

HOT  
EATS IN

## San Diego

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT

**SOME FOOD TOURS ARE ALL ABOUT**

discovering a regional cuisine. Others provide a gateway to understanding local culture.

And some are just about who's the brightest kid on the block doing great things with food.

Bite San Diego's *Downtown/Little Italy* tour is all about the latter — which could explain why the majority of the 15 folks who've turned up for today's tour actually live within an hour's drive.

"I hear there's so much going on in this part of the city," says a woman who lives in the suburban enclave of Chula Vista. "But I never get down here. And if I did, I wouldn't know where to begin."

Her comments are echoed by the others I meet as we stroll and sample leisurely across the city core over the subsequent four hours. As one of the fastest growing cities in the US (now the eighth-largest in the country with a population of 1.37 million people), San Diego is burgeoning with new eateries that come and go and move on to other locations at a speed with which it's difficult to keep up.

Bite San Diego aims to stay on top of the city's growing food scene with seven routinely updated tours across the greater San Diego area. They draw several of their venue selections from the "Best of San Diego" charts — including the starting point for our tour: the **Royal India**, voted "Best Indian Food" by *San Diego Magazine* readers since 2007.

Here, Chef Sandeep Kambo (listed in *Best Chefs America*) focuses on northern Indian specialties, and the lunch buffet that we are invited to sample includes many standards from that region: chicken tikka masala, vegetable korma, meat and vegetarian curries, as well as house-made chutneys and raita. The buffet table is a humble looking affair, but the flavours are complex and flush with fresh ingredients, making it easy to see how Royal India has sustained its long-term popularity.



San Diego

WHERE ON EARTH



San Diego Gaslamp Quarter

Like most food tours, there's a healthy side of history to provide context for our exploration. Our guide Eddy gives us a brief overview, starting with a nod to the region's indigenous peoples and its first European flag-in-the-sand (it was Spain's) planted by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo. Over time, the city became a Spanish mission, a provincial

capital of Mexico, and treaty booty for the US following the Mexican-American War. A real estate boom initiated by William Heath Davis and taken up by Alonzo Horton in the mid-1800s created the Gaslamp Quarter where we now sit (known then as New Town San Diego). The economic bust that followed saw the district languish, its glorious Victorian architecture falling into decay. Fresh eyes and economic growth spawned a 1980s redevelopment program whose result is the thriving entertainment district that is the Gaslamp Quarter today.

The buzz is at a low murmur on this early Friday afternoon as we begin our exploration of the Quarter. Eddy pauses at intervals to provide amusing anecdotes about sites of historical interest, which include the elegant Horton Grand Hotel, the William Heath Davis house (New Town's oldest surviving structure and now a museum), and the bronze statue of San Diego's official street dog, Bum (who assumed a leading role in many local legends until his death in 1898).

Next up is **Berkeley Pizza**, whose hand-lettered sign harkens back to the farmers' market origins of this perennial "Best of San Diego" award winner. Owner Danny Palacios generated a quick fan base in 2009 for his reverse-topping pizza; now two storefront locations offer the hallmark deep-dish pizzas with meats and veggies on the crust, a layer of cheese in the middle, and a thick spread of tomato sauce on top. Our wedges of the Pepperoni and the Pesto-Garlic pies



MAKES ABOUT 3 CUPS

## Fruit Shrub

*POPULAR ON THE current cocktail scene, fruit shrubs were a colonial-American spin on the lime-sugar syrups preserved by British sailors to mix with rum. The modern version adds vinegar to the fruit, but can trace its lineage to the sharabs and sharbats of medieval Arabia and Persia.*

**Fruit**<sup>1</sup>  
1 lb

**Sugar**  
2 cups

**Apple Cider Vinegar**<sup>2</sup>  
2 cups

**Herbs or Spices**<sup>3</sup>  
optional

- 1 IN** a large bowl, macerate fruit (and optional herbs) with the sugar. Cover and refrigerate for 1-2 days.
- 2 PRESS** the fruit mixture through a fine sieve, discarding the solids. Stir the vinegar into the strained juice.
- 3 POUR** the shrub into a glass jar, cover tightly and refrigerate at least 1 week to allow flavours to mellow.
- 4 TO** serve: Combine an ounce or two of shrub with sparkling water, wine or your choice of alcohol, poured over ice.

<sup>1</sup> Such as blueberries, strawberries or peaches.

<sup>2</sup> Experiment with balsamic or wine vinegars, too.

<sup>3</sup> Try ½ Tbs fresh ginger or a handful of fresh basil with blueberries; 3-4 sprigs of thyme with strawberries; a stick of cinnamon with peaches.

shine with full roasted tomato flavour and a consistently crispy golden crust.

We move on to bustling Fifth Avenue, the former main street of New Town, whose colourful heritage buildings have been restored to their former glory and whose 'gas' lamps are now powered by electricity. Here Eddy points out one of the former gambling halls run in 1880s San Diego by gunslinger Wyatt Earp and recounts tales of political corruption and of marketing aplomb from the street's former brothel district owners. We follow the tree-shaded brick pavers past cafés, bars — and a shop selling dog yogurt — to **Zymology 21**, brought to the street by Chef Leyla and Alex Javadov of San Diego's popular Cafe 21.

This sister venue is committed to enzymes in all their food-centric applications: brining, curing, distilling, and fermenting. Like the decor that has jars of preserves and distressed wood tables juxtaposed with chemistry lab motifs and a plethora of glass beakers, the menu fuses the organic and the molecular into small-plate offerings. Creative cocktails are the feature attraction, fashioned from vinegar-fermented fruit shrubs that were the purview of early American colonists. Top billing for drama here goes to the colourful five-shrub flights, served in a cluster of test tubes in a smoking beaker of dry ice.

Drinks cost extra in this value-priced tour but their Instagram-worthiness (and the entertaining overview presented by the resident mixologist) makes them a popular draw for our group. What IS included at Zymology is a glass of spicy roasted tomato soup paired with grilled cheese on a deliciously grainy sourdough bread.

We eventually amble across San Diego's business district to Little Italy, where Eddy presents a primer on the tuna industry that flourished here with the early-1900s arrival of Italian immigrants and faded when dolphin-friendly regulations drove the industry elsewhere near the end of the century. Rejuvenated a decade or two ago by a consortium of Italian business-owners, the neighbourhood is now an energetic enclave studded with gastro-pubs and wine bars.

A wine bar is where we settle in for our final two tastings. **Davanti Enoteca** presents us generous samplings of a favourite from its rustic-contemporary menu: Focaccia di Recco, a delicate Ligurian-style focaccia baked with fresh cheeses and crowned with a dripping slab of honey comb.

From across the street at **Napizza** come slices of Nutella Pizza: an oozy dessert of imported Italian Nutella (which uses cane sugar instead of sugar substitute) slathered between layers of 72-hour-aged crust made from flour stone ground near Rome.

It's a sweet end to our rambles across downtown San Diego — and a perfect place to linger over our wine glasses as Eddy bids us farewell. 



Operating since 2010, BITE SAN DIEGO offers food tours lasting from three to five hours through seven San Diego neighbourhoods. Bite donates two percent of its annual profits to the San Diego Roots sustainable food project. [www.bitesandiego.com](http://www.bitesandiego.com)

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