

ZAGAT

Why San Diego's Food Scene Is Better Than LA's

By Darlene Horn | July 25, 2016



With only 120 miles separating San Diego from Los Angeles, the cities share a lot in common — namely weather and a big-city beachy vibe — but they couldn't be more different in terms of culinary landscape. LA's much-heralded food scene often steals the spotlight from the rest of Southern California, but there are a few local chefs, owners and managers who find San Diego suits them just fine. We spoke to seven people in the local scene who have either lived or worked in the city to our north and asked them why San Diego is better than Los Angeles.



Anthony Sinsay, executive chef at Jsix

"The main thing that sets San Diego apart from LA is the camaraderie. The pretense in the scene is minimal at best. The chefs here in San Diego genuinely want to make the dining scene [better], and we work together instead of against each other by helping each other out when we need it. We are always open to collaborations and doing events in each other's kitchens. We learn from one another and we grow together.

"No one is too prideful to ask another about a technique one of us is using, and we aren't too scared to share it either. It's quite unique and something that you don't find in a lot of cities, plus it's my hometown and that helps. LA has culinary giants, but San Diego wants it really bad. We are no longer the little brother to the south that is living in the Big City shadow, but are working hard to find our own identity and soul in a cuisine that can only be defined as purely San Diegan."



Giselle Wellman, *Top Chef* alum and executive chef at Pacific Standard

"Originally, I moved away from San Diego to broaden my culinary skill set and work with some of the best chefs in the business. I ended up in LA because it was close to home, but had a larger culinary world for me to grow in. In the time that I was away from San Diego, the culinary scene has seen tremendous growth. We have an abundance of fantastic ingredients, from freshly caught fish right off the coast of Baja to seasonal produce from local farmers. Taking into consideration all these things, San Diego is a chef's paradise, and I'm so proud to be a part of this booming culinary city where everyone else vacations, but I get to call home."



Charles Kaufman, owner of Bread & Cie

"Opening Bread & Cie in San Diego in 1994 came on the heels of having lived in LA for more than a decade as an independent filmmaker. We all know that LA's hallmarks are the trendy-trends, faddy-fads and glitzy-glitz that are here today and gone tomorrow. But I wanted to get away from that 'flash-in-the-pan' food scene because in the end, it might be fun, but it's like fast food – tasty and ultimately not satisfying. Trendiness does not promote or nurture long-term quality, individualized personal vision, loyalty, or community involvement. We chose San Diego because we wanted to be anchored in a food community that values long-term commitment – to quality, to creative innovation, to longevity, to customers.

"Here in San Diego, we are freer to experience a wide-ranging palette of interesting and innovative food choices because here, individual creativity abounds and is not constrained by imitating or one-upping the collective 'latest and greatest.'"



Steven Lona, executive chef of Tasting Room Del Mar

"Growing up in LA is somewhat tandem to growing up with traffic jams, crowded spaces, a lot of hustle and bustle. There's an urban quality that permeates most aspects of culture and expresses itself in a rather industrious manner. I think growing up in LA, that's what I remember the most. The eclectic industrial influence and multi-cultural perspective.

"LA has its perks, but I've found myself in stronger collaborative relationships in San Diego than in my time spent north. The creative relationship I have in-house with my chef de cuisine, Jenny [Goycochea], is something I chased for a long time in LA, and it took coming to San Diego to find it. That speaks volumes about the potential for collaborative growth on personal and professional levels."



Yohei Umezu (pictured on the right), owner of [The San Diego Poke Company](#)

"I grew up in LA, but I have found myself to prefer the San Diego food scene to LA's because of the exciting locales such as Little Italy. They have great restaurants, frequent festivals and weekly farmers markets. Ever since I moved here from LA, I have felt so welcomed. I have encountered nothing but kind, respectful and friendly people. There are so many food and drink events always happening in San Diego – from cultural festivals such as PIFA to beer fests. I am blessed with such an amazing client base. I am thankful for my everyday customers, who are super friendly San Diegans. I'm proud to say San Diego has become my second home."



Christian Liang, co-owner of [Common Theory Public House](#)

"Why San Diego over LA? I love LA almost as much as I love San Diego; I have a lot of fond memories up there. Sure, the dining scene is recognized as one of the major food cities, and perhaps rightfully so, as it has many great restaurants and chefs. But what makes San Diego better, in my opinion, is that the food scene [here] is exciting; there's a lot of momentum and excitement from the consumers, the chefs, and the restaurateurs. That momentum is credited to the many years of hard work and dedication from talented chefs like Trey Foshee from George's at the Cove, and Jay Knibb from The Nine-Ten, just to name two – and there are many, many more. As fairly new business owners in this exciting hospitality business, we're just humbled, excited and happy to be part of it!

"Oh, and of course the San Diego food scene is waaaay better because of the hundreds of local craft breweries that are making amazing beers here in our neck of the woods. Many chefs all around San Diego are having a blast creating dishes to pair with craft beer and even cooking with some of our local crafts."



Oliver West, manager at Backyard Kitchen & Tap

"I grew up in Venice Beach, back when it was 'the jungle,' a few blocks from the Oakwood Pentagon. This was well before the hipsters settled, before million-dollar homes lined the canals, before Canal Club, James' Beach, and well before anyone dreamed a Michelin star would find a home on Abbot Kinney. What makes San Diego unlike any other city are the people that make up what we collectively call 'the industry.' It's a brotherhood that supports one another. Every restaurant, bar, nightclub you go to you're taken care of. LA doesn't have that – it's disconnected, dissonant.

"While San Diego is a smaller market, [it's] been a boon to its culinary revolution. Smaller markets are more forgiving. You can experiment without the fear of being ruined by one bad decision. The culture in San Diego is about innovation, and I think that's been the biggest draw for some younger chefs moving here like Brian Malarkey, Matt Gordon, Richard Blais, and Jason Knibb. LA has something about it that simply feels dated. The older restaurants cast a long shadow, and it's hard for new and different ideas and places to really stand out."