

Places: San Diego

Jennie Nunn • December 21, 2016



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San Diego isn't just about surfing, beachcombing, and the boardshort and flip flop-clad set. The design-minded oceanfront city is the second largest in California with numerous universities (think University of California, San Diego and University of San Diego), three major sports teams, and a slew of new and recently revamped hotels and restaurants. In fact, notes Bruce Ford of Lodging Econometrics, the city has an active construction pipeline of 41 projects with 8,400 rooms. "Existing there's about 484 hotels with 62,860 rooms, so if you built everything in the pipeline, that's about 18 percent growth, which is in the higher end of the spectrum," he says.

Projects in the works include a hotel housed in a 1920s former YMCA Beaux-Arts building by West Hollywood-based designer Thomas Schoos (who also completed Herringbone and Searsucker restaurants for chef Brian Malarkey in La Jolla and downtown San Diego), and Atlanta firm tvsdesign is helping craft a massive, \$107 million investment into downtown's Marriott Marquis San

Diego Marina's meeting and events space with the addition of more than 280,000 square feet of venues, including two of the largest ballrooms on the West Coast. A massive Swarovski chandelier in the grand ballroom features more than 400,000 individual crystals, and a landscaped walkway includes two public pieces by Los Angeles-based art collective After Architecture.

But it's the city's famed culinary scene that's a major attraction, with notable chefs and owners such as Malarkey and his latest venture, Herb & Wood in Little Italy. "The restaurant scene is moving in a great direction in San Diego," says Gina Champion-Cain, CEO of American National Investments/the Patio Group and owner of new restaurant Fireside by the Patio. "The past five years there have been restaurateurs and hospitality groups developing different restaurant concepts [with] one common theme—the bounty of the Pacific, produce from local farmers, and purchasing plate and glassware from local craftsmen." Brian Miller, CEO of local hospitality group Eat.Drink.Sleep agrees: "There's an ongoing trend in both travel and culinary to strip away fussiness," he says, adding that doesn't mean travelers don't want luxury, but rather "they want that luxury to feel authentic and friendly. San Diego naturally benefits from this trend because it's always had a laidback, cool aesthetic."

Here's a look, by neighborhood, at some of San Diego's latest design-forward hotels and restaurants.

Mixed-Use Downtown

BRIC, a major waterfront revitalization development at the intersection of Broadway and Pacific Highway downtown, sits at the former Lane Field Park (home of the Padres until 1957). The reconceived site will be replete with two hotels, a public park, and dining and entertainment options. In April, the first phase launched with Marriott's dual-branded SpringHill Suites and Residence Inn San Diego Downtown/Bayfront, while the next includes the 400-room InterContinental San Diego hotel. The combination of properties, explains Greg Botsch, principal at Atlanta-based John Portman & Associates (the designer of both Marriott offerings), "brings an extremely attractive range of choices to travelers interested in visiting San Diego and enjoying the waterfront. The retail and dining options draw visitors and residents to further activate the area."

Another notable mixed-use project is 7th and Market by Cisterra Development (set for 2018) with a 40,000-square-foot gourmet market, a 153-room Ritz-Carlton hotel, 59 branded condominium units, 34 affordable housing units, and 156,000 square feet of office space.

The Headquarters at Seaport

Less than a mile away, downtown's open-air market—comprising the now-connected Seaport Village and the city's revamped Old Police Headquarters—is home to several standout restaurants, including Flour & Barley, known for its brick oven pizzas. "We are paying homage to San Diego's long history as a major U.S. military town, with amazing custom naval-inspired artwork, and salvaged naval light fixtures," says Block 16 Hospitality's chef Anthony Meidenbauer of the 3,800-square-foot space crafted by Las Vegas-based 1027 Design Management (with architecture by Tassara Architecture + Design), which is layered with white subway tiles, red tufted banquettes, etched glass dividers featuring a star pattern, exposed brick walls clad with metal rivets reminiscent of World War II aircraft carriers, original, restored terracotta flooring, ovens covered in Ferrari-red scalloped tiles, and reclaimed wood tables made from 100-year-old doors.

For the second installment of Puesto (the original is up north in La Jolla), Schoos took the Mexican streetfood menu to heart, infusing an eclectic, colorful mix of mismatched tiles, custom wicker and wood furniture (some upholstered in pops of blue), suspended potted plants, a mesh wire wall filled with vegetation, 16-foot-tall metal doors, cantilevering light fixtures, and wall murals done by a local graffiti artist (one rises floor-to-ceiling, one serves as the backdrop of the two-story dining room). And respecting that this was once the main filing room for the jail and the dining room housed two floors of cells, he kept the old wooden floors, exposed ductwork, and even the original concrete walls with peeling paint—“all the wears and tears,” he says, adding that he opened up the building to the piazza via a series of doors so guests can “feel the history from outside of the building.”

Gaslamp Quarter

Pendry Hotels, the new luxury lifestyle brand from Montage Hotels & Resorts, will make its much-anticipated debut in San Diego in the center of the city’s downtown restaurant and nightlife area, steps away from Petco Park stadium and the convention center. It’s a fitting location for the SoCal-based company. “We were looking for the right market and the right neighborhood, and fortuitously came across an amazing development site that, at the time, was a parking lot right in the middle of the Gaslamp Quarter,” explains Michael Fuerstman, Pendry’s co-founder and creative director. Occupying almost an entire city block, the hotel, with the lobby and lobby bar Fifth & Rose (featuring a rich stone and black and white palette with crimson details), 317 guestrooms (including 36 suites), rooftop lounge the Pool House, and spa crafted by Houston- and New York-based Rottet Studio, also includes restaurant and marketplace Provisional Kitchen, Café & Mercantile, designed in collaboration with Raan and Lindsay Parton from Los Angeles’ Alchemy Works retail concept. Other F&B venues designed by Toronto-based Studio Munge include seasonal restaurant Lionfish, which is swathed in wood and brass; intimate basement cocktail bar Oxford Social Club, which will feature plush seating and art installations for a home-like setting; and Nason’s Beer Hall—one of the first of its kind for the city. “We’re creating something locally bred,” adds Andy Masi, CEO of Clique Hospitality, which is developing and managing Lionfish, the Pool House, and Oxford. “The soul of Pendry is uniquely San Diego.”

As a nod to the city’s early Spanish roots, the architecture of the city’s Balboa Park, and its location near the ocean, San Francisco-based Paletteur recently renovated the 237 rooms at the Kimpton Solamar San Diego with eggplant-hued ostrich leather headboards, chevron-patterned bedside tables, geometric gold wallpaper, faceted gold lamps, and black and white bathrooms that feature surfboard-shaped vanity mirrors and a brocade wallcovering. In the lobby, mirror and glass tiles, glass pendant lights, and gold tones add sparkle and movement, referencing the sea and sun. Overall, the design reflects the “casual Southern California lifestyle with a bit of bohemian flair,” says principal David Lasker. “We infused the palette with youthful colors and finishes that reflect the vibrancy of the Gaslamp Quarter.”

And the ONE Group’s modern steakhouse STK now has a new home at the Andaz downtown, complete with a bar and lounge area, raised dining platforms, and the brand’s signature central DJ booth. Outfitted with a black and white palette, white brick walls (another brand standard) done in a pixelated pattern, gold wire cluster lighting, and abstract neon wall installations, the entire space doubles as an art gallery with a rotating collection of work by visionary designers and independent artists native to San Diego and Southern California, says Jesse MacDougall, director of strategy and brand development at design firm ICRAVE, a longtime ONE Group collaborator.

Little Italy

Kettner Boulevard has transformed from a longtime tourist spot to one of the city's most popular dining destinations with a long list of eateries headed up by celebrity chefs including Richard Blais' Juniper & Ivy (crafted by Atlanta's the Johnson Studio at Cooper Carry) and the Crack Shack, plus Top Chef rising star Giselle Wellman's coastal-inspired Pacific Standard—a concept by T2 and developers New School housed in an Art Deco building with coastal chic interiors by local firm Delawie featuring handblown glass light fixtures, white marble countertops, chevron-print leather barstools, and two 16-foot long natural walnut live edge communal tables. Also recently opened is chef Javier Placencia's Spanish Colonial-style Bracero Cocina de Raiz, designed by LA firm Bells & Whistles with a nod to the U.S.'s 1942 bracero program, complete with a bracero hat installation, antique farm tools, and vintage items sourced from Mexico.

One of the staples of the area is restaurant and cabana-filled rooftop destination Kettner Exchange. Now the owners of it (and other San Diego-area hotspots) Matt Spencer and Tyler Charmin have opened Grass Skirt in Pacific Beach, designed by Costa Mesa, California-based Davis Ink. A modern take on the traditional tiki bar, it was a perfect fit for principal Davis Krumins who has been “obsessed with tiki for the past 25 years with extensive collections of tiki ashtrays, table lamps, glassware, and tropical vintage polyester shirts.” Guests enter through a secret refrigerator door located inside the kitchen of an adjoining poké restaurant; upon opening the door, fog is released within a lava rock tunnel and a projected image of a hula dancer fills the space. Other highlights of the “fun socially interactive dream world,” he says, are a 3-foot-tall custom tiki with VIP seating inside the open mouth; 16 gold-plated pineapple-head skulls (inside custom front-lit wood frames) set in a grid pattern on an orange wall; a 15-foot-tall tiki “god fire” feature; and a 28-foot-wide backlit acrylic wall with an erupting volcano, a topless hula dancer, and a Hawaiian sunset.

Malarkey's self-proclaimed passion project, Herb & Wood, meanwhile, is “based on being inspired by simple cuisine and wanting to get back to our roots and what we love most about what we do,” he says. Imagined in-house with restaurant partner Christopher Puffer, it is an exercise in masculine-feminine contrasts: channel-back banquettes and roll-back Parsons chairs integrated with captain's chairs and tufted leather booths; delicate, pearl-like, globe pendant lights suspended from iron hanging-mounted arms; modern portraits and nudes by artist Johnny Lane; and a central bar made from French Poly Var sitting beneath a barrel-vaulted ceiling. “It has an almost Southern charm while somehow feeling perfectly at home in Southern California,” Malarkey says.

Point Loma

West of downtown at the reconceived Liberty Station—a Spanish Colonial-inspired mixed-use development that once served as the Naval Training Center—visitors can peruse Liberty Public Market (the city's first such venue, with a mix of artisans and food purveyors and an enclosed outdoor seating area), or choose from restaurants including Fireside by the Patio (by the Patio Group's creative director, Bea Arrues and Lahaina Architects) with a bohemian look thanks to 80 custom pillows made from tapestries, Old-World art pieces, and bold plant arrangements; and Blue Bridge Hospitality's Mess Hall. Filled with wood, communal tables, and pops of green courtesy of Fitch and OBR Architecture, the restaurant serves food made from the various artisans at the market. Visitors can also take in a movie or bite at the LOT, the second iteration (the first opened last year in La Jolla) of the combination upscale cinema and glass-enclosed restaurant, bar, and café. “Walking into the LOT feels more like walking into a luxury boutique hotel than a movie

theater,” explains managing director Carlos Wellman, who explains that the venue’s design relied on partnerships with local artists and craftsmen, including for the preservation of the former Luce Auditorium’s original oak stage.

South Park

Kindred, located further inland, is a cocktail bar and vegan eatery by restaurateur Kory Stetina lined with cheeky and irreverent elements by locally based BASILE Studio (which is also behind North County San Diego’s specialty beer-centric Stone Hotel from Untitled Hospitality and slated for early 2018). “We wanted to create a disarming and approachable establishment that didn’t scream ‘vegan’ by offering a space with death metal and French Rococo-induced design elements,” says principal Paul Basile of the space, fashioned with a mirrored backlit coffered ceiling, a 35-foot-long marble bar, and baby pink-hued toile wallpaper by illustrator Dane Danner. Basile points to standout custom pieces such as Gothic flip windows, hanging rotating liquor shelving, and a tête-à-tête seating installation. But the major conversation starter is a massive, wall-mounted black four-eyed wolf with snake horns created by Los Angeles sculptor Brandon Kihl.

Mission Valley

Town and Country Resort & Convention Center from Two Roads Hospitality (the merged Destination Hotels and Commune Hotels + Resorts), is currently undergoing a sweeping \$80 million renovation set to debut early next year, with 668 updated guestrooms by Los Angeles-based HFS Concepts 4, and Gensler’s San Diego office redoing public spaces. The 39-acre property features a river park, a revamped 7,500-square-foot lobby, and a new 22,000-square-foot resort pool deck complete with raised cabanas with retractable tops and sides, multiple firepits, and a secret garden. “Large volume, open air spaces will seamlessly transition from indoor to outdoor areas, [while] lush landscaping and natural materials evoke a casual California aesthetic,” explains Todd Majcher, vice president of resort development and design at local development company Lowe Enterprises. “Simple gestures tie new and old architecture together and refine the language of the resort aesthetic. This includes using specific materials and geometry, such as wood and wood-like tones, to provide sense of warmth and informality.”