

San Diego's Culinary Scene Has Grown Up

The days of driving to LA for a great meal are over.

BY AMBER GIBSON

“If you have great ingredients you can build great food,” says Travis Swikard, chef and owner of [Callie](#) and recently opened [Fleurette](#) in La Jolla. “My whole career I've been a crazy maniac about ingredients, chasing after the very best no matter where I was—Paris, London, or New York City. But I've never seen better ingredients than what I have here in San Diego, my hometown.” At Fleurette, Swikard cooks with items like local sea urchin, California sheephead, garden greens, and [Mikolich honey](#), uniting the sun-kissed culinary approach of Southern France with San Diego's Mediterranean climate and way of eating in what he calls “cuisine du soleil.”

[San Diego](#) has long been overlooked by jet setting foodies and the James Beard Awards—no San Diego chef has ever won. The city has a reputation for being casual and fun, albeit a little less sophisticated and less ambitious when it comes to hospitality. Sort of like Los Angeles's younger sibling. But over the past several years, a slew of new openings and passionate chefs have made it clear that fine dining has arrived in San Diego. You don't have to drive to LA for a mesmerizing tasting menu.

The San Diego food scene, unlike that of the bigger city two hours north, is defined by a tight knit community of culinary professionals and an incredible bounty of local produce and seafood. San Diego County is home to the most [small family-owned farms in the U.S.](#) and you'll spot names like [Chino Farm](#) and [J.R. Organics](#) on menus at the city's top restaurants, revered for heirloom produce you can't find at grocery stores. The wide array of world-class ingredients is a result of San Diego's sublime weather and unique terroir.

“The seasons are way different [here], and we have so many different micro-seasons and producers,” says 30-year-old Elijah Arizmendi of the new 30-seat tasting menu restaurant [Lucien](#) in La Jolla, which opened in July 2025. He remembers working with Wolfgang Puck in Las Vegas at Spago, and being blown away by the boxes of produce they would receive from Chino Farm in Rancho Santa Fe. “You want to have the best tools in your arsenal—the sharpest knife, the nicest stove, but what’s so much more important is the ingredients and that’s what dictates my cooking every day,” he says. While he expected the produce to be stellar when he relocated to San Diego, he says the quality of the seafood was a pleasant surprise; he’s also found a small ranch in Escondido where he gets a whole pig each month to break down for making guanciale, coppa, pâté en croûte, jamón, rillettes, and head cheese. It’s rare to see restaurants doing whole animal butchery, but Arizmendi relishes the challenge.



In the kitchen at Lucien in La Jolla Kimberly Motos

“The foundation keeps getting more layered, interesting, and dynamic,” says chef Eric Bost, who along with partner John Resnick, owns four different restaurants ([Jeune et Jolie](#), [Campfire](#), [Wildland](#), and [Lilo](#)) on the same street in Carlsbad. “It’s a slow growth but it’s been substantial, and we have more and more momentum,” he says, which is true both more broadly of the city and for their family of restaurants.

It’s that momentum that allowed Bost and Resnick to open their most ambitious restaurant yet, 22-seat chef’s counter [Lilo](#), to immediate success last year. “Nobody gets a menu [at Lilo] until the end, so the sense of trust is so important.” Diners might glean hints of what’s to come if they spot dishes like local [sea urchin canapés](#) decorated with toasted pumpkin seeds and delicate alyssum flower on social media, but most arrive and wait to see what will happen. For Resnick, Lilo’s popularity is a sign that San Diego diners are more excited for new experiences and unique offerings than ever before in his 20-plus year restaurant career.



At Lilo, chef Eric Bost doesn’t offer diners a menu until the end of the meal—meaning trust is paramount. Elodie Bost

Similarly, Swikard says his more rustic and casual Mediterranean restaurant Callie, which opened in 2021, was “step one” in building diners' trust before opening Fleurette in December 2025, where the cooking is a little more intricate and technique driven, with the help of a custom-built stainless steel Athanor cooking suite from France, and French brigade style service featuring a large team of cooks divided among different stations. “This style of cuisine [at Fleurette] is my purest expression of myself that I've ever shown in San Diego,” Swikard says. And Hokkaido sea urchin has nothing on the sweet plump tongue of live local urchin, which he serves in its striking purple shell on a bed of the creamiest soft scrambled eggs with black truffle sherry sabayon.

There's broad diversity in more elevated dining across the city too. Restaurants used to play it safe, defaulting to fish tacos and relying on rooftop views to bring in crowds. But now hot new restaurants aren't afraid to push the boundaries. [Kingfisher](#), [24 Suns](#), [Matsu](#) and [Deckman's North at 3131](#) are all noteworthy openings in the past few years, showcasing Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and Baja Californian flavors with beautiful presentations and remarkable craftsmanship. Tara Monsod (San Diego's only ever James Beard finalist) unapologetically showcases her Filipino heritage, serving pig ears, beef tendon, and dinuguan, Filipino pork blood stew, at Asian steakhouse [Animae](#).

“The scene here has changed dramatically,” says 24 Suns' Nic Webber, who grew up in San Diego and has spent most of his career in the city. “If you wanted to be a fine dining chef in San Diego even 10 years ago there were only a handful of establishments you could really go to train at.” [Mister A's](#), [Market](#), [George's at the Cove](#), [Nine-Ten](#) and [Addison](#) were a few of the city's fine dining pioneers, and all are still going strong, with Addison being the first Southern California restaurant to receive three Michelin stars in 2022. Webber worked at Addison for several years before opening 24 Suns with fellow alum Jacob Jordan; now, they serve modern Chinese food reimaged with Californian ingredients. “A successful food scene is generational. I hope we can inspire more people to take risks and open concepts that don't already exist here.”

Lucien is one of those risky new ideas, promising a lengthier and more expensive tasting menu than many locals are accustomed to. Arizmendi, like Swikard and Bost, is helping to define San Diego's culinary identity. “I'm really excited to be part of this wave of chef-driven restaurants,” he says. Arizmendi is not afraid to serve guests oyster ice cream, for example: a dainty quenelle within a shellfish composition that looks like a frothy ocean landscape, with poached abalone and mussels. Many dishes, including his pork pate en croute and tilefish with satisfyingly crispy skin, are served on colorful ceramic plates made by Arizmendi's mother in Northern California.



Animae is an unapologetic showcase of Filipino flavors. James Tran



Pork blood stew gets an elevated treatment. James Tran

San Diego's new culinary ambitions are drawing veteran chefs like Jason McLeod back too. McLeod first moved to San Diego in 2007 as the opening chef of the [Fairmont Grand Del Mar](#) and recalls that most restaurants of that era served tacos and burgers, catering to hungry families who came for SeaWorld. “People came out here to work less, surf, and hang out at the beach,” he says. Diners had lower expectations and chefs could get away with coasting. That’s not the case anymore. “San Diego is a big city but it's small,” McLeod says. “It's surprising how much our clientele dines out. That's the biggest luxury we have—a committed guest that likes to dine out.”

In 2009, McLeod moved to Chicago, garnering two Michelin stars in the inaugural Chicago Michelin guide for his work at RIA. When he returned to San Diego a couple years later, he began working with Arsalun Tafazoli and [CH Projects](#), helping a nascent bar group become a true restaurant juggernaut.

When they opened [Ironsides Fish & Oyster](#) in 2014, it was their first full-service restaurant, and the most money they'd ever spent on a project, celebrating local seafood and working closely with fishermen at [Tuna Harbor Dockside Market](#). “We were one of the first to put the fisherman's name on the menu,” McLeod says. “And the fishermen came wheeling in 180-pound swordfish through the front door during lunch.” After McLeod moved to Las Vegas in 2022, the restaurant fell a bit by the wayside, but McLeod returned this year to resurrect it after an extensive kitchen and dining room renovation.

“I turned 55 this past November, and I'm doing the opposite of what most older chefs do,” McLeod says. “I'm going back into a single restaurant and will be cooking every day on the line. I can't wait.” He plans to introduce two different tasting menus at the kitchen counter and bakery counter too. “I have no fear in selling that now.”

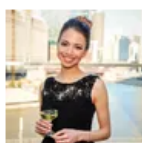
While San Diego has always had incredible seafood and produce, local diners are finally ready for nice things—and chefs like McLeod, Bost, Swikard, and Arizmendi are ready to deliver that in spades.



Ironsides Fish & Oyster opened in 2014—and soon will introduce two different tasting menus. James Tran



Through close relationships with local fishermen, Ironsides Fish & Oyster celebrates fresh seafood. James Tran



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