

THE 50 FINEST

With an ever-growing lineup of fine restaurants boasting stellar chefs, unique preparations and over-the-top dining experiences, Orange County has become a hub for gourmet cuisine. Here's our list of people, places and tastes that are setting the bar for culinary excellence on our shores.

By Tina Borgatta, Anita Lau and Kristen Schott

DELICIOUS DISH
O.C.'s foodies are buzzing about Fig & Olive Executive Chef Pascal Lorange's exciting menu and the restaurant's chic surrounds. That's why this place made our 5 Hottest list.

GEETA BANSAL

The Clay Oven owner's journey to the culinary world wasn't easy. Born in Delhi, India, she first set out on a career as a college professor and urban planner, then later became a chef. Her Irvine spot is popular for its contemporary takes on traditional dishes—her ash-roasted mango cold soup is divine. clayovenirvine.com

SCOTT BRANDON

Fireside Tavern's executive chef is a whiz when it comes to crafting inventive spins on comfort food. He founded LinX, an artisan sausage joint, in 2011, and opened Crow Bar + Kitchen with Steve Geary in 2007. Now we're obsessed with his proprietor's burger—an 8-ounce hunk of meat joined by tallegio and Gorgonzola dolce cheeses, and a Nueske's bacon and tomato jam spread between a sesame brioche bun. firesidetavern.com

ALEXANDER DALE

His grandfather founded the former Villa Nova in Newport, and he grew up in the landmark's kitchen. He was inspired, even as a child—he'd add fromages to his Kraft mac and cheese. Today, the Le Cordon Bleu grad is creating award-winning menus of Cali-inspired share plates, like the new chimichurri hanger steak salad, at the beachy-chic SeaLegs. sealegswinebar.com

DAVID FUÑE

After his first visit to Ducasse Paris, he stayed up writing notes so he wouldn't forget the best meal he ever ate. He brings that passion to Splashes at the Surf & Sand with cuisine that capitalizes on the flavors of the coast. His yellowtail crudo is a tale of texture, with lemon pearls, crisp leeks and minted guac. His beef short ribs are seconded only by the cauliflower prepped two ways—roasted and malted. surfandsandresort.com

AMERICAN MAN
Watertable's Manfred Lassahn is putting a new, creative spin on American-style cuisine.



10 CHEFS WE LOVE

MANFRED LASSAHN

This restaurant vet is raising the culinary bar. If you've been to Watertable at the Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach, you know what we mean. He serves up contemporary American fare to gourmands who are crazy for everything from his Meyer lemon-and-thyme-stuffed branzino to his bar jars filled with snackables, like house-roasted almonds with rosemary and Maldon sea salt flakes. huntingtonbeach.hyatt.com

CARLOS SALGADO

Before he was the man behind Taco María at The OC Mix, this O.C. native was a pastry chef, a graphic designer and a computer engineer. He says

procedural thinking influences his cooking. He got his start in Michelin-starred establishments like Commis and executes an ever-changing lineup of modern Mexican creations, including tacos like the *pescado frito*, with halibut, charred scallion aioli, cabbage and grapes. tacomaria.com

AMAR SANTANA

Crisp veal sweetbreads with roasted heirloom carrots, peanut crumble, pickled chiles and toasted coconut—artful creations like this have earned the gourmand acclaim. At 32, he's already achieved his dream of opening a restaurant (Laguna's Broadway by Amar Santana), and he's held stints

in lauded kitchens like Aureole in NYC. Yet, he's remained levelheaded through it all and is a big supporter of the nonprofit Careers through Culinary Arts. broadwaybyamarsantana.com

RAINER SCHWARZ

Dine at The Deck, and your palate will be plied with the freshest fish creations you'll ever taste. Born in Austria, this chef began his training at 15, with an apprenticeship at a castle-turned-restaurant. He's worked in five-star restaurants, was mentored by Joachim Splichal and opened Cienega in L.A. Now, he's filling bellies with concoctions like his pan-roasted halibut with corn pudding, asparagus, sugar snap pea vines and artichokes. deckonlaguna.com

CRAIG STRONG

Join Studio's executive chef on a tour of his oceanfront garden, and he might make you try a fava bean, then give you another to place in your pocket for good luck. He grows delicious crops—cilantro flowers, lavender and fingerlings—and uses them in his dishes. Try the sauteed duck breast—it gets a tart pop from raspberries and rhubarb. studiolagunabeach.com

NORBERTO VILLEGAS JR.

The Mexican-American chef got his start as an intern at Tabu Grill in 2007, and this year, he came full circle. He now heads the kitchen at the Laguna hot spot, where the menu of South Pacific palatables is exotic and mysterious. (His sumac-rubbed lamb is accompanied by mint tea-infused Israeli couscous.) He says his mother's "adventurous" cooking instilled an appreciation for different styles of cuisine. But his favorite is Latin American: "It makes me feel at home." tabugrill.com



ISLAND FARE
Clockwise from top:
Oak Grill's roasted
Chilean sea bass;
Andre Sickinger; Del
Frisco's Grille's
ahi tuna.



5 WE CAN'T WAIT TO TRY

OAK GRILL

One of the biggest restaurant transformations this year is the Island Hotel's Palm Terrace to the just-opened Oak Grill. The chic but laid-back atmosphere features warm interiors of oak (natch), deep red colors, nautical accents and romantic lighting, and a lush and expansive patio for alfresco dining. The concept offers a locally sourced menu creatively balanced with global flavors and ingredients to reflect the varied cultures found in Southern California. How's that for an Island paradise? oakgrillnb.com

PALATABLE POPS
Zov's tomato basil
risotto lollipop fritters



DEL FRISCO'S GRILLE

This award-winning establishment, known for its innovative twists on American comfort classics (it's headquartered in Texas, after all), will arrive at Irvine Spectrum Center in August, serving up delectable dishes such as the kale and Brussels sprouts salad, broiled strip steak with potato cake, and ahi tacos with tangy citrus mayo. We're hungry just thinking about it! delfriscosgrille.com

BABETTE'S

The East Hampton-based neighborhood eatery comes to Crystal Cove this summer, offering healthful selections for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and a great bar menu. We're excited about the exotic vegan-friendly fare, like the Tunisian salad of pomegranate seared salmon and papadum-crusted tofu over a bed of couscous, haricot verts, arugula and mint in a tandoori dressing. Guilt-free deliciousness. babettesrestaurant.com

OUTPOST KITCHEN

Is Orange County ready for Australia's most sought-after clean-foods chef? We think so. Andre Sickinger's modern concept sets up shop in Newport Beach this summer, giving an industrial nod to the terminology of what an Australian outpost actually is. Here,

OAK GRILL'S ROASTED CHILEAN SEA BASS. PHOTO COURTESY OF OAK GRILL NEWPORT BEACH



Agave Maria, JENNY BUCHHAGEN

The St. Regis Monarch Beach's scarlet sip is made with Herradura silver tequila and jalapeño, and it's among a bevy of Bloody Marys the mix master is churning out this season to celebrate the 80th birthday of the brand's iconic cocktail. stregismb.com



Gin Gin Buck, BRANDON SOSA

At **Little Sparrow**, this bartender (and the spot's two other cocktailians) have perfected the classic drink. They're creating their own fresh ginger juice and syrups, and they've adapted the recipe to make it less sweet and more balanced. littlesparrow.com



Frozen Sangria, COLIN PFLUGRADT

This boozy, icy treat is perfect for warm temps. Housemade red wine sangria is layered over **Solita's** custom frozen fruit-based margarita, made with pure blue agave tequilas. Pair it with the spicy yellowtail ceviche and a seat on the patio. solitatacos.com



The Hillhurst, DAVID ALLEE

Sit at **Juliette's** rustic yet chic bar, and watch this head barman create handcrafted drinks. And we've got an orange crush on this cocktail—a blend of City of London gin, grapefruit, honey and Tank 7 farmhouse ale. juliettenb.com



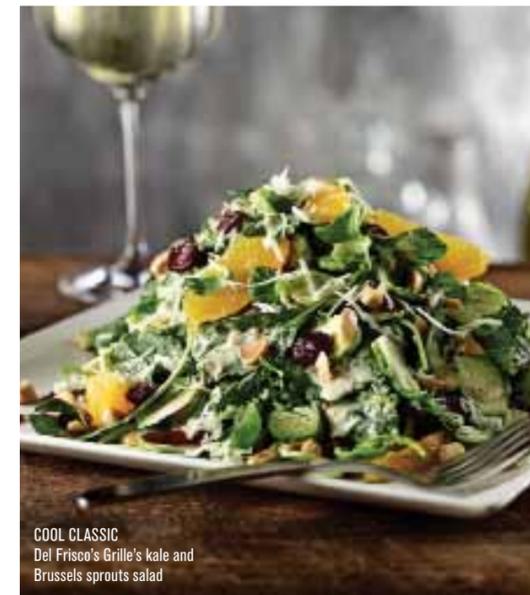
Carthay Manhattan, JOSE BARRAGAN

This drink of Bulleit Rye, vermouth and Angostura bitters is among a select few at **Carthay Circle** that boast an ice-cube sphere. The mixologists make it with an ice press that uses aluminum to conduct heat to form the sphere. Cool. disneyland.disney.go.com

foodies will indulge in Aussie-style farm-to-kitchen, kitchen-to-table dining, while promoting local sustainability in the Newport area and its surrounding communities. Now that's feel-good food.

ZOV'S

Orange County's longtime culinary sweetheart, chef Zov Karamardian, will soon open her fourth location in Anaheim, featuring the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Armenian flavors for which she's known and loved. And its proximity to the "Happiest Place on Earth" puts the restaurant in a prime position for introducing the rest of America—and the world—to the delights we've been enjoying for decades. zovs.com



COOL CLASSIC
Del Frisco's Grille's kale and Brussels sprouts salad

1 GROWING SUCCESS

FRANCO BARONE

We were thrilled when this culinary artist (whose pappardelle in lamb ragu sauce is a taste of heaven on Earth) opened **Il Barone** four years ago. We're over the moon to see a growing empire, with **Il Barone Pizza e Pasta** on Balboa Boulevard, which opened in May, and **Il Barone Bottega**, an Italian market and bakery on Martingale Way, set to open this month. ilbaroneristorante.com



FANTASTICO! Chef Franco Barone

5 DISHES TO SAVOR



LASAGNA MAISON

This dish by **Marché Moderne** Executive Chef Florent Marneau is a summer bounty, lavishly assembled on parchment paper and presented on a wood board. Burrata, Parmesan, mozzarella and fontina cheeses; dollops of luscious asparagus mousseline; and caramelized onion chutney make our mouths water. Marneau balances the richness with the acidity of heirloom tomatoes and meaty French morels. marchemoderne.net



LOBSTER TEMPURA

It all begins with large chunks of lobster tail. The gifts from the sea are dipped in a light tempura batter and flash fried before arriving at your **Fleming's Prime Steakhouse** table. Each bite brings a textural explosion. Outside, it's crisp, but not oily. Inside, tender and juicy. The soy-ginger sauce for dipping pairs nicely with the savory saltiness of the tempura. Sublime. flemingssteakhouse.com



PAN-SEARED HALIBUT

One of the most sought-out plates in O.C. is **Bluewater Grill's** pan-seared halibut, served with a petite herb salad and a mouthwatering green bean, grape tomato and sweet corn succotash. Vibrant in color and bursting with the freshness of summer, it appeals to all of our senses. bluewatergrill.com



PRIME GRILLED DELMONICO

With 25 years under its belt, **Scott's Restaurant & Bar** is as popular as ever. And we can't get our fill of the Delmonico, a succulent 16-ounce bone-in prime New York strip with a robust flavor that's enhanced by a chimichurri sauce accompaniment. A meat-lover's dream. scottsrestaurantandbar.com



STEAK TARTARE

A Restaurant Executive Chef Jon Blackford's sumptuous steak tartare is best described as addictive. It's tart and salty, with capers, mustard and Romano cheese. And the heady aroma of black truffle adds another dimension of style to this velvety smooth experience. Savor each bite with the crunch of toasted bread. arestaurantnb.com

CHEF'S SPECIAL
Pelican Grill's Tasting Table offers foodies an interactive dining adventure featuring exclusive Napa-inspired culinary creations and wine pairings.



PELICAN GRILL'S TASTING TABLE PHOTO BY JOHN DOLE, PAN-SEARED HALIBUT AND STEAK TARTARE PHOTOS BY BOB HOODSON

3 GREATEST CHEF'S TABLES

Pelican Grill

Any visit to The Resort at Pelican Hill promises to be a special one, but it becomes even more memorable if you're there to partake in the Tasting Table experience at Pelican Grill. For this culinary adventure, you and your dining companions (the rustic wooden table accommodates 10) are seated right next to the restaurant's display kitchen, so you can watch the artists in action as they create a special multicourse menu of California Wine Country cuisine, featuring seasonal ingredients and exclusive daily specials. You can ask questions about the preparations—and perhaps even take home a few tips to practice in your own gourmet kitchen. *From \$85 per person or from \$130 with wine pairings, pelicanhill.com*

RAYA

The Ritz-Carlton established itself as a pre-eminent luxury destination long ago, and it hasn't lost its luster—or its ability to remain relevant, innovative and exciting when it comes to the culinary arts. And the proof is in the pudding—or, more specifically, the chef's table experience offered at its signature restaurant, Raya. It's an intimate affair, best suited for two to four guests. Of course, a larger party can be accommodated. Chef de Cuisine Steve Wan creates a customized menu that showcases Raya's unique Asian-influenced pan-Latin coastal cuisine. The experience typically includes five courses, but you can have however many more (or less) you want. And you'll be treated to a selection of dishes—some may be Raya favorites, others may be new and exclusively yours. Want wine pairings? That can be arranged too. *From \$95 per person without wine pairings, ritzcarlton.com*

STONEHILL TAVERN

It's a place people go for marriage proposals, anniversaries and all sorts of special occasions. So it makes sense that the signature restaurant at The St. Regis Monarch Beach would offer a culinary experience that's the stuff food-lovers' dreams are made of. It is, after all, a destination created by acclaimed chef Michael Mina. Couples can delight in the specially prepared menu privately in the expansive dining room, or invite up to 24 guests. Chef Raj Dixit will craft a meal of a lifetime, with courses based on your tastes and desires. Think Nebraska filet mignon with ruby crescent potato puree, melted carrots, blond morels and wild leek bone marrow butter for an entree, and root beer float saffras ice cream with a warm, freshly baked chocolate chip cookie for dessert. Of course, there's wine to be poured as well. Dream on! *From \$3,000, stregismb.com*

1 SWEET TREAT



Peanut butter and bananas—it's a classic pairing. But **Hopscotch** Pastry Chef Mai Phan has taken this treat to a whole new level with her peanut butter truffle cake. "Chocolate truffle cakes are so popular, but I'd never seen a peanut butter one," she says. "I decided to test it out, and luckily it came out good." Indeed, the truffle is sweetly nutty, and a scoop of the banana pastry cream provides a cool, fruity note. A toasted marshmallow spread brings a lovely warmth to each bite, and a final flourish comes by way of a sprinkling of micro mint. It's over the top. hopscotchtaVERN.com



5 OVER-THE-TOP EXPERIENCES

ANDREA

A celebration in Andrea's private dining room starts with spectacular views of The Resort at Pelican Hill's Coliseum Pool and the sparkling blue Pacific—a lovely backdrop to a night of culinary indulgence. These affairs can be as extravagant as your heart's desire. Cuisine ranges between \$125 to \$225 per person, with optional wine pairings from the selection of 2,000 bottles of nectar from Italy, France and California—and many of the vintages are exclusively carried by Andrea. pelicanhill.com

ANQI GOURMET BISTRO

An exclusive journey into the world of sake will only cost you \$250 per person (with a minimum of six guests), and it includes a private tasting with a House of An sake sommelier. And it is, indeed, an adventure, complete with a

unique five-course dinner pairing created by Master Chef Helene An and chef partner Ron Lee. You'll be seated at AnQi's chef's table, and with its window into An's secret kitchen, you're guaranteed a peek into the room where the magic happens. anqibistro.com

CHARLIE PALMER

An exquisite, private party of 10 is made even more exclusive when Charlie Palmer himself designs your special menu for the evening. Served to you and your guests in the Barrel Room, your extravagant dinner will be paired with the best wines from Next Vintage in true classic Charlie Palmer style, promising you an evening of sophistication and opulence. charliepalmer.com

HAVEN GASTROPUB

The popularity of Chef Greg

Daniels' whole roasted suckling pig dinner is a unique six-course culinary experience featuring the best locally grown, organic seasonal ingredients. Pricing begins at \$124 per guest for parties of eight or more (the reservations must be booked two weeks in advance), with an option of beer, wine or cocktail pairings starting at \$50 per person. havengastropub.com

PLAYGROUND 2.0

A seat at Jason Quinn's Playground 2.0 takes you on a culinary sojourn you won't ordinarily find in Orange County. For a mere \$250 per person (and reservations are required, naturally), you will sample roughly 30 courses, with 10 alcohol pairings served *omakase* style, leaving your taste buds at the hands of your chef. It's an intimate experience that's bound to blow your senses. playgrounddtsa.com

5 HOTTEST RESTAURANTS



FIG & OLIVE

This is *the* place to see and be seen—while dining on Executive Chef Pascal Lorange's unsurpassed fare, no less. Here, the well-heeled set noshes on dishes influenced by the French Riviera, like the melon and burrata. A round of the fruit is crowned by the lush fromage, tomato, radicchio, micro arugula and a basil olive oil emulsion. To pair with the plate? A bottle of 2011 Dumol Chardonnay (\$136). So sit back, look around and indulge. figandolive.com



PROVENANCE

Cathy Pavlos has done it again. The chef behind the beloved Lucca now is pleasing palates with farm-to-fork cuisine—courtesy of crops culled from her 1,300-square-foot organic plot on-site near the patio. You'll find us here snacking on the whole smoked Idaho trout or New Zealand sole, which has a fragrant aroma from the purple flowers of wild basil—just another little beauty from her garden. provenanceoc.com

CHARLIE PALMER PHOTO BY BOB HOODSON; PEANUT BUTTER TRUFFLE CAKE PHOTO BY ALAN DE HERRERA; PROVENANCE PHOTO BY ANNE WATSON PHOTOGRAPHY



RED O RESTAURANT

Rick Bayless' lauded Mexican eatery at Fashion Island opened with much fire late last year, and it continues to heat up the scene. It's got a sultry, resort-style design (we love that tantalizing wall of tequila—the restaurant has 215-plus varieties) and elevated cuisine, crafted locally by Executive Chef Keith Stich. He's giving new meaning to guac (yuzu, anyone?), and the lamb mole negro is nothing less than a work of art. redorestaurant.com

THE WINERY RESTAURANT PHOTO BY IRE OKIHARA



WAYS & MEANS OYSTER HOUSE

We raised an eyebrow when the oyster house first opened in Old Towne Orange, but just one visit to the retro-chic inland spot had us hooked, with its bevy of bivalves from both coasts (try the Kaiparas from New Zealand) and sustainably caught, inventive seafood concoctions like the diver scallops. Chefs de Cuisine Justin Odegard and Benjamin Wallenbeck serve them seared and atop a rich plum-port puree. wmoysters.com



THE WINERY RESTAURANT

Jaw-droppingly gorgeous—it's the only way to describe the second outpost from JC Clow, sommelier William Lewis and Executive Chef Yvon Goetz. Sitting on a prime piece of waterfront property in Newport, it exudes sophistication, with a two-story wine cellar filled with nectars like Screaming Eagle (\$3,200). And Goetz's wine country-inspired lineup includes chile lime-rubbed mahimahi and rare black truffle specials for summer. thewineryrestaurant.net



STRAIGHT FROM THE SEA
Waterline's locally sourced
signature halibut BLT

5 TRENDS DEFINING ORANGE COUNTY

FRESH CATCH FROM LOCAL WATERS

With the Pacific at our doorsteps, we shouldn't be surprised when toques choose locally sourced seafood. The tide is changing. Chefs like **Haven Gastropub's** (havengastropub.com) Greg Daniels and **Driftwood's** (driftwoodkitchen.com) Rainer Schwarz turn to Santa Monica Seafood, while **Waterline's** (balboabayresort.com) Vincent Lesage buys fish from Pearson's Port in Newport Beach. Treasures of the sea, indeed.

HALIBUT BIT PHOTO BY ANNE WATSON PHOTOGRAPHY

GARDEN TO PLATE

Many of O.C.'s most acclaimed chefs are trying their hands at farming—and with great success. **Park Ave's** (parkavedining.com) David Slay is no stranger to the trend—he's been nurturing crops at his popular Stanton (that's right) restaurant for years. He's joined by the likes of **Onotria's** (onotria.com) Massimo Navarretta and **Studio's** (studiolagunabeach.com) Craig Strong, whose on-site crops are yielding a bounty of fresh produce—everything from eggplant and artichokes to apples and oranges. Now that's farm to fork.

FAST AND FABULOUS

Quick-serve in O.C. no longer means McDonald's and In-N-Out. Foodies in need of a fast fix are turning to places like Andrew Gruel's **Slapfish** (slapfishrestaurant.com) for delectable bites of sustainable seafood (the lobster roll is to die for), and Adam Navidi's **Green 2 Go** (livegreen2go.com) in Brea, which serves up a broad menu of organic fare (the salads are sensational, and the grass-fed bison burger is spectacular) for takeout or dining on-site, with produce from Navidi's Future Foods Farms. Gourmet now!

HOUSEMADE SOFT DRINKS AND SYRUPS

There's a movement toward incorporating all things fresh and locally produced into menus, and the trend has even trickled down to sodas and syrups. Cathy Pavlos' **Provenance** (provenanceoc.com) serves up homemade beverages (sans the alcohol) like Earl Grey cream soda, which is presented to guests in a Mason jar. And **Scott's Restaurant & Bar's** (scottrestaurantandbar.com) lead mixologist James Wood painstakingly blends housemade syrups for his menu of cocktails. Cheers to that!

ARTISAN SPIRITS

Since we're talking cocktails, we'd be remiss if we didn't give a nod to the show of creativity the region's top mixologists are demonstrating, shaking up unique concoctions that'll blow even the most discerning sipper's mind. Case in point: **Arc's** (arcrestaurant.com) Koire Rogers' Cigarettes & Coffee, crafted with, among other ingredients, his own smoked bitters, whiskey and real coffee. And then there's **Driftwood's** (driftwoodkitchen.com) John Nye's Salad Bar, with kale and sage liqueur. Sensational!



BEEFCAKE
Arc's Noah Blom

3 MEAT MASTERS

ARC

We can't think of anything more decadent than the 18- to 20-ounce prime grass-fed rib loin, butchered in-house. **Noah Blom** chars his Arc tomahawk at 2,000 degrees, ensuring a perfect sear on the outside. There are no words to aptly describe the deliciousness of this cut of meat, with juices that flow onto your tongue with every bite. arcrestaurant.com

MASTRO'S STEAKHOUSE

You'll sigh at the mere sight of the 48-ounce double-cut prime porterhouse. Separated by bone, it offers a strip steak on one side and a tenderloin on the other. **Nicholas Foegal** seasons, sears and broils it to your desire, then slices and finishes it with clarified butter. Perfect for sharing, but you won't want to. mastrosrestaurants.com

SELANNE STEAK TAVERN

One of our favorite meat indulgences is chef **Joshua Severson's** Lord Stanley at Selanne Steak Tavern. This 32-ounce wagyu tomahawk rib-eye from Darling Downs, Australia, is grilled to absolute perfection. Tender and mouthwatering, it is a generous portion even for the heartiest of appetites. selannesteaktavern.com

2 MOST UNIQUE OFFERINGS



COOL! Waterable's
Grilled & Chilled Octopus

GRILLED & CHILLED OCTOPUS

We've been known to crave octopus—those lovely tentacles tasting of the sea. **Waterable's** Manfred Lassahn has a prep that beats all others. He simmers it in a root vegetable and paprika bouillon to shed its tough texture, then tosses it in an herb marinade and places it on an open grill. Each morsel is smoky, soft and simply unforgettable. huntingtonbeach.hyatt.com

PORK BELLY LOLLIPOPS

We could eat a dozen of these. (Wait, we have.) They're made of Kurobuta pork, which by itself is fabulous. **The Winery's** Yvon Goetz cubes the meat and cooks those squares to a light crisp, dressing them with a yuzu, wasabi and toasted sesame reduction. Each bite packs a flavor blast with layers of texture—meaty, soft and juicy good. thewineryrestaurant.net

NOAH BLOM PHOTO BY RALPH PALLUMBO