

## How San Diego Has Evolved Into an Unassuming Foodie Town

BY ANDREW BENDER

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Carne crudo asado at Juniper & Ivy

*Diana Le*

Paris, Barcelona, Tokyo, Bangkok, New York, New Orleans ... San Diego? OK, maybe it's a stretch to pair our neighbor to the south with these foodie capitals, but the 619 has come a long way since its awesome fish tacos put it on the culinary map. Creative chefs are transforming three of the city's neighborhoods, Little Italy, Point Loma and North Park, into destinations where even the most intrepid explorer of L.A.'s restaurant scene might find something new.

The culinary attractions of Little Italy, just northwest of downtown, might seem obvious — but there's plenty to explore beyond the red and-white-check-tablecloth pizzerias and been-there-forever Italian delis. Mainstays such as Filippi's Pizza Grotto stand alongside new restaurants specializing in cutting-edge cooking from name-brand chefs from across the United States and the Mexican border.

Richard Blais started the trend in 2014 with the scenester Juniper & Ivy (2228 Kettner Blvd., 619-269-9036, [juniperandivy.com](http://juniperandivy.com)), where standards include crudo asado, deviled eggs with meringue crust, and the house-made Yodel, which bursts into hundreds of chocolate micro-beads when cut open.

Blais' follow-on last November was Crack Shack (2266 Kettner Blvd., 619-795-3299, [crackshack.com](http://crackshack.com)), turning humble fried chicken into an art in a very modern shack of distressed wood, corrugated aluminum and — because it's San Diego — an open-roof seating area. The Coop de Ville sandwich comes on a brioche bun heaped with fried chicken, pickled Fresno chilies, Napa cabbage and lime mayonnaise; don't forget the biscuits with miso-maple butter

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Juniper & Ivy's dining room

CeCe Canton

Little Italy is also the stateside landing pad of chef Javier Plascencia, who came north last summer after transforming Tijuana's and Valle de Guadalupe's dining scene with his Baja-Med cooking. At his Bracero Cocina (1490 Kettner Blvd., 619-756-7864, [bracerococina.com](http://bracerococina.com)), people go loco for albacore two ways (seared and tartare, with lime salsa verde, burnt onion crème fraîche, crispy eggplant and jalapeño ponzu) and crispy brisket and short rib served with, among

others, avocado leaf and serrano chile gastrique. It's all under high ceilings with postindustrial concrete, glass and wood, while leather seating around the bar adds a touch of old Mexico.

West of Little Italy, across the bay from San Diego's airport, sits the former Naval Training Center (closed 1997) in the Point Loma neighborhood. Now recommissioned as Liberty Station, this Spanish Colonial collection of retail, dining and cultural establishments on 28 grassy acres feels so gracious that it almost makes one glad for the military-industrial complex, and restaurants started moving in a few years ago.

Among the first restaurants to decamp here from across town was Corvette Diner (2965 Historic Decatur Road, 619-542-1476, [cohnrestaurants.com/corvettediner](http://cohnrestaurants.com/corvettediner)), an exuberant, poodle-skirted, soda-jerky homage to the 1950s. I caught a bouffanted waitress leading a gaggle of teens away from burgers and milkshakes to do the Locomotion through the aisles in honor of Emma or Zach or whoever the kid's birthday was.

The brewpub of San Diego's own Stone Brewing Company (2816 Historic Decatur Road, 619-269-2100, [stonelibertystation.com](http://stonelibertystation.com)) is a stunner in the former mess hall. With high, beamed ceilings not unlike a Mexican Hogwarts, it features a bocce court, twinkly lit courtyard and stone slabs that might be at home in a Kyoto Buddhist temple garden, and way-better-than-bar-food chow such as poké tacos and Korean *ssambap*.



And the just-opened Liberty Public Market (*2820 Historic Decatur Road; [libertypublicmarket.com](http://libertypublicmarket.com)*) aims to be San Diego's answer to downtown L.A.'s Grand Central Market.

It's an upscale collection of purveyors of gourmet cheeses, olive oils, empanadas, pasta, Thai food, juice and wine bars and more, sold from stalls with eye-catching overhead signage under big windows. Here, the restaurant Mess Hall serves a daily-changing, veggie-forward menu, with the freshest from the market.

The third foodie 'hood, the hipsters-pushing-strollers enclave of North Park, sits northeast of Balboa Park. Its look of ordinary grid streets belies the cultural transformation that's been happening in the last few years, with art galleries, hip bars and trendy restaurants. Cheaper housing and more cultural offerings here are giving the adjacent Hillcrest neighborhood a run for its money. About five years back, Urban Solace (*3823 30th St., 619-295-6464, [urbansolace.net](http://urbansolace.net)*) pioneered here. It still gets props for modern comfort food such as warm cheese biscuits with orange-honey butter and smoked tomato jam, and "duckaroni" – mac 'n' cheese with duck confit. The dining room is dominated by a brick-walled bar, and there's plenty of outdoor seating under generous umbrellas. The Sunday bluegrass brunch has become a neighborhood institution.

Across the street, hipsters have made Waypoint Public (*3794 30th St., 619-255-8778, [waypointpublic.com](http://waypointpublic.com)*) their own. Opened in 2014, this indoor-outdoor beer and gastropub — all salvaged wood panels and roll-up glass garage doors — serves a vast menu including the Waypoint burger, featuring cheddar, pulled pork, aioli and pickled vegetables, and pork French toast (potato chip and Parmesan French toast with BBQ pulled pork). Both come topped with a fried egg, presumably because it looks better on Instagram.

Meanwhile, One Door North (*3422 30th St., 619-618-1285, [onedoornorthsd.com](http://onedoornorthsd.com)*) hit the scene this spring, serving campfire-inspired dishes such as campfire trout, short-rib pizza and the toasted s'mores bar, complete with tables inside tents to enjoy them in, naturally.

## SAN DIEGO

**Getting there:** Why tangle with traffic when Amtrak from Union Station takes just under three stress-free hours (with traffic, driving might take you longer) and offers Instagram-worthy beach views? Once you arrive, Uber costs about the same as parking; plus, no DUI worries.

**What to do:** Little Italy has transformed itself not just culinarily but as an art and design district. Check out the 20 or so shops of the Kettner Art & Design District. Discover hardware you never knew you needed at Architectural Salvage, or peruse the offerings of the Scott White Contemporary Art gallery. In Point Loma, go for history and inspiring views at the Cabrillo National Monument, named for the Portuguese explorer who journeyed up the California coast in 1542.

**Where to eat:** Enjoy highlights such as the Yodel dessert at Juniper & Ivy, albacore two ways at Bracero Cocina, the scene at Liberty Public Market and the pork French toast at Waypoint Public.

**Where to stay:** The 68-room La Pensione (*606 W. Date St.*; [lapensionehotel.com](http://lapensionehotel.com); rooms from \$159) is a staple of both Little Italy and midpriced accommodations, with smallish rooms and easy access to restaurants, shops and galleries. In Point Loma, the Pearl (*1410 Rosecrans St.*, 619-226-6100, [thepearlsd.com](http://thepearlsd.com); rooms from about \$190-\$245) has a midcentury modern style that feels kinda Palm Springs; the sweet pool deck and swim-up movies are fun.

**Wild card:** Paralleling the food boom, San Diego County has seen massive growth in craft beer, with more than 100 breweries and nearly 120 tasting rooms. Besides Stone at Liberty Station, check out Ballast Point's Tasting Room in Little Italy, or visit [sandiegebrewersguild.org](http://sandiegebrewersguild.org) for a list of tasting rooms and beer-focused restaurants. Brewery Tours of San Diego ([brewerytoursofsandiego.com](http://brewerytoursofsandiego.com)) can plan your visits and handle the driving.