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THE FLAVORS OF SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Flavors: San Diego

California's Coastal Paradise is a new Foodie Hub



by Jeremy Joven

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When thinking about San Diego, the first thing that used to come to mind was Shamu, the world famous zoo, and Tijuana. I bet anyone who grew up in the southernmost city of California hates those associations. After all, San Diego has a lot going for it. The coastal city is the second biggest in California with a population at a little over 1.3 million. The fair-weather city doesn't make international news much, probably because it's just so moderate in San Diego. I don't mean that in a bad way... The weather is moderate all year, the people are just lovely, and the scene don't make too much noise—all a result of the city's slow paced lifestyle. It's as if you're living on an island. In my view, that's a great thing. We give too much cadence to being a bustling crazy busy place and we don't have enough metropolitan spots with a sense of island ease.

It's not just that perfect weather of 75 degrees year-round that makes San Diego just so damn delightful. The city is also a great spot for beer lovers, with over 700 breweries and distilleries (micros and nanos included) scattered all around the 400 square miles it occupies. What may surprise you is just how lively the food scene is right butt against the border with so many San Francisco alum chefs and sommeliers soaking up sunny San Diego's allure and changing the scene along with their arrival. On our visit we ate at more than 15 hot spots in the city, half of which just opened in the last few months to rave reviews and a crowd of hungry customers just waiting to get in. Could it be that San Diego is America's next darling "Foodie Town"? They sure are working collectively to get their spot in the limelight!



We had to try Bracero Cocina de Raiz in Little Italy, chef Javier Placencia's hot restaurant (a follow up from his hits in Baja California) where the true Baja flavors can enlighten our palettes, made with fresh ingredients from surrounding farms both in Mexico and California. In Baja-Med cuisine, as chef Placencia calls his style is a revelation, every spice, every ingredient, and every element of his dishes truly bring out the best in traditional Mexican cuisine. As one would imagine, San Diego has bountiful fresh seafood, and the chefs here know what to do with it. For example, Bracero's Wood grilled octopus with green garbanzo, roasted peanuts, and jalapeño is so perfectly cooked with just the right amount of char and spice to let the octopus freshness come through. There's the Sea of Cortez Callo de Hacha (Scallop) with the simplest ingredients like red onion, cucumber, and lime, all coming together to make my tastebuds dance. Their drinks are inventive as well, with creative cocktails perfectly complimenting the Baja-Med cuisine flavors.





All over the city from North Park to La Jolla the restaurants are buzzing with excitement. Their interiors are all inspired with a repurposed chic aesthetic, approachable and audacious at the same time, some more quirky than the others, all feeding into the vibe of San Diego's varied district styles. Breakfast Republic in North Park has that playful vibe, red walls, cheeky artwork, and an offering that will save you from having to eat at IHOP ever again. They have Oreo cookie pancakes, bacon pancakes (not just bits and flavors but an actual bacon strip inside the pancake!), churro pancakes, pineapple upside down pancakes, and more! Don't worry, they have healthy options too, and even some great energy boosting shots juiced just for them.



When you walk around North Park you'll have the sense that this is the newest rising neighborhood. It's cleaning up with lots of public art installations, murals, and attitude. (Even the trash cans have cutesy illustrations). Here you'll find the historic and trendy La Grange Hotel. It's hard to miss because everyone who frequents North Park loves this

ring the historic and lovely Larayette hotel. It's hard to miss because everyone who frequents North Park loves this place. They have live music playing at the hotel's pool area, which is open to the neighborhood for a small fee and, at times, movie nights, which are the perfect compliment to the hotel that used to be the last stop for big name actors in the '50s and '60s on their trips down to Mexico. The pool parties here get pretty insane (in a good way) with an outdoor bar to keep it going as long as you can enjoy that San Diego sun. I'd hate to call this hotel hip, because in reality, it's just a great spot with great history... and it doesn't try too hard to be cool.

Nightlife in San Diego is certainly lively. After all, UCSD brings those college kids out with their insatiable need to party. With a city with a booming cocktail scene and an already world-class beer reputation, you know people will be out and about to enjoy it. During the day when you visit you should visit as many breweries as you can... You could even call this service called Brew Hop so they can just drive you around to get your brew on. Make sure to go to Mike Hess' cool spot and check out the amazing space at Modern Times, too. Hillcrest, the gay area of the city, has some interesting offerings. Just try to prepare yourself for horrible-amazing karaoke if you happen to go there on a tuesday night. If you're looking for some sophisticated drinks and a playful atmosphere with table tennis, pinball machines, and shuffleboard go check out Park & Rec. It has a great layout with so many rooms to make out in.



San Diego's coastal spot, La Jolla, offers an entirely different experience from North Park's playful 'tude. The restaurants are a little more refined and a little more expensive but equally enjoyable. The Hake Kitchen & Bar serves a scrumptious ribeye lettuce wrap with a sweet soy marinade, the best one I've had in my life and I will certainly fly out to San Diego just to eat it again and again... It's so simple really, just braised beef! Their drinks are killer and their salads taste like heaven, farmed and plated. Galaxy Taco, on Avenida de la Playa serves up some legit tacos with organic blue corn tortillas made fresh from nearby mexican corn farms! Notable tacos include lamb barbacoa, potato with green chorizo spice, kale and queso fresco, and grilled avocado tacos... Muy deliciosos! Those are some elevated street foods right there, with the finest ingredients and the freshest flavors. Of course if you like your Mexican food from the small kitchens, there's a ton of that... and it's all guaranteed to make your heart melt and want to call your *Abuelita* and tell her you miss her.

The culture of SD is as exciting as its food with amazing mural projects by Murals of La Jolla, Balboa Park's immense collection of museums, and the inspiring self-enterprising people opening up new little shops all over North Park and other districts daring to be different. The deliciousness of San Diego's thriving culinary scene is the result of hard working chefs and restaurateurs daring to break from old food traditions in the restaurant business. Freshness is key here and working surrounded by the region's rich history, wealth of agriculture, and heritage in food truly makes San Diego a dream destination besides its beaches and sunshine and zoo.



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