


COVER
STORY


City's restaurant scene
has been transformed
over the past decade

THE NEW OCEANSIDE

BY PAM KRAGEN

Ten years ago, Oceanside was known as a city where you could always find a hearty breakfast, cheap beer and tasty wings, tacos and barbecue.

What a difference a decade makes.

Today, more than two dozen new restaurants, wine bars and beer tasting rooms line the South Coast Highway corridor offering a mix of white-tablecloth dining, farm-to-table bites, prix fixe menus and sushi so unique it lures diners from as far away as Los Angeles.

Oceanside's culinary scene has exploded in recent years due to what Oceanside-raised sushi chef Davin Waite calls a "perfect storm of reasons." Waite, whose wildly creative ways with fish have made him a media darling, runs two side-by-side restaurants on Coast Highway with his wife, Jessica: the popular 4-year-old sushi eatery Wrench & Rodent Seabasstropub and the Whet Noodle ramen shop, which opened last year.

Waite said that after the recession, tourism and real estate development surged; the city rolled out the welcome mat to new businesses; people started eating out again; high-end purveyors like San Diego seafood marketer Catalina Offshore began making North County deliveries; and the success of a few pioneering higher-priced restaurants encouraged other hopefuls to take the leap.

The first seeds of the transformation were sown in 2008, when San Diego's Harney Sushi opened a second outlet near the Oceanside train station. It arrived to cash in on the planned construction of several downtown hotel and condo projects (many of which would stall during the recession).



Seared ono in smoked apricot sauce and topped with bonito fish sperm and cherry tomatoes by chef Davin Waite (left) of Wrench & Rodent Seabasstropub in Oceanside.

K.C. ALFRED U-T PHOTOS



MASTERS KITCHEN AND COCKTAIL

Then came San Diego restaurant visionaries David and Lesley Cohn, who have repeatedly blazed culinary trails in once-underserved communities like Hillcrest, La Mesa, Imperial Beach and Escondido.

“We look for good areas coming up where we’re going to be happy five to 10 years down the road that we made the decision to go in,” said David Cohn, president of Cohn Restaurant Group. “We like the idea of urban revival areas. Oceanside at one time had a thriving downtown. We thought it could come back.”

In 2010, the Cohns opened 333 Pacific on the cliff-top bluff over the Oceanside Pier. They decided to make it a partial white-tablecloth destination restaurant and spent as much money on the glass-walled building as they would have in the pricey Gaslamp Quarter.

“We felt having views of the pier and ocean would always be worthwhile,” he said. “We also looked around Oceanside. ... There were lots of mom-and-pop restaurants, but nobody trying to create a mid-to upscale experience.”

Encouraged by the Cohns and Harney Sushi, married entrepreneurs Roddy and Aaron Browning



SAM WELLS

Ryan Jubela, a race car builder turned pastry chef, opened Masters Kitchen and Cocktail restaurant in 2014.

were the next to jump in, opening their Flying Pig Pub & Kitchen on Tremont Street in 2011. The Brownings, who lived in Oceanside from 2004 to 2014, at first worried that their pork-centric, dinner-only pub would struggle.

“The first two months we were nervous, but wow, people showed up on the very first day,” Roddy said. “It just kept gradually getting busier and busier, and the organic growth was fun to watch.”

Like Waite and a few others, the Brownings were happy to share their secrets with other Oceanside residents in the hospitality trade.

“I won’t take credit for creating a dining scene in Oceanside, but I’ll take credit for showing other restaurateurs what we were doing,” said Roddy, who moved with his wife three years to Vista, where they’ve opened a second Flying Pig in another underserved area. “We were an open book and were happy to help others get started.”

As the recession waned, a rash of new eateries arrived. Christine Loyola opened the French patisserie La Petite Madeline near City Hall in 2011. In 2012, Oceanside-raised besties Jamey Stone and

Charlie Anderson opened Privateer Coal Fire Pizza.

In 2014, three new beer hall/gastropubs opened on Coast Highway: Local Tap House, Bagby Beer Co. and Pour House. That year also welcomed two new restaurants, the Hello Betty Fish House near the pier and Ryan Jubela’s Masters Kitchen and Cocktail, one of the city’s most ambitious new dining projects.

Jubela, a race car builder turned pastry chef, said he saw what was happening in his hometown and wanted to create a restaurant experience that reflected the changing city and its people.

“Oceanside is a blue-collar type of town,” Jubela said. “We’re not Carlsbad, we’re not Del Mar. We’re not even Encinitas. I was a little concerned that what I was trying to create might not work in Oceanside, that people might think it was too pretentious. But I’ve found out that’s far from the case.”

Built in a 1930s auto shop, Masters Kitchen has roll-up doors, a stunning arched wood ceiling and a diverse menu that ranges from \$8 wings to \$32 steaks.

“People definitely like their burger
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NOTABLE RESTAURANTS

Bagby Beer Co.: 601 S. Coast Highway. (760) 270-9075 or bagbybeer.com

Flying Pig Pub & Kitchen: 626 S. Tremont St. (760) 453-2940 or flyingpig.pub

Harney Sushi: 301 Mission Ave. (760) 967-1820 or harneysushi.com

Hello Betty Fish House: 211 N. Mission Ave. (760) 722-1008 or hellobettyoceanside.com

Holme Estate Cellars: 211 N. Coast Highway. (442) 264-7055 or holmeestatecellars.com

Local Tap House: 308 S. Coast Highway. (760) 547-1469 or localtaphouse.com

Masters Kitchen and Cocktail: 208 S. Coast Highway. (760) 231-6278 or mastersoceanside.com

The Miller’s Table: 514 S. Coast Highway. (442) 615-7200 or themillerstable.com

Petite Madeline Bakery: 223 N. Coast Highway. (760) 231-7300 or petitemadelinebakery.com

Pour House: 1903 S. Coast Highway. (760) 730-5944 or pourhouseoceanside.com

Privateer Coal Fire Pizza: 1706 S. Coast Highway. (760) 453-2500 or privateercoalfirepizza.com

Privateer Marketplace & Wine Bar: 1704 S. Coast Highway. (760) 453-2254 or privateer-marketplace.com

608 Oceanside: 608 Mission Ave. (760) 291-1040 or 608oceanside.com

333 Pacific: 333 N. Pacific St. (760) 433-3333 or cohnrrestaurants.com/333pacific

Urge Gastropub & Whiskey Bank/101 Proof Speakeasy: 2002 S. Coast Highway. (760) 429-7424 or oceanside.urgegastropub.com

Wrench & Rodent Seabastropub/The Whet Noodle: 1815 S. Coast Highway. (760) 271-0531 or seabastropub.com

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and beer, but they also want to be able to go out and have a nice glass of wine and a great steak,” Jubela said. “That’s what Oceanside is now. You can choose your story. You can have that nice fine-dining experience and you can also get that loud fast-casual board shorts and flip-flop experience as well.”

In early 2016, partners Grant Tondro and brothers Zak and Nate Higson opened the Urge Gastropub & Whiskey Bank, a wildly popular restaurant/bar concept on South Coast Highway. They added the 101 Proof Speakeasy in November.

Then last summer, chef/owner William Eick introduced the city’s first nightly prix fixe menu at 608 Oceanside, a farm-to-table restaurant on Mission Avenue. Like Jubela, Eick said he’s discovered that Oceanside residents are increasingly open to better dining experiences.

“I feel like it’s my job as a chef to build up the dining community and make it a better place,” Eick said. “The community of chefs we have in Oceanside is second to none. We have chefs, cooks and farmers working together, bouncing ideas off each other and not fighting over customers.”

The newest players on the scene are wine bars, with three openings on Coast Highway in the past year. Married winemakers Julie and Craig Holme run Holme Estate Cellars, Anderson and Stone diversified their brand with the Privateer Marketplace & Wine Bar, and longtime wine educator and chef Staci Miller opened The Miller’s Table.

Miller, who moved to Oceanside last year, said her 24-seat wine bar and restaurant was a success from the start thanks to repeat business from local residents and fellow restaurateurs like Waite who gather daily around the bar’s large communal table.

“In L.A., I don’t know if the communal table would work because people don’t always want to know their neighbors, but everyone here has embraced it,” Miller said. “This community of chefs and residents has been so fantastic and welcoming.”

Several new Oceanside restaurants are in the wings, which brings a new challenge. Several owners said the city has gradually transitioned from underserved to overserved and competition is becoming tougher.

But Cohn said that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

“The rising tide does lift all restaurants,” Cohn said. “Ten years ago, people would’ve said we were crazy to think that Oceanside could ever be a dining destination. But now people say it’s a pretty cool place and we’re happy.”

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NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T

Last summer, chef/owner William Eick introduced the city’s first nightly prix fixe menu at 608 Oceanside.



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PAM KRAGEN U-T

Fried octopus (left) and braised short rib at 608 Oceanside, a farm-to-table restaurant on Mission Avenue.