



SAN DIEGO'S BEST NEW RESTAURANTS OF 2016

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Published On 12/12/2016



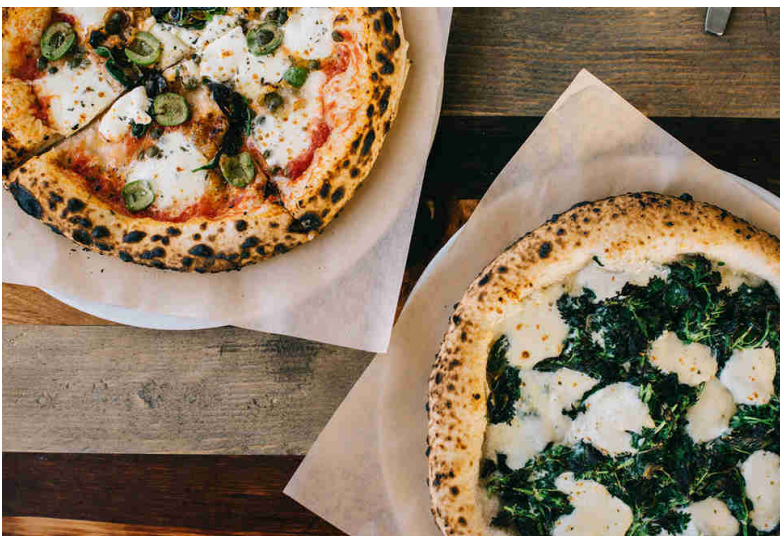
2016 was a landmark year for the local food scene, with a slew of new openings all over the city offering new and exciting venues for us to eat our feelings. We saw Italian bistros become neighborhood darlings, wood-fired scorch its way to a top trend, and fast food getting decidedly healthy. In such a heavy hitting year, it was hard to pick a mere handful of favorites, but we managed to whittle down a lengthy longlist to five superb openings from this past year.



BARBUSA

LITTLE ITALY

Little Italy wasn't exactly hurting for another Italian restaurant, but Barbusa's entry on the scene proves there was room for a team smart enough to see the rising demands of the city's hottest dining neighborhood and raise the stakes accordingly. Owned and operated by the Busalacchi family, who previously operated Po Pazzo out of the same space on India Street, the buzzy spot immediately landed in our round-up of best Italian restaurants in San Diego, thanks to its thoughtful menu of modern Sicilian fare, which includes crudo, pizza, meaty entrees, and spectacular handmade pasta dishes at prices so reasonable it could be your new go-to.



BIGA

GASLAMP

BIGA's appearance in the historic Samuel Fox Lofts signalled the dawn of an optimistic new era in the downtown dining scene. For years, ground-level retail spaces sat vacant and the Spanish revival building was just another dead zone on Broadway. That changed when the lights went on at BIGA. From day one, the culinary team, lead by owner and Executive Chef Tae Dickey, has turned out an ambitious menu of high-quality provisions like Neapolitan-style pizzas, sandwiches on fresh-baked bread, fresh pasta, and coffee made from Bird Rock Coffee Roasters beans, all at fair prices. That alone would land BIGA on this year's best-of list, but Dickey recently went a leap further by hiring an accomplished pastry chef to oversee the expanded dessert offerings and a new baker to head up an ambitious bread program. We can't wait to see what this over-achieving enterprise gets up to in 2017.

CAMPFIRE

CARLSBAD

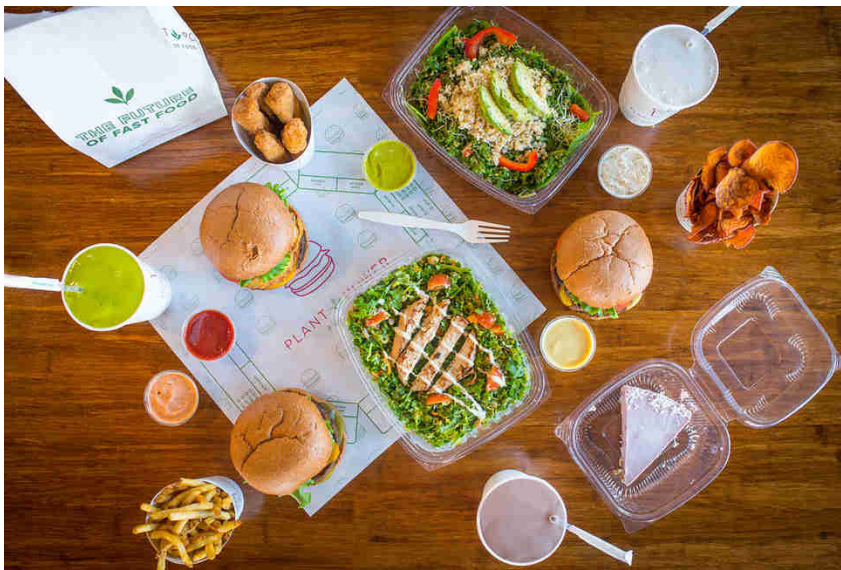
This stylish outfit in Carlsbad Village offers a trim, one-page menu of creative (and occasionally whimsical) flame-kissed fare executed by an A-list culinary team alongside equally as inventive cocktails. Dishes shift with the seasons and are designed for communal dining, so it's best to show up with people you don't mind sharing food with and feast family-style on sumptuous options like char-grilled oysters, roasted beets with ricotta, and flat iron steak. Coupled with the outdoor-chic decor and copper-topped bar, the sprawling, indoor/outdoor space sets a new standard for the neighborhood.



BREAKFAST REPUBLIC

NORTH PARK, LIBERTY STATION & ENCINITAS

This local breakfast concept recently spawned two new locations and is scheduled to expand into East Village and Carmel Valley in 2017. The winning combo of creative eats (like breakfast jambalaya, s'mores French toast, and turkey meatball hash) with cheeky decor and branding elements -- including chairs that look like hard-boiled eggs and cutlery wrappers reminding you that yawns are silent screams for coffee -- make it one of the best breakfast options in SD. Tip: the Liberty Station location serves a pared-down menu with inexpensive, appetizer-sized portions of core offerings and half-price cocktails from 3-8pm daily.



PLANT POWER FAST FOOD

OCEAN BEACH

No matter how many flashy new restaurants with million-dollar design budgets emerge in San Diego, the casual sector of the local dining scene will always be an important touchstone of this laid-back beach town. This year, the city's first legit vegan fast food operator opened in Ocean Beach, bringing a comprehensive menu of reasonably healthy sandwiches, sides, and shakes that deliver on taste and texture. Factor in conveniences like free parking and take-out car ports with the affordable prices and you've got a viable argument for Plant Power living up to its own marketing as "the future of fast food." A second outpost slated to open in Encinitas in April 2017 will also be a big step towards the company achieving its stated goal. Ironically housed in a former Burger King with a wrap-around drive-thru that now has a huge outdoor seating area with an herb garden, it will serve as the "flagship" store that future locations in Southern California will be modeled around.