

9 San Diego Restaurant Trends That Are Here to Stay

By Darlene Horn | February 29, 2016



Opening a restaurant is no longer just about the food. The concept, decor and a host of other issues all go into creating a space that will attract and keep customers, reflect the culture at large and be a good fit with the food. So what's hot in the San Diego restaurant business these days? Communal tables, private cabanas and wood-burning ovens are just a few of the trends we've been seeing popping up at the hot spots around town. Read below for nine déjà vu-esque trends and where you can spot them.



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Photo by: Firehouse

Succulents

The Southern California drought is affecting our lives in all sorts of ways, right down to the plants we use to decorate. San Diego restaurants are picking up on this concern, employing cute cacti and using them in a number of inviting ways. Belly up to the bar at **Bracero Cocina** and *senecio*

rowleyanus (string of pearls) greets you on the table. Downtown's **Le Parfait Paris** puts a small succulent at every table. But our hands-down favorite by far is the impressive wall of succulents at PB's **Firehouse** (pictured), which brings the outdoors in to the bar area.



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Photo by: Darlene Horn

Games

Some places want people to eat and get out; others encourage you to linger a while longer (while drinking, of course) by offering a bit of sport with the food. Dartboards and pool have been commonplace in bars and taprooms, but we've seen some new gaming options pop up around

town of late. There's bocce ball at **The Crack Shack** and **Stone Liberty Station**. Hillcrest's **Tabletop Commons** caters to board game aficionados with Settlers of Catan, Battleship and 150 more games. Diners who like a bit of electronic gaming action should check out North Park's **Coin-Op**, and look for Coin Haus retro arcade opening in La Mesa later this year.



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Photo by: Darlene Horn

Communal Tables

There's just something about communal tables that has spurred restaurants everywhere to have one (likely the ability to fit a lot of people into a small area). Spots with communal tables on our short list include North Park's [Soda & Swine](#) (pictured) and [Encontro](#), South Park's [Grand Ole BBQ](#) and [The](#)

[Crack Shack](#) in Little Italy. Some people like the idea of dining elbow-to-elbow with total strangers, although IFC's [Portlandia](#) brilliantly skewers the trend showing every possible nightmare situation one faces when eating next to a group of unknowns.



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Photo by: Kettner Exchange

Private Cabanas

On the opposite end of communal tables are the intimate private cabanas that we've spied at [Kettner Exchange](#) in Little Italy (pictured), [Backyard Kitchen & Tap](#) in Pacific Beach and [Eat at the Pearl](#) in Point Loma. Usually requiring a reservation, private cabanas include curtains to close you off from the

rest of the restaurant or patio, creating an exclusive and intimate VIP area for you and your crew.



Secret Menu Items

Here's a tactic taken right out of In-N-Out's playbook: secret menus. Many San Diego restaurants are catering to diners who want to be in-the-know by serving dishes not listed on their menus. Eagle-eyed fans might uncover these dishes via an eatery's social media account, but

their existence can also be spread by word of mouth. A few of our favorite secret dishes in San Diego include the mozzarella balloon (pictured) at Gaslamp's [BiCe](#), Cali-Taco at [Puesto](#) and chala mata fries at [MishMash](#).



Rimmed Baking Trays

The days of your food arriving in colorful plastic baskets may be numbered; it's all about the baking sheets doing double-time as plates these days. Sturdy and durable, these trays can hold everything from fully loaded fries and piles of wings to soup and sandwich combos. They're a nice upgrade from

their plastic cousins but still not a big expense for a restaurant's bottom line. Spot them in fast-casual joints like [Baguette Bros.](#) on Convoy, [Rubicon Deli](#) (multiple locations), [Encontro](#) in North Park, [The Crack Shack](#) in Little Italy and more.



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Industrial Design Look

The number of San Diego restaurants with furniture constructed out of pipes (as pictured at [Streetcar Merchants of Fried Chicken, Doughnuts and Coffee](#) in North Park) and with decor sporting unfinished wood has us wishing we'd paid more attention in high school shop class. Restaurants that employ

these design touches are eschewing ready-made goods for a unique "you'll only find it here" look, which, of course, is now everywhere. A few new restaurants that play up industrial design include The Garlic Shack in Golden Hill and Barrio Logan's [MishMash](#).



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Photo by: Darlene Horn

Roll-Up/Flip-Open Windows

The smart restaurant takes San Diego's amazing year-round weather seriously. And outdoor patios are great for the outside of the restaurant, but what about the inside? That's where roll-up or flip-open windows come in; they bring the outside in. At Downtown's [Copa Vida](#), the glass flip-open

windows seamlessly meld indoor with outdoor seating and close at night when the chill settles in. Further down J Street at [Waters Grill](#) (pictured), window-side diners get a front-row seat to what's happening outside. At other restaurants, the windows roll up just like a garage door: see The Garlic Shack in Golden Hill and even fast-food places like Sonic Drive-Thru in Kearny Mesa.



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Photo by: Cannonball

Wood-Burning Ovens/Fire Pits

Out of all of humankind's early discoveries, fire was one of the most important. Fire cooks food and keeps us warm at night, as well as acting as a beacon in the dark. Today, restaurants like Downtown's [Biga](#) are bringing fire and food back together, using wood-fired ovens to impart a char

that you can't replicate in a regular oven. Owner and head chef Tae Dickey goes one step further using a mix of red and white wood to bake his pizzas and veggies. And when it's not used in the kitchen, fire is implemented outside as a focal point as evidenced at Mission Beach's [Cannonball](#) (pictured). Later this year, look for new restaurants like [Campfire](#) in Carlsbad (opening this spring) and Liberty Station's [Fireside by the Patio](#) to focus on wood-fired dishes.