

A Twist on the Classics

At the eastern end of the Sunset Strip, a Rococo-style mural, adorned with whimsical graffiti and bright splashes of paint that certainly don't belong in 18th-century France, greets diners to one of the best new culinary experiences in L.A. at Michael Mina's new hit, **XIV**. At the helm is Chef Steven Fretz, who works closely with Mina to create innovative small plates that are perfect for the restaurant's "social dining" concept. Head bartender Jason Bran has worked with XIV's parent company, the SBE Group, to craft a cocktail program that is all about the classics—with a twist. "I love classic cocktails," says Bran, "and gin is perfect in classic cocktails because it is more complex, layered and fun to play with than vodka." THE TASTING PANEL's favorite was the Star Daisy, made with Beefeater gin, Clear Creek two year apple brandy, lime, grenadine and a splash of soda. —*Rachel Burkons*

Jason Bran of XIV makes the Star Daisy cocktail.



PHOTO: ELAINE CHEN-HERNANDEZ

A Friendly Endeavor

At **Ortega 120** in Southern California's Redondo Beach, Demi Stevens and Tommy Ortega have capitalized on their years of restaurant experience and friendship to create a dining experience that's all about their customers. Close friends for eight years, Stevens and Ortega opened Ortega 120 in 2008, and quickly earned a loyal fan base who craved the restaurant's gourmet Mexican food and outstanding cocktail program. "We had people in here so often that we joked about putting their names on the bar stools," explains Stevens. "And then we did it anyway," she laughs as she points to the tiny engraved metal placards throughout the restaurant. With fantastic food, superior cocktails and customers who can't wait for more, THE TASTING PANEL can't wait to see what's next for this talented duo. —*R.B.*



THE TASTING PANEL's Rachel Burkons and Demi Stevens, the mixologist owner of Ortega 120, love Hornitos.

PHOTO: ELAINE CHEN-HERNANDEZ

Downtown Dallas Revival

Downtown Dallas is starting to come back to life. One part of the revival is the The Joule, a luxurious and modern boutique hotel, which opened in May 2008 and features the restaurant Charlie Palmer. Native Texan Brandan Kelley worked under Drew Pappas MS before taking over in June 2008 as the restaurant's Wine Director. With more than 800 wines on the list, as well as a retail store on property, Kelley offers hotel and restaurant guests a global selection, including a few labels from Texas. The wine list is presented in an E-Wine Book, an electronic list that allows guests to search by varietal, region, country, type or vintage. Kelley offers weekly wine tastings and wine-maker dinners throughout the year at Charlie Palmer, as well as in-home tastings and cellar consulting. As downtown Dallas continues its renaissance, Kelley will continue to do his part to share his passion and educate his guests. —*Allison Levine*



Brandan Kelley holding the E-Wine Book in the retail wine shop of Charlie Palmer at The Joule Hotel.

PHOTO: ALLISON LEVINE