



THE BEST RESTAURANTS IN SAN DIEGO RIGHT NOW

BY [ERIN JACKSON](#)



SARA NORRIS/THRILLIST (EDITED)

In San Diego, there are always exciting new restaurants to discover (and you should definitely check them out), but our fine city's diverse dining scene invites exploration beyond the brand-spankin'-new spots.

That's why we're introducing Eat Seeker, a list we'll update throughout the year highlighting our picks for the best restaurants in SD right at this very moment. Some spots may still be shiny and new (that's you, Bracero), others are more established (oh hi there, Urban Solace!). Basically, they're the restaurants we recommend to out-of-town friends (Hodad's), our personal

go-tos (Tender Greens), and special occasion destinations we wish we could enjoy more often (Cowboy Star).

With no further ado, here they are, in alphabetical order:



BENCOTTO

Bencotto

Little Italy

San Diego has some [seriously good Italian restaurants](#), but none can touch this Little Italy mainstay, especially where fresh pasta is concerned. A variety of different types are made fresh daily and topped with luxurious sauces. The ambiance is well suited for date night, but visiting for lunch is an equally good (perhaps better) idea.



BLIND LADY ALE HOUSE

Blind Lady Ale House

Normal Heights

Sometimes known as BLAH, this Normal Heights beer bar and pizza-centric restaurant is anything but. It's a fine go-to for vegetarians, neighborhood locals with kids, and anyone who appreciates a great thin-crust pie (which, who doesn't?), whether you're in the market for something simple like a margherita or the egg & bacon, decked out with that dynamic duo along with Swiss chard, caramelized onion, and truffle oil.



BRACERO

Bracero

Little Italy

Hotshot chef Javier Plascencia's highly anticipated two-story restaurant in Little Italy features an open kitchen, a crudo bar bursting with Baja seafood, and a menu composed of hot and cold small plates, tacos, and meaty entrees. If you want to dine when the crowds are thin, stop by for lunch. Menu offerings are limited to dishes that appear on the left-hand side of the menu (which includes raw and cold plates and seven different tacos).



BREAKFAST REPUBLIC

Breakfast Republic

North Park

Yep, you guessed it: this fun spot in North Park slings a mean breakfast that's anything but boring. Some of the unique menu offerings include a Vietnamese chicken wing breakfast bowl, Oreo cookie pancakes, and breakfast hot dogs -- plus every caffeinated beverage conceivable, antioxidant shots, and even organic kombucha on tap.



CARNITAS SNACK SHACK

Carnitas' Snack Shack

North Park and Carmel Valley

This pork-centric eatery satisfies with its short-but-sweet menu of comfort food favorites like the pork-on-pork-on-pork Triple Threat sandwich, bacon jam-topped burger, and Shack poutine. A third location, set to open on the North Embarcadero early next year, will feature an open kitchen and new menu items like fish tacos. Until then, you can get a quick fix at the Carnitas' Snack Shack food truck parked near the site from Wednesday-Sunday.



ERIN JACKSON/THRILLIST

City Tacos

North Park

Beeline here for 10 different imaginative tacos, each priced at \$3.50. We're particularly enamored with the camaron taco (sauteed shrimp dipped in a serrano tempura batter with grilled zucchini, corn, and green tomatillo salsa). The digs are modest (and somewhat cramped) but the friendly staff, big flavors, and low prices more than make up for it.



Cowboy Star Restaurant & Butcher Shop

East Village

This East Village chophouse shattered the mold of what a steakhouse should be. Instead of the same tired decor and Rat Pack soundtrack, you'll find thoughtfully sourced meat from the nation's leading Certified Humane Angus herd, an exhibition-style kitchen, cowboy-chic decor, and flawless service. Yes, it's pricey, but every cut is prepared with so much precision and respect for the animal that it's absolutely worth the splurge.



ERIN JACKSON/THRILLIST

Hodad's

Downtown, Ocean Beach, and Petco Park

Restaurants don't get much more iconic to San Diego than this beloved family-owned burger joint famous for burgers topped with bacon patties, thick-cut fries, and super-thick shakes. The community mourned the death of beloved owner Mike "Bossman" Hardin earlier this year, but the dedicated crew he left behind hasn't changed a thing. Let's hope it stays that way... forever.



SARA NORRIS/THRILLIST

Ironside Fish & Oyster

Little Italy

The nautical-themed interior, fresh and delicious seafood, and inventive cocktail program make this Little Italy stunner a must-visit, whether you're aiming to impress out-of-towners, a date, or just yourself. When in doubt, the lobster roll -- served on fresh-baked bread with brown butter mayo, crispy shallots, and chives -- is a good go-to. Oh, and this place also serves cocktails in adorable killer whale glasses.



JUNIPER & IVY

Juniper & Ivy

Little Italy

Some of SD's top culinary talent come together to create dumbfoundingly delicious plates the likes of which you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere else. Yeah, you could easily drop a wad of cash here on dishes like a 16oz bone-in prime ribeye (and probably not regret it) but considering one of the best things on the menu -- the buttermilk biscuit with smoked butter -- is only \$5, with a little careful planning, you could easily make dinner here a regular thing. The not-so-secret "In-N-Haute" burger made with a custom blend of short rib, brisket, and chuck mixed with dry-aged beef fat is a gotta-try dish.



BRIGLE MARTELL PEACE PIES

Peace Pies

Encinitas and Ocean Beach

Vegan food is actually hot right now, and this is where you want to try it. Sure, it's easy to assume that raw, organic, vegan food that's also gluten and dairy free wouldn't exactly taste great, but this healthy resto duo proves that assumption dead wrong, with tasty items like kale chips, nacho platters, street tacos, and way more desserts than you'd expect. The blissed-out vibe and spacious patio earns the Encinitas location a slight edge, or you can try some of the shop's best sellers at local farmers' markets.



SARA NORRIS/THRILLIST

Puesto

La Jolla and Marina

Pre-Puesto, San Diego's taco achievements were well established, but mostly limited to cheap, casual spots with no real sense of occasion. The newest location at The Headquarters changed that completely, with its open kitchen, expanded menu, legit cocktails, and (most recently) upgraded desserts like buñuelo taquitos. Trust us, you want these inside you and you do not want to share.



QUAD ALEHOUSE

Quad Alehouse

Gaslamp

A well-curated tap list that goes way beyond local, hop-heavy IPAs and a meat-leaning menu of sandwiches, plates, and salads courtesy of Chef Brandon Brooks are just two of the main selling points of this new beer bar overlooking the Gaslamp Quarter. Though it shares ownership with Gaslamp Tavern, the upstairs space has a totally distinct vibe. If you've been looking for a chill place to drink beer (and maybe play a little Connect 4), you just found it.



RUBICON DELI

Rubicon Deli

Mission Hills and Mission Beach (La Jolla location coming soon)

Any sandwich shop that makes its own bread in-house deserves props, especially when it also laces that bread with flavor agents like blue cheese, garlic, and jalapeños. Choose a pre-made option, like the Dapper Dipper (with slow-roasted tri-tip, crispy onions, Swiss cheese, creamy horseradish, and au jus for dipping), or design your own 'wich from an encyclopedic array of ingredients. No matter which direction you go, you'll be happy to know all sandwiches come with a free (albeit pint-sized) cookie.



SAB-E-LEE

Sab-E-Lee

Linda Vista

Fans of this authentic Isaan-style Thai restaurant were more than happy to squeeze into the restaurant's former space (a hole in the wall if there ever was one!), but now that the restaurant has moved to a new, larger location, dining here is significantly more enjoyable. The best approach is to go family style, so you'll taste a variety of different dishes. No matter what you do, don't skip the panang curry and DO be careful with your spice level (three is a good place to start).



SMOKING GOAT

The Smoking Goat

North Park

Executive Chef and owner Fred Piehl's French-American bistro fare is perfect when you want to enjoy a nice night out with solid food, great service, and a comfortable (not stuffy) atmosphere. Hit the restaurant early and you can open your meal with happy hour specials like duck fat truffle fries, goat meatballs, and escargot au gratin before moving on to top-notch entrees like chicken, pork chops, and steak frites -- all priced very reasonably considering the quality of the cuts and expert preparation.



COURTESY OF TAJIMA RAMEN HOUSE

Tajima Ramen House

Hillcrest and Convoy

This is the place for real-deal ramen made with your choice of thin or thick noodles, plus rice plates, Japanese curry, and tapas-sized plates of salmon tataki and gyoza. The kitchen is open late on Friday and Saturday nights -- good news for anyone whose cravings tend to be strongest outside of traditional dining hours.



AN HOANG/COURTESY OF TENDER GREENS

Tender Greens

Downtown, La Jolla, Liberty Station, and Mission Valley (soon)

If you dine out a frequently, you have probably already learned the benefits of choosing something fairly healthy once in a while. For those days, Tender Greens is where you want to go. The selection of salads -- with primo proteins, fresh veggies, and tasty dressings -- ranges from unique options like the Happy Vegan to Southern fried chicken (so yeah, not everything is totally good for you). Best yet, it also stocks a daily changing selection of desserts, like cookies, bars, and cake by the slice. Hey, if you're eating salad for lunch, you deserve a treat.



TOSTADAS

Tostadas North Park

North Park

This seafood-and-juice outfit from the same team behind City Tacos serves a compact menu of tasty tostadas with fine-tuned flavors derived from a unique mix of traditional and modern ingredients. Not a seafood fan? No problem; there are duck, pork, and cactus tostadas too.



COURTESY OF URBAN SOLACE

Urban Solace

North Park

You can always rely on good, honest eats at this North Park institution. Whether you're there for a quick bite, a big dinner, or the weekly bluegrass "blunch," as long as you have functioning taste buds, you'll leave happy. Standouts are many, but you'll never go wrong with the grilled four-cheese sandwich (served with fries and creamy tomato-fennel soup). At brunch, always get the cinnamon roll.



COURTESY OF WRENCH AND RODENT SEABASSTROPUB

Wrench and Rodent Seabasstropub

Oceanside

Executive Chef Davin Waite pushes boundaries with his innovative (and sometimes twisted) menu of seafood dishes crafted from the fresh catch of local fishermen and some of the city's top suppliers (Catalina Offshore Products and Specialty Produce). Items like black garlic mahi mahi on a block of pink Himalayan salt, plant-based sushi rolls, and shishito pepper "poutine" with duck fat gravy are just some of the reasons it's worth the drive.

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Erin Jackson is a San Diego-based writer and photographer who lives to eat and (clearly) loves making sure others do the same. If you like food tips and cat photos, definitely follow her on

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