

San Diego Dining

Written by Elizabeth Exline

Wednesday, 28 April 2010 01:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 21 April 2010 15:13

Sun, surf and sustainability—if anything drives San Diego's culinary scene nowadays, it's these three concepts. And if any restaurant embodies such principles from the first sip to the last forkful, it's Cucina Urbana (619.239.2222, www.sdurbankitchen.com), the earthily hip eatery that opened last June.



Even if Cucina Urbana served nothing but its rosemary-potato focaccia bread with sundried-tomato pesto (it doesn't), and even if it weren't an inspiring success story (it is), you should visit to see the light fixtures. Chandeliers draped in ribbon, surrounded by old-fashioned filaments or shaded by tiny explosions of lavender fabric—these illuminating features surprise and delight just like the rest of the space. Everything has been tricked out in reclaimed and recycled materials that, like the pasta and produce, were sourced within San Diego city limits.

Formerly a fine-dining venue, Cucina Urbana is now gleefully rustic. Nothing costs more than \$20, bottles of wine are sold at retail prices with a modest corkage fee and the community table—which cannot be reserved and therefore inspires hope of avoiding a wait—encourages an egalitarian spirit.

But there's more to this hot spot than its gimmicks. Take the stuffed fried squash blossoms, for instance. These little beauties are filled with a mild herb ricotta, whose richness is nicely balanced by crisp stalks that taste like SoCal sunshine. And the strawberry fregolatta deserves its moment in the spotlight, too. (Roasted strawberry filling that sings of summer and is enclosed by a savory tart—need we say more?) In between appetizer and dessert is any number of entrees—veal scallopini done with lentils, pesto ravioli, braised black cod with a pistachio-caper crust—that won't lead you astray.



Photo courtesy of: Kelly Fitzgerald

Like Cucina Urbana, Cafe Chloe (619.232.3242, www.cafechloe.com) makes good on its commitment to use local produce (as well as all-natural meats and sustainable seafood), but it does so with French flair. Named after the co-owners' daughter, this is the sort of place where patio doors crinkle open to foliage-strewn patios. Where Art Deco styling and a black-and-white color scheme make you feel like you're in an idealized Paris. Where you can reminisce about that college backpacking trip over comforting dishes like macaroni with pancetta and tarte flambée with bacon and caramelized onion. The result is a bistro where the visual appeal is backed up by the gastronomic goods. For this reason, you shouldn't pass up dessert. Ice creams fall in step with the trend of unusual flavors (think orange-olive oil and milk chocolate-stout beer), but the bittersweet chocolate pot de crème steals the show. And accounts for your daily caloric intake.



When it comes to falling off the dietary wagon, however, nothing is quite so effective as the Hotel del Coronado's Crown Room Sunday Brunch (619.522.8490, www.hoteldel.com). Seven stations serve up seafood, sushi, Mexican fare, traditional eggs and omelets, cheeses, carvings, fruits and a spectacularly decadent dessert selection that includes chocolate soup and old-fashioned candies. It's probably owing to the resort's unimpeachable elegance that this culinary carnival—attended by everyone from families with picture-perfect children to guests old enough to remember the heyday of the brunch's rock candy offerings—remains impressively civilized.

As at The Del, George's at the Cove in La Jolla draws on a long history of California-style sophistication. But of its three restaurants, George's Ocean Terrace (858.454.4244, www.georgesatthecove.com) most seamlessly fuses San Diego's quintessential culinary traditions: light fare and alfresco dining. The shrimp cocktail and fish tacos, for instance, are as delicious as George's Famous Soup (made famous by none other than Oprah), and they satisfy without compromising your aspirations to be as trim as the well-heeled diners crowding the rooftop patio. But if you must overindulge, do so on the endless views of the Pacific. This is California at its best: Sun on your back, sea in your line of sight and a menu

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that draws on San Diego's tastiest assets.



A light lunch, of course, means you'll crave a proper dinner, one that marries the seafood of San Diego with the meatier traditions of a steakhouse. Enter Suite & Tender (619.515.3003, www.suiteandtender.com) at Sè San Diego Hotel. Traditional entrees are available, but the eponymous Suite & Tender selections are justifiably the most popular. Before you find out why, however, you'll have to procure the right tools, and so your server presents you with a selection of steak knives, à la a dessert tray, to browse. (Choices range from traditional stainless to a delicate rose-petal version.)

Now the fun can begin. The lobster and braised short rib, for example, enticingly arrive on a slip of a plate with two niches dividing the beef on garlic-potato puree from the lobster on corn with caramelized onions. It's as efficient as a child's plate but, unlike a child, you'll want to mix up the bites as you try to decide which is your favorite and which is best paired with the bottomless glass of wine you ordered.

As you mull over these important considerations, take a gander at the topographical relief of San Diego Bay that commands the rear wall. An illuminated dot pinpoints your location--not that you need to be reminded to appreciate it. Textured design washes over you in waves at the Sè, whether you're contemplating the jellyfish-like pendants in the lobby or paying a visit to Suite & Tender's unisex bathroom, which is outfitted from floor to ceiling in granite and inlaid Lucite. Such diversity of experience essentially sums up the San Diego dining scene: Cutting-edge style, innovative culinary interpretations and a good sense of humor.

For more San Diego restaurant recommendations, visit www.sandiego.org.