

THE CHANGING FACE OF SAN DIEGO'S *Dining Scene*

When Mike Mitchell, president of the San Diego chapter of the California Restaurant Association, was growing up in San Diego, there were a small handful of iconic restaurants in the city. "In the '60s and '70s you could count [the world-class restaurants] on one hand," says Mitchell, who is also general manager and operating partner of the Oceanaire downtown.

A couple of decades later, you wouldn't even know that San Diego's dining scene is in the same city. With a growing roster of world-renowned restaurants now expanding way beyond longstanding favorites such as La Jolla's George's at the Cove and the Marine Room, San Diego has gained accolades from coast to coast. Recent additions garnering national buzz include Carmel Valley's Arterra, Del Mar's Addison, and downtown's Jsix and Café Chloe, along with Nobu, the latest big-name newcomer, which arrived in November.

Clearly things have changed in the past few years. "San Diego as a dining scene is really blossoming," says David Cohn, founder and president of Cohn Restaurant Group, which oper-

Eat Your Heart Out DURING SAN DIEGO RESTAURANT WEEK

There's no better time to savor our city's dining scene than during San Diego Restaurant Week. After all, when else can you enjoy three-course dinners at San Diego's best restaurants for only \$30 to \$40 per person?

This year, more than 130 restaurants are participating, from the South Bay to North County. Best of all, San Diego Restaurant Week 2008 will offer double the enjoyment this time around. Following the remarkable response to Restaurant Week 2007, which attracted more than 250,000 diners, this event will be held twice in 2008: from January 27 to February 1, and from June 22 to June 27.

In the last few years, San Diego has made its national mark as a premier dining destination. So mark your calendars and make reservations at your favorite spots as well as new locales. For a closer look at some of the changes that have helped put our city on the dining map, read on.



Trattoria Acqua

MARTIN MANN

ates more than a dozen restaurants in San Diego, including The Prado, Thee Bungalow and Island Prime. "We've been making strides for a lot of years and suddenly we're going into warp speed. There's more interesting restaurants. And we're leaving the gimmicky side and are, instead, more into food."

FRESH, ORGANIC INGREDIENTS

One of the biggest changes in San Diego's restaurant scene might be the relatively new focus on getting the freshest, highest-quality ingredients. "We don't shop price; we shop quality," says Michael McGeath, owner of Trattoria Acqua in La Jolla. "I never say to the chef, 'Find the cheapest ingredients.' I say, 'Find the best ingredients and we will do our best to serve it at an affordable price.'"

To do so, chefs are going to nearby farms and creating menus from locally sourced, often organic ingredients chosen that day. "We're getting away from cuisine of the moment and moving toward good-quality cooking techniques and products," says Cohn.

Oceanaire's
Brian Malarkey
and Mike Mitchell



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There's also a shift toward sustainability. "We are asking if there is a better way of doing things," says Cohn. "We're trying to find ways to use fewer resources." As an example, Cohn says that for years water was brought in from Fiji and France, yet now the company is using locally sourced water.

GROWTH OF NEIGHBORHOOD RESTAURANTS

Until recently, chain restaurants were coming to San Diego as part of the "entertainment" trend that prioritized visual entertainment as much as the dining experience, according to McGeath. Now, he says San Diego is becoming more of a neighborhood restaurant town, with a stronger focus on quality food.

This means that once off-the-beaten areas are creating their own epicenters for foodies. For example, a compact area at 30th and Upas streets in North Park hosts three new local favorites: Zensei Sushi, Alexander's and The Linkery.

According to McGeath, people don't want to drive all over the county to have a good dinner anymore. And Mitchell points out that many flourishing neighborhood restaurants understand a crucial aspect of the business: It is imperative to build consumer loyalty. "Where value and hospitality are a priority," he says, people go back.

CELEBRITY CHEFS

The evolution of the chef as a celebrity is also a trend that has hit the dining scene in San Diego. "We have a lot more chef-driven restaurants, where the chef is the focal point," says McGeath. Take, for

example, Tony DeSalvo, executive chef and partner of Jack's La Jolla, and Del Mar's Market executive chef and owner Carl Schroeder. In each case, the accolade-winning chef and restaurant are nearly synonymous.

With a growing number of such cases, San Diego's chefs have certainly gained notice—even in the pop-culture sphere. "Five years ago, you wouldn't have seen a chef from San Diego picked to be on a national TV show," says McGeath, referring to the run of Brian Malarkey, executive chef and operating partner at the Oceanaire, on Bravo's *Top Chef*.

CHANGING CONSUMERS

Another huge part of the change in San Diego's dining scene is the consumer. "There has been a tremendous evolution of consumers' knowledge," says Mitchell. "Consumers are very savvy now." Because of that increased level of sophistication, consumers support restaurants that provide value in the dining experience, he says. But value is not determined by price—rather, it is determined by quality and hospitality.

Consumers also dine out more often than they used to. Mitchell attributes this to more emphasis being placed on entertaining outside of the home, as well as to the need for connection. "Technology has made it easier to communicate, but that face-to-face, meaningful time with each other—that's gone away," he says. "Restaurants are the last bastion of civility. It's a place where you can slow down, relax and have a conversation." ■