



## Discover intrigue in 'secret' San Diego

Kathy Strong, Going My Way 1:45 p.m. PDT May 30, 2016



*(Photo: Supplied)*

Some secrets are just worth spilling—especially when they are tied up in adventure, fun and anything but the expected. If you think you know everything about San Diego, consider this an opportunity to add a few more favorites to your favorite city. For those who seek intrigue, pleasant surprises and off-the-beat-path finds, this is just for you!

### **Maserati-style lodging**

First, you need a “home base” for sleuthing that is in the middle of all the action, especially for your late-night adventures. The perfect choice is a surprise hidden gem snuggled in the heart of the Gaslamp Quarter. Locating the hotel might require an extra turn around the corner to spot since the brick-fronted historic structure fuses quietly with this lively downtown center. However, once inside its multi-storied hallows, unexpected surprises await on every floor.

The Keating House by Pininfarina—created by the same Italian design team responsible for the Maserati and Ferrari—ventured into hospitality for the first time with the 1890-built Keating Building office structure. A salute to its historic side, the five-story Romanesque building still possesses the longest running elevator in the city, powered solely by steam heat.

To create a unique experience worthy of the Pininfarina name, the design team removed features you might expect in standard hotels, such as interior walls, drapery and carpeting. The final result is a design full of surprises including model cars in the hallways, whirlpool tubs in the living room, lots of stainless steel and sleek Italian designed furnishings. State-of-the-art amenities abound from Lavazza espresso machines to Alpha Morphosis Jacuzzi tubs—both Pininfarina Extra designs as well.

The Keating House is perfectly poised in middle of the Gaslamp’s energetic vibe, cuisine-creative restaurants and bars and just a few blocks from the Horton Plaza shopping center and the convention complex. For an easy day trip idea, a ferry travels from Coronado to this section of downtown regularly.

## **Night-time adventure**

Nightfall brings a new level of “secret” to San Diego—top secret night spots that even the locals can’t find without some clues. I asked permission from each of these clandestine “speakeasies” to reveal these hush-hush hints to detecting those libation and entertainment nooks hidden within the confines of the Gaslamp Quarter and all walkable from The Keating House.

## **Noble Experiments**

The Gaslamp Quarter is jam-packed with hopping bistros sharing the sidewalks, some more noticeable than others. One you may not notice is the Neighborhood restaurant at 777 G St., the entre into the hidden nightspot, Noble Experiments. Pass right on by the diners and wait staff, heading to the restrooms in the rear. Look right for a wall of “kegs.” No beer here, just a cleverly concealed entrance. Push on the kegs and a world of mystery and wonder opens up in an intimate space known for its cocktails and hypnotic décor. For those who are fans of the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland, you’ll feel like the ride stopped and you entered its macabre interiors—accomplished by a wall of skulls, a massive crystal chandelier and changing framed art on the walls (and ceiling) that morph into bizarre portraits pairing humans with rabbits or dogs. To gain access, call (619) 888-4713 for a reservation (necessary). ([www.nobleexperimentsd.com/](http://www.nobleexperimentsd.com/))

## **Prohibition**

The name, Prohibition, is perfect for this hidden nightspot—one of the locals’ best known and a popular live jazz nook. You can’t call for a reservation—you just need to know, but the small size means you may have to wait. Head to 548 Fifth Avenue and look carefully for a small plaque that declares “Law Office Eddie O’Hare, Esq.” If Eddie meets his legal clients in this locale, they are in for a surprise. Down the staircase is a world that celebrates the speakeasy period with crafted cocktails, low lights and plentiful music. ([www.prohibitionsd.com](http://www.prohibitionsd.com))

## **Vin De Syrah**

There is actually a sign that signals Vin De Syrah on a Gaslamp corner, but don't be fooled—it is not that easy to find. When you arrive at 901 Fifth St. walk down a flight of stairs to this subterranean place of wonder, as in "Alice in Wonderland." Push open the door covered in grass and "fall down the rabbit hole" to a spacious area filled with intimate seating nooks, princess chairs, hanging branches that give a forest-like feel and accent lights. The hidden door entrance is fun to watch from the inside since closed circuit television reveals patrons trying to find the right door to wonderland. The food is tasty bar fare and the wine list impressive. Take time to graze, drink and enjoy a variety of entertainment, highlighted by burlesque on Friday nights. ([www.syrahwineparlor.com](http://www.syrahwineparlor.com))

## **Fairweather**

Unlike the other concealed nightspots, Fairweather is easy to spot—but nearly impossible to find. If you are in the Petco field vicinity on J Street, you might eye a lively rooftop patio where baseball games are clearly visible (on a massive screen) and audible. Fairweather patrons only need to look for Rare Form and head to rear of the restaurant. Turn right and several doors await marked "yes" or "no." Upstairs, welcome to Fairweather, a comfortable and pleasant patio bar that sports "drinks from sunny places"—from generous piña colodas to mai tais. The refreshing concoctions served under sunny skies (hence, the name) or at night for a lively vibe, are all accompanied by delicatessen delicacies from Rare Form. You won't care which team wins by the end of the day or night. ([www.godblessrareform.com](http://www.godblessrareform.com))

## **Dining reveals**

You'll have to switch from walking to riding for these two dining discoveries, but it will be well worth your effort.

Bleu Boheme is nestled in the up and coming Kensington neighborhood of San Diego, not far from the pulse of downtown and about 10 minutes from anywhere in the city. Established seven years ago, the neighborhood bistro is not a stranger to locals but still being discovered by visitors who

wander off the main roads. The restaurant blends well with the village feel of the area; more specifically, Bleu is reminiscent of a French country bistro from its rustic stone walls to the wax-dripping candelabras on each table. It is an ideal spot for romance with intimate dining nooks, but you'll also see families and groups soaking in the ambience at harvest-style tables. The casual-chic restaurant serves a classic onion soup and other French specialties that will take your senses on a French holiday which attests to chef/owner Ken Irvine being honored as "Chef of the Year" not long ago.

### **Liberty Public Market**

The locals definitely know about this destination for dining, artisans and farmer's market shopping, but Liberty Public Market is still not quite on the visitor's itinerary yet. The unique marketplace that opened just a couple of months ago is already a huge hit with San Diegans for good reason. Like big markets in other metro areas, this site is made for strolling and dining. The former Liberty Station naval base in the city's Point Loma neighborhood still pays homage to its roots, but that is where the comparison ends. The 22,000-square-foot development offers a seven-day-a-week farmer's market where goers may sample artisan breads, tortillas, cheeses, olive oil and jams and buy from small businesses that offer gourmet pet food, arts and crafts and more. Dining either inside or out is a big draw at Liberty. Mess Hall, located in the former naval dining hall, is a perfect way to sample the market's various artisans since daily menus are sourced from the restaurant's Liberty Market "neighbors." It is also very popular, especially for Sunday brunch. I doubt that the prior occupants enjoyed jeweled brioche bread pudding French toast with strawberries or a wood-fired asparagus and feta quiche.