



Reclamation NATION

A haute food movement is taking root in San Diego, inspired by Twinkies, banana peels and your Pressed Juicery habit. Revolutions have started on a lot less. And as they seek innovation from sustainability, San Diego chefs are putting their menus where their mouths are.

By James Vernetta // Photography by Tim Melideo

Food, like fashion, tends to rise up. The peasant vittles of yesterday often become the gourmet meals of tomorrow. For instance, lobster was so plentiful in the early years of this country's history that it was given to slaves and prisoners. Once mere sustenance for tool-using scavenger hominids, bone marrow got its own special silver spoons by the 18th century. And today, as even the most refined gourmards turn their attention toward sustainability, we have "upcycling," a new word for the world's grand tradition of turning food items that might have gone to waste into delicious new dishes. "The idea of turning humble ingredients into high-brow cuisine is not a new one," notes upcycling pioneer and James Beard Award-winner Dan Barber of Blue Hill in Manhattan and Blue Hill at Stone Barns in upstate New York. "Cultures around the world have been doing it for centuries—just look at a dish like coq au vin, which was originally made with the tough meat of a male rooster. Modern restaurants look [to] these dishes for inspiration not because of the novelty of upcycling, but because they're absolutely delicious."

Barber's WastED pop-up dining experience, in which famous chefs like Mario Batali, Grant Achatz and April Bloomfield create courses for a sustainability-starved public, doesn't gild the lily when it comes to the menu. Dishes are spelled out: "Cured cuts of waste-fed pigs" served with "reject carrot mustard, off-grade sweet potatoes, melba toast from yesterday's oatmeal" was a hit at his first event in 2015. WastED got such traction, it took over the rooftop at Selfridges London this year, featuring a who's who of more than 30 famous chefs, among them Alain Ducasse, Gordon Ramsay and Raymond Blanc.

Every chef does some sort of upcycling, even if they aren't using the exact term, points out Marc Johnson, the corporate chef at Red O in La Jolla. "We find ways to reuse the tortas and tortillas, such as putting them into mole sauces or [making] croutons out of the ones that don't make it into the enchiladas," he says.

If you've had sausage or certain types of charcuterie, you've eaten upcycled organ meats, an underappreciated food item, according to Island Prime executive chef Mike Suttles. "I think people are missing out by not enjoying them," he says. "I



Clockwise from left: Misadventure's Blake Carver, Sam Chereskin and Whit Rigali toast to hedonistic sustainability; painstaking research goes on in their private bar; Mendocino Farms' Rescued Vegetable Burger and Pressed Juicery's veggie pulp join in eco-friendly matrimony.



Clockwise from left: Only Misadventure knew you could achieve such clarity via processed sugar; fried skate cartilage never looked so elegant (from a WastED event by Dan Barber); Misadventure's founders in their distillery.



RESCUED VEGETABLE BURGER PHOTO COURTESY OF MENDOCINO FARMS; FRIED SKATE CARTILAGE PHOTO COURTESY OF WASTED

think my parents' generation was the last not to throw those out." But that's changing. Local chefs are discovering there's not only delicious flavor but also true innovation in repurposing food items and making them essential parts of the meal—and sometimes the star.

At Oceanside's **Wrench & Rodent Seabastropub** and **The Whet Noodle**, chef and owner Davin Waite has somehow turned banana peels from being a prop in a bad slapstick comedy into a wonderful entree: banana peel tacos. The key, he says, is simmering the peels in an adobada veggie broth before serving them with Mexican-flavored quinoa and salsa made with heirloom tomatoes. "We found that as long as they were simmered for about 45 minutes the bitterness would go away," he notes. Eating a banana peel taco is a revelatory experience, especially knowing it was made from a food item that is normally sent to the recycle bin. With the mouthfeel of braised chicken, it takes on the flavor of its cooking liquid—in this case, the salty, tomatoey cooking liquid.

Another restaurant that has seen the benefits of upcycling is Mendocino Farms in Del Mar, which recently added a rescued veggie burger made from the pulp left over from its juice press. Co-founder Mario Del Pero estimates that he and his partners tried 14 variations before settling on the one currently on the menu. The research and development resulted in a burger even meat eaters could crave, while reducing the restaurant's waste. "Forty percent of the U.S. food supply goes

into the trash," he shares. "Not all of that food is spoiled; a good amount is edible ingredients that could help reduce hunger in our underserved, vulnerable communities."

Although many businesses donate edible items to food banks, San Marcos entrepreneurs Whit Regali and Sam Chereskin are helping those orgs by turning leftover baked goods into high-end vodka. Food banks have nutritional mandates that don't include things like Twinkies, Ho Hos or even french fries, that are filled with sugar and starch—the building blocks of vodka. But don't say the vodka is made from wasted food. "We don't use 'waste,'" Regali says. "We use excess food that would be 'waste' if we didn't use it." Regali sees Misadventure vodkas as both a great mixer and a great conversation starter. "We want to get people thinking about what they're drinking."

Meanwhile, back at Blue Hill, Barber continues to dig in to the parts of the farm that you might not think of during the harvest. "How can we be more resourceful in our farming, fishing and eating?" he posits. "Can we take a nose-to-tail approach to a whole landscape?" Recently, a nearby farm had too many sunflowers and asked Barber if he wanted the stalks, so sunflower stalk marrow is a new feature at the restaurant. "One of our cooks cut the stalk lengthwise and discovered this delicious pulp inside. We serve it with some sunflower toast to spread the 'marrow' on. I think diners love how unexpected it is." And who knows: A few years in and it might even get its own fancy spoon. ■