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The gritty North County city is coming of age one local idea at a time

# THE OCEAN SIDE REVO LUTION

By Troy Johnson

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and Sam Wells



A father and son outside Rais Case boutique during the monthly South O Walkabout

**San Diego's beaches are nearly at max capacity. The cost of living near one of them gets higher by the day, meaning most residents have already reached the point where success is to be enjoyed, not fought for. There is nothing inherently wrong with money, nor people who possess lots of it. But there's a certain hunger and energy to people who haven't made it yet. They take risks, fly by the seat of their pants, scrape life together, put everything on the line. Whether in art, music, food, drinks, or entrepreneurship, there's an energy to that hunger that can't be replicated.**







**San Diego has exactly three beach towns remaining where the hungry can live: Imperial Beach, Ocean Beach, and Oceanside.** And now the Oceanside rush is on, because the locals have made it terribly cool.

**Davin Waite** points to a full-grown carrot plant in the ramshackle back patio of **Wrench & Rodent**, his sushi restaurant in South Oceanside. “That was just a scrap that we threw in the soil,” he says. “We’ll take scraps, throw them in the corner, and see what grows.” Next to a grill where they smoke eel, there are plants of all kinds—

tomatoes, butternut squash, carrots, peppers, kaffir limes, herbs, chocolate mint, passionfruit.

Local fisherman Shawn Aulby of Oceanside Whole Fish pulls his truck up to the restaurant. Inside a cooler, he unveils last night’s catch: three vibrant yellowtail, destined to become tonight’s sushi.

Even Grammy-winning musician Jason Mraz has gotten into the local food scene. He recently held the O’Side Feast at his own Mraz Family Farms with local chefs, growers, and makers. It was a collaboration with the city, which is investing money to promote the area’s agritourism. As he put it:

“Oceanside’s the new Brooklyn of San Diego.”



**Once marginalized as an isolated military town** of strip clubs and gang problems, Oceanside’s food, art, and local business scene have reached the destination stage. Now mixed-use retail spots are springing up, tourist maps are circulating, and South O “walkabouts” are heading out on the second Wednesday of each month. A crane looms near the landmark pier like a sculpture called *Progress*.





"I'm born and raised here for 42 years," says Aubly. "It's changed drastically. It's a good thing. As a local, I like the old, shady Oceanside. But you can't stop change. It's sad that these restaurants are here for us. They'd rather give their money to me or a local farmer like Luke Girling of Cyclops Farms and keep it in the community."

There are two Oceansides: the more tourist-oriented downtown,

*SEEDINESS IS CRUCIAL TO OCEANSIDE'S CHARM. TOO MUCH PRISTINE DEVELOPMENT, AND SOUL WILL BE SHED, IF NOT LOST.*

and the local haven of South O. Both have their charms. When the city allocated redevelopment money years ago, most of it went into downtown. So South O business owners—like Roddy and Aaron Browning of Flying Pig, which most people credit as the bistro that started the city's little revolution—grabbed some bootstraps and built themselves.

Waite introduces me to Charlie Anderson, a native many refer to as "the mayor of South O." He credits TransWorld, a surfing and skating lifestyle media company founded in Oceanside, as a big reason for the city's creative boom. "They brought all these creative people to the area who had access and connections who started their own businesses," he says. "I started Privateer [Coal Fire Pizza] while working there. Our former receptionist at TransWorld started Nixon watches. Brixton apparel was started by a TransWorld employee; [sports commentator] Sal Masekela worked there."

Waite, a 37-year-old sushi chef, is a living metaphor for his hometown. He spent the first half of his life as the kid moms warn their children to avoid—drugs, drinking, danger. Then he cleaned



(Top) Sunshine Brooks Theater on North Coast Highway; (bottom) Charlie Anderson, owner of Privateer Coal Fire Pizza (left) and Davin Waite (right), chef-owner of Wrench & Rodent and The Whet Noodle

up and became an attraction.

With an old Oceanside punk band, The Hillstreet Stranglers, on his radio, Waite drives me to some of his favorite places. We start downtown at Petite Madeline, a bakery owned by local Christine Loyola. Their all-day buns and ham sandwiches (Gruyère cheese, béchamel sauce, and roasted ham) pull a steady stream of locals in for breakfast and lunch.

Before we enter, Waite pauses and looks around downtown. “As a kid, my dad would drive our Pinto up here and say, ‘Kids, if you hear a loud noise I need you to duck.’ And when it happened, he’d reach back with both hands and lock both of the doors. And you know what, most of the time we had to duck. There were still hookers on the street. It was the place where kids go away with Pinocchio and turn into donkeys.”



**Seediness is crucial to Oceanside’s charm.** Too much pristine development, and soul will be shed, if not lost. There’s a reason the TNT crime drama *Animal Kingdom* is filming here. The city still feels rough, gritty, real. No one in Oceanside cares much about celebrities, Waite says. Yes, so-and-so lives here. Locals care about the skaters, surfers, hot rodders, bikers, enlistees, farmers, fishermen, muralists, graffiti artists, natives, neighbors, people.

Waite points to a sex shop with excitement. “Every town needs a good sex shop,” he says. “And I think it’s great that we have a sex shop right next to the tourist attraction of the surf museum. And we still have a strip club.” As we get out to walk the streets, the sidewalks aren’t Del Mar clean. But we pass moms in yoga pants with their kids in strollers. Clean enough. Buildings are wrapped in bright murals by artists like Kris Markovich. The police no longer consider the murals graffiti; they’ve let street art flourish.

The harsh realities of old Oceanside still occasionally sting. In



June, a man was murdered in Junior Seau Amphitheatre on the night of the farmers’ market. But Waite credits the city, and police, for fostering the right kind of progress. “The OPD has solved almost every homicide that’s happened in the last couple of years,” he says. “It’s not a sterile environment; the homicides are still happening, but it’s been a long time since I didn’t feel safe.”

We stop by Real Surf Shop and meet owner Shawn Ambrose. I tell him I’m doing a story on—“The gentrification of Oceanside,” he says, finishing my sentence. Yes, well, the growth.

“Here’s the thing,” Ambrose explains. “We don’t want to become Huntington Beach. Unfortunately, the town council uses that as a goal, kind of. You can’t stop progress, but you can control it. I’d rather be closer to OB or Leucadia.”

You’ll hear almost this exact line from all the local business owners: progress is inevitable; we’d rather

be a part of it. “If you talk to everyone, we’re all going to say the same thing,” explains Waite, smirking as he adds, “and if we have to bear arms to accomplish our agenda...”

Part of what’s kept Oceanside so “real” is the same reason OB became a hotbed for counter-culture: geographic isolation. Interstate 8 wasn’t built until 1972, so ’60s activists had a relatively removed place to live their nontraditional, creative lives. And Planet Oceanside is 35 miles from downtown San Diego, with the gridlock of the 5/805 merge between them. On the north end, Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton separates it from Orange County by 16 miles.

“Mayor Anderson” has expanded Privateer next door with a market of local goods. He serves baked treats from Madeline, plus some desserts from a local gal who’s baking while working a day job at Brixton. His son works at Privateer.







next to a local who's already selling pizza, your time in Oceanside will not be pleasant, and possibly short.


On an empty lot in suburban Fire Mountain ("the Beverly Hills of Oceanside," says Waite), Luke Girling walks us through Cyclops Farms. This is a place where a multimillion-dollar estate could've been built. Instead, there are rows of squash, watermelons, peppers, tomatoes, and strawberries. On Saturdays, there's a line for his farm stand. The rest of the week, he supplies Oceanside chefs like Waite and Willy Eick, a former George's at the Cove cook who partnered in the bistro 608. Farm-to-table distance: about eight blocks.



**Back downtown, we drive by the *Top Gun* house,** where Tom Cruise and Kelly McGillis did their thing. It's abandoned, a little sad. But the fence suggests someone has plans for that prime real estate. The weekly Thursday farmers' market is jam-packed, and will reconvene closer to the water and a little rowdier near sunset.

Having grown up in San Diego, I remember Oceanside as San Diego's gangland, whether the Posole Locos, Deep Valley Bloods and Crips, Samoan gangs, black gangs, Mexican gangs, white Aryan gangs. It has the best summer surf in San Diego, so we would come despite all that, and drive by all sorts of boarded-up businesses. It was a surf ghost town. Shady people in the sun.

Now those empty storefronts are filling. Families walk the streets next to the homeless, the haggard, and the willfully unkempt. They've started calling the Coaster commuter train "the Oceanside Express." People from central San Diego will take the train up, go to dinner, grab a drink at Local Tap House, and then Uber back home.

And at the center of all the renewed interest and action are longtime locals like Waite and Anderson, showing respectful outsiders around with a wary, vigilant eye on the growth. 



(Clockwise from top left) *Endless Sessions*, which specializes in custom boards; chef-owner Iole Revilla cooks at *Panca Peruvian Cuisine & Rotisserie*; a shopper cruises the neighborhood during the *South O Walkabout*

They had the same third-grade teacher at the nearby elementary school.

The fact that Waite has taken me to see *Privateer* is indicative of Oceanside's community, especially South O. Locals help each other. Outsiders who don't get it get snubbed. As a surfer, I suggest to Anderson that it's similar to "aggressive localism" in the water. I apologize, feeling that might be too harsh.

"You can say 'aggressive localism,'" he agrees. "I feel we're really welcoming and accommodating, open arms to everyone. But if you're going to be a jerk and disrespect us, then the elbows go up. Because we've been ostracized our entire lives as 'Oceanslimes.' Dirtbags. And here are these dirtbags now making cool stuff. We don't take that for granted."

They want people investing in the community. People who help each other. If you set up a pizza place

# THE OCEANSIDE GUIDE

**Where to eat, shop, and soak up culture in the 760 (and 442)**

## FOOD & DRINK

### ♦ Flying Pig Pub & Kitchen

Most locals cite this gastropub as the start of South O's current restaurant boom. Inside, it's got the Austin-like garage-sale aesthetic, but pro service (owner Roddy Browning worked at Market Del Mar). Order anything pork. *626 South Tremont Street; flyingpig.pub*

### ♦ Petite Madeline

Chef-owner Christine Loyola started selling all-day buns at the farmers' market until popularity demanded this corner space. Now it's where the whole city starts the day, sometimes at noon for the ham sammys. *223 North Coast Highway; petitemadelinebakery.com*

### ♦ Wrench & Rodent Seabastropub

Chef Davin Waite's sushi joint is a tiny, eclectic box filled with knickknacks and skate-punk decor. Waite and his brother usually work the bar themselves, so sit there for an *omakase*. *1815 South Coast Highway; seabastropub.com*

### ♦ The Privateer Marketplace & Wine Bar

This is the expansion of owner Charlie Anderson's Privateer Coal Fire Pizza next door. They have open-faced sandwiches like house-smoked pastrami, plus breakfast pastries and desserts. Monday night's stand-up comedy events are always popular. *1704 South Coast Highway; privateer-marketplace.com*

### ♦ Panca Peruvian Cuisine & Rotisserie

This is where Oceanside gets its Peruvian food. Chef-owner Iole Revilla's original rotisserie was so successful that she

expanded into a full menu, and is opening a new concept next door. Try the lomo soltado and the aji de gallina. *1902 South Coast Highway; pancaperuviancuisine.com*

### ♦ 608

After cooking at George's at the Cove, chef Willy Eick opened this bistro on the main strip going into downtown. Dishes like short ribs in panang curry sauce are pushing the scene's culinary acumen. *608 Mission Avenue; 608oceanside.com*

### ♦ The Miller's Table

This little courtyard is where a lot of O'side chefs got their start, and right now it's Staci Miller's wine and craft beer bar with sandwiches, salads, small plates, charcuterie, and cheese. *514 South Coast Highway; themillerstable.com*

### ♦ Local Tap House (LTH)

This has become the social aorta for O'siders, with 32 tap handles of craft beer, a wide-open corner layout, and true farm-to-table food from chef Daniel Pundik. *308 South Coast Highway; localtaphouse.com*

### ♦ Banana Dang

A coffee and smoothie stop, where locals go for a liquid breakfast and pick-me-up like the "Radical Dang" with kale, hemp, banana, and mango. *115 South Coast Highway; bananadang.com*

### ♦ Farmers Market and Sunset Market

Thursdays the whole city gathers in the downtown streets, starting with the Farmers Market (9 a.m.–1 p.m.), then moving closer to the beach for Sunset Market (5–9 p.m.). *mainstreetoceanside.com*

### ♦ Cyclops Farms

On a plot of land tucked between very nice homes, farmer Luke Girling grows food for locals and chefs alike. Go Saturday mornings when his farm stand is open, selling the latest harvest. *1448 Avocado Road; cyclopsfarms.com*



(Top) Flying Pig Pub & Kitchen; (bottom) Captain's Helm

## ARTS & CULTURE

### ♦ Oceanside Museum of Art

Surf city has a long history of pretty, arty things, and OMA is one of the its top modern museums. Through the end of August, they're showcasing work from 92 regional artists. *704 Pier View Way; oma-online.org*





#### ♦ South O Walkabout

Every second Wednesday of the month from 5 to 8 p.m., South O's shops stay open late and locals loiter, mingle, and jump from one storefront to the next, saying hi, tasting, sipping, buying.

[southowalkabout](#)

#### ♦ California Surf Museum

O'side has some of the best surf in San Diego County, especially during the summer, and it's ground zero for some of the best shapers and pro surfers. This museum documents their art and stoke.

[312 Pier View Way; surfmuseum.org](#)

## SHOPS

#### ♦ Real Surf

Indie surf shops are, like record stores, an endangered breed. Here, owner Shawn Ambrose shapes, fixes dings, and designs threads. It's where locals shop.

[1101 South Coast Highway; realsurfshop.co](#)

#### ♦ Captain's Helm

One of the most creative vintage clothing stores in town, specializing in one-of-a-kind, hard-to-find items (Ted Nugent concert tees!). They also have a tiny coffee bar where locals get their espresso.

[1832 South Coast Highway; captainshelm.com](#)

#### ♦ Reap & Sow

Like a laid-back spiritual boutique. This self-described "lifestyle apothecary" is one cool store, with teas, herbs, spices, holistic products, creative knickknacks, CBD oils, and art things.

[1830 South Coast Highway; reapandsowonline.com](#)

#### ♦ Cloth+Arrow / All Ye Citizens / Furrow Floral

This trio of indie boutiques (two fashion, one floral) all share a space in true upstart collective style.

[clothearrow.com](#), [allyecitizens.com](#), [furrowfloralco.com](#)



(Clockwise from top left): The Privateer Marketplace and Wine Bar; Cloth+ Arrow / All Ye Citizens / Furrow Floral; Petite Madeline; Local Tap House; Banana Dang; Oceanside Museum of Art