon & Garfunkel, and the other in the production-heavy here-and-now of Kanye & Co. It's almost as if when Fun went on hiatus in 2015, they quietly handed off their sonic brand to AJR, whose debut full-length appeared that same year. But with 2021's ultra-ambitious *OK Orchestra* they transcended comparisons with a mind-bogglingly multi-faceted marriage of doo-wop, hip-hop, unashamed pop, and nostalgic Broadway pomp. AJR are already producing material of a complexity and restless, genre-hopping creativity worthy of a place in the same sentence – okay, *paragraph* perhaps – as Jellyfish or even Queen.

ZEKE @ Tiki Bar, Costa Mesa

Saturday, June 25

When the world lost Motorhead with Lemmy's passing in 2015, Seattle stalwarts Zeke continued to tout a similarly punkified hard rock cocktail, returning with their first full album in 15 years, *Hellbender*, in 2018. But while Zeke's constant 'Head comparisons remain valid, right down to *Hellbender's* frantically bluesy guitar breaks, the foursome is much more a truly punk affair, reeking of sticker-splattered underground clubs and broken-down Econolines rather than tour buses and the open road. Marking 30 years as a band and with two founder members still aboard, Zeke's wonderfully accomplished fury is absolutely unbowed. Their violently visceral take on rock 'n roll feels more welcome than ever after two years largely devoid of live music's crucial communal connection.

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IRVINE RESIDENTS' ARTWORK GRACES LAGUNA BEACH'S FESTIVAL OF ARTS

BY LIZ GOLDNER

Laguna Beach's reputation as an art colony can be traced back to the early 20th century when talented landscape painters moved here from disparate parts of our country and from Europe. Yet the city of Irvine is today lapping at Laguna's artistic heels with significant art venues including the Great Park Gallery, the Irvine Fine Arts Center, and the burgeoning Institute and Museum of California Art. While UC Irvine's visual art department within the Claire Trevor School of the Arts has been making waves since its founding in 1965. And many working artists who live in Irvine exhibit their work throughout Orange County and beyond. With the start of summer, four of these artists are emerging from their studios and scenic environs to display their various art forms and creative approaches at Laguna Beach's summer-long Festival of Arts (FOA), opening on July 5.

Working in photography, ceramics and oil paint, they embrace a variety of artistic approaches. Photographer Breck Ro-

thage, a 20-year Irvine resident, specializes in images of the California coastline and its waves. He explains, "Irvine allows access to everything Orange County has to offer an artist, including the inspirational natural beauty of our beaches. And let's not forget all of the wonderful art galleries nearby." The 11-year Festival of Arts exhibitor adds, "It is an honor every time I exhibit there. I can still remember the excitement of my very first year. As we got our booths prepped, and everyone was unveiling their new works for the show, you had a deep sense of the community that FOA has created. Everyone there is incredibly supportive, and the wish is for everyone to really do well, and for our work to wow the public that comes out to experience it."

"I create my artwork purely in-camera, exclusively using artistic motion and light. For this technique to work, the ambient light and motion of the wave must come together with precision to bring out all the true colors of the seawater, the powerful motion of the wave, and the eloquent beauty of the sea spray as it wisps across the crest of the barrel. One of my new



PHOTO BY BALDEMAR FIERRO

pieces for the Festival of the Arts focuses on a very specific color of aquamarine found in the top barrel of the California wave."

Ceramicist and lifelong Californian Gary Monji has lived in Irvine for 20 years and exhibited at the FOA since 2009. "I have served my apprenticeship in teaching and been a practicing ceramicist for 56 years, starting in 1966 during the heyday of the ceramic era in California. And I have taught the craft for 40 years. After devoting my career teaching ceramics and design classes, I feel qualified to participate with the best artists. And 'crystalization' is a rare category in the world of art and its uniqueness is a great contribution to the FOA. (The crystals, which are planted and grown in the kiln during the final firing stages, produce iridescent and unpredictably radiant patterns.) I devote 100 percent of my artistic efforts during the year toward my exhibitions at the Festival of Arts."

Painter Peggy Chang, born in Taipei, Taiwan and living in Irvine, creates dramatically expressive, colorful landscapes, seascapes, still lifes, portraits and her "Café Series." Her landscapes and seascapes, drawing inspiration from traditional California landscape artists in locations, subject matter and technique, illustrate scenes from disparate places in our state and beyond. These include Laguna's Heisler Park, the San Gabriel mountains and valleys, Monterey and the Grand Canyon. Her portraits of pensive girls and women recall the work of American artist Robert Henri. Her still lifes, most including flowers, burst with color and life. And her Café Scenes, depicting local and foreign

cafés, evoke some of the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh.

Photographer Hugh Foster specializes in portraiture, including close-ups of individuals and group scenes, with a strong emphasis on musicians, dancers, models and acrobats performing. Having lived and studied in the Pacific Northwest, in Los Angeles in the OC, his poignant depictions of mostly urban dwellers exploring the vicissitudes of life, depict as he explains "darkness and light, sadness and joy, sugar and salt." His images further express the adage that art is a metaphor for life, that photos can explore humanity's creative energy, along with our search for meaning and identity.

Behind the Festival of Arts' inviting grounds, the 90-minute Pageant of the Masters is presented nightly under the stars in the Irvine Bowl. This summer's production, "Wonderful World," presents a variety of international artwork from disparate lands and cultural celebrations. The dramatic narrator of this summer's (and of previous summers') pageant production is Irvine resident Richard Doyle, profiled in the *Irvine Weekly* in 2019.

The Laguna Beach Festival of Arts hosts more than 100 artists, exhibiting more than 1,000 pieces of fine art, including paintings, sculpture, photography, printmaking, ceramics, glass, furniture and jewelry. The outdoor festival at 650 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach is open July 5 to September 2, Monday-Thursday, 4pm - 11:30pm, Friday-Sunday, 10am - 11:30pm. The Pageant of the Masters runs from July 7 through September 2, with all productions beginning at 8:30pm. www.foapom.com



PHOTO BY RONA ZEVEDO

FOOD

WHEALTHY OPENS NEAR LOS OLIVOS NEIGHBORHOOD IN IRVINE

BY AUDREY FONG

A casual new dining option, Whealthy, has opened near the Los Olivos neighborhood in Irvine in the same shopping center as Fukada. Originally opened in West Hollywood in 2017, the franchise now has four locations throughout California and Georgia. Its focus is on healthy and fast stir-fried meals.

When you first enter, you will see that the restaurant is set up cafeteria-style, but this does not mean the food is pre-made. Rather, you have the option to fill your bowl up with fresh vegetables, uncooked noodles, and raw meats to create your own meal. What happens is that you first choose between their cup and bowl

sizes (I always go for the bowl size to have a full entrée) and then you can choose between one of their signature recipes or make your own. If you choose to make your own, you will then fill your bowl with carbs of your choice, move to the next section to pick out vegetables, and then finish off your meal with proteins and a sauce. After you put everything together in your bowl, you pay, and a chef stir-fries everything in their patented turning stir-fry bowl which cooks your meal rapidly.

What's amazing about their selection is that they offer a wide enough variety of carbs, veggies, and proteins that depending on your mood, you can customize

your bowl to taste more like Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Italian food. I also like that this restaurant is vegan friendly both because of the plethora of vegetables available and because they typically will have several plant-based proteins on hand like tofu or vegan chicken. Diners interested in low-carb meals will also love how Whealthy allows you to control how much of everything goes in your bowl, so in theory, you can skip the carbs completely.

My favorite part about this place is that they do not charge you based on weight, but on bowl size, so that I can add as many vegetables and noodles as I want. The only thing they upcharge you for is if

you get more than two proteins.

I personally always choose to make my own bowl because that's the fun of a place like Whealthy. My go-to bowl is udon with a ton of vegetables like spinach, corn, peas, mushrooms, onions, black fungus, and green onions. Then, I finish it off with bacon and vegan chicken (or salmon depending on my mood) and their sweet spicy sauce.

I highly recommend choosing their sweet spicy sauce. Even though it has multiple chili peppers next to its name on the menu, it's not spicy. It leans more towards a sweet and savory flavor and when paired with the bacon, it's especially delicious. I also like that the sauce is pretty thick so that it clings to your noodles. This sauce is the number one reason why I return to Whealthy.

Overall, Whealthy is a fast, convenient, and affordable dining option. Each bowl ranges from \$12.50 - \$13.80 and the portion sizes are generous. I recommend it to anyone who enjoys build-your-own-meal type of restaurants.

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NICE TO MEET YOU HOT POT BRINGS SKEWER HOT POT DINING TO IRVINE

BY AUDREY FONG

New to Culver Plaza, Nice to Meet You Hot Pot specializes in chuan chuan, a type of hot pot from Chong Qing, China that focuses on skewers of meat or vegetables. The skewers are then placed in the pot of boiling soup in the middle of the table to cook the ingredients just like at other hot pot places.

Like other shabu and hot pot places, the first step at Nice to Meet You Hot Pot is to choose your broths. You can have up to two broths and I opted for the tomato and house spicy beef (mild) flavors. The tomato broth is a sweet and savory option that pairs well with vegetables and noodles, while the house spicy beef reminded me of Szechuan spicy soups

filled with lots of numbing peppery flavor. Even at mild, the house spicy beef broth was still quite numbing, so I recommend going down one level of heat than what you normally order.

After you order your broths, you head to the self-serve refrigerated section in the middle of the restaurant. Here, they have racks of skewered meats and vegetables; plates of tofu, vegetables, and noodles; and an open refrigerator filled with beverages. All of the skewers and plates do add up quickly and can become quite expensive, so I recommend grabbing a little at a time instead of going nuts and grabbing every dish in your first round. If you're not interested in the skewers or bowls of fresh vegetables, they do have

a menu you can order from made up of cooked appetizers and the sliced meats you can find at a shabu spot.

In this center area, Nice to Meet You Hot Pot also has a few cold appetizers like cucumber salad, a selection of Chinese desserts, and a sauce bar. The sauce bar has a huge selection of toppings and sauces including fresh chilis, chili oil, minced garlic, cilantro, green onion, soy sauce, hoisin sauce, and sesame seeds.

Out of the refrigerators, I grabbed a large variety of stuff to try – watercress, luncheon meat, bamboo shoots, instant noodle, tofu skin, taro, and several meat skewers. Out of what I tried, I enjoyed the watercress and skewers the most. The watercress soaked up a lot of the soup as

it cooked, giving it quite a bit of flavor. Out of the skewers, my favorites were the beef filled with cilantro, beef filled with enoki mushroom, and pork belly filled with pickled cabbage. Each of these skewers was made up of a thin slice of meat wrapped around the filling, so it cooked fairly quickly. With these ones, I enjoyed how the filling added both flavor and different textures to each bite.

Overall, I enjoyed my meal and know I will bring my friends and family back to try it.

If you do go, I recommend wearing something casual because the smell of my meal clung to my clothes. My jacket didn't necessarily stink the day after, but it did have a clear spicy beef smell to it.

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ENTERTAINMENT



STRANGER THINGS SEASON 4: NOT SO STRANGE ANYMORE

BY DANIELLE BROADWAY

Arriving on Netflix in 2016, the science fiction horror series, *Stranger Things*, created by the Duffer Brothers, quickly garnered popularity for its 80's nostalgia and novel take on sci-fi and light-hearted horror. Set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, the first season explored the friendship between four young boys: Dustin Henderson (Gaten Matarazzo), Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin), Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) and Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard). Their bonds were tested when Will mysteriously disappeared and a girl with psychic powers named Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) appeared amid the supernatural occurrences within their small town.

The show also followed Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), Jim Hopper (David Harbour), Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer), Jonathan Byers (Charlie Heaton), Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink), Steven Harrington (Joe Keery) and others as they worked to unravel the secrets of a dangerous dimension called the Upside Down and a creature known as the demogorgon. With a similar tone to the 2011 Stephen Spielberg-produced film *Super 8* (which was also a nostalgic take on small-town life and featured a cast of kids fighting a monster) *Stranger Things* has been a wild ride, building up to what should be a big payoff in season four. But it falls a bit flat.

The installment, which debuted May

27, is split into two parts. Part one sets an immediately darker tone than the previous seasons while vastly expanding the lore of the alternate dimension, the town and Eleven. Set four months after the events of last season, the group is now almost grown up and split up between Hawkins and California as they navigate their biggest challenge yet – high school. Things go terribly wrong when yet another supernatural foe called Vecna emerges. The basic idea is this: a corrupt villain with a particular aptitude for being cruel as a child for some reason grows up to be even more cruel. The central antagonist is overpowered without explanation, is exceedingly evil without any initial reason, and uses

supernatural abilities to cheat death.

This chapter of *Stranger Things* is akin to parts one and two of the *Harry Potter* and *the Deathly Hallows* movies when it comes to tying together loose ends. The season is more sinister and brooding than the previous ones, with more jump scares and gore, but it's reduced by a generic background plot. Just when the series seems to have all of the right appetizers for something unique, the main dish is bland.

Beyond the villain, season 4 does have some winning elements: it situates viewers in interesting realities that aren't what they seem as beloved characters encounter deadly new problems and try to piece together all the clues. While this is an effective way of keeping the episodes engaging, an influx of new characters makes the story somewhat disorienting.

Introducing numerous new characters in later seasons is always risky, as there isn't much time for fans to build an attachment to them, let alone how they fit into the overall storyline. Here, we're introduced to Eddie Munson (Joseph Quinn), the leader of Hawkins Middle School's Dungeons and Dragons club and Argyle (Eduardo Franco), Jonathan's new best friend and a delivery driver for Surfer Boy Pizza. Balancing such a large cast with multiple storylines that eventually begin to overlap gets a bit messier than usual this season. Established characters with compelling narratives could have benefited from more focus.

In all, this season of *Stranger Things* does what it needs to do. Classic horror fans and those who enjoy mystery and science fiction will be mostly satisfied. There's some brilliantly sequenced scenes that are both immersive and aesthetically pleasing, and the older teenage angst is interwoven well within the supernatural chaos. But it's not quite enough to make it great and there's likely no way to redeem the dullness when part two comes in July, in just two installments. That said, we'll hold out hope that the Summer finale and season 5 might provide darker turns, wrap up loose ends and pay homage to what has been one of the best things streamed on Netflix.