

Modern Luxury

ORANGE COUNTY

*TASTE OF
SUMMER*

MUST-TRY NEW DINING
DESTINATIONS FROM
COAST TO COAST



THE
RESTAURANT
ISSUE 2016

THE 50 FINEST

EXCITING DEBUTS, FIVE-STAR FEASTS,
CHEFS TO WATCH,
DECADENT DESSERTS & MORE!

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FEATURES

86 THE 50 FINEST Delight in the tastes that Orange County's top chefs and most exciting dining spots are dishing out now with this year's list of the best restaurants in the region.

96 A TASTEFUL TOUR Our annual cross-country "tour de fork" highlights the most intriguing new restaurant openings coast to coast: Pack your bags, as well as your culinary curiosity, and prepare to hit the road for a savory summer!



ON THE COVER
Paella de vegetales with roasted vegetables, bomba rice and saffron aioli, \$32, at Vaca; photo by John Dole

THE 50 FINEST

Orange County's restaurant scene is more exciting than ever, with chefs launching out-of-the-box concepts, a plethora of fine dining experiences and the return of a landmark that's even better than the original. So sit back and savor the tastes we share from our annual list of the best restaurants the region has to offer.

BY TINA BORGATTA
AND KRISTEN SCHOTT

TAPAS THE TOWN At
Amar Santana's Vaca,
share the atun crudo
(\$14), with tuna tartare,
balsamic nori puree,
tomato and avocado.

ATUN CRUDO PHOTO BY JOHN DOLE

**JEFFREY BOULLT,
MAMA ROUX**

O.C.'s culinary circle let out a collective "hallelujah" when we learned that this gourmand is taking his Southern flavors back to Playground as its sous-chef (he says it's the only place he can cook what he wants with no compromise)—and he's giving new life to his pop-up, Mama Roux, at 2.0. His 10-course prix fixe dinners (\$175) will dish out creations like his chowder, a gorgeous soup that teams celery root with absinthe (two products he loves together). It's whimsical and soulful—just like Boullt, 220 E. Fourth St., Santa Ana, 714.560.4444, playgroundtsa.com

**JULIO HAWKINS,
FLY-N-FISH
OYSTER BAR**

Smoke, brine, stuff, sashimi, batter, cedar-plank—those are the ways he experienced king salmon while growing up in Washington. And he uses the last technique in Fly-N-Fish's version (\$28), with his own Asian-inspired twist. But it's his seasonal gazpacho (\$15) that has everyone talking: He's adding a watermelon puree to the tomato base and serving it in the rind, with spiced baby shrimp and feta. 2304 W. Oceanfront, Newport Beach, flynfishoysterbar.com

**BRIAN HUSKEY,
TACKLE BOX**

You can thank this *Top Chef* alum for the gourmet beach concession food you're savoring seaside. Huskey—who once worked with L.A.'s Ricardo Zarate—started the trend with his concept (it's a step from the sand). You'll taste global flavors such as the shrimp ceviche "michelada" (\$12), inspired by his work with Zarate. Shrimp, onion, jicama, avo and cilantro are dressed in a tomato broth. See you on the shore. 3029 E. Shore Ave., Newport Beach, 949.723.0502, tackleboxoc.com

**ROMAN JIMENEZ,
MACALLANS**

Gayot named Macallans among the 10 best Irish pubs in the United States, owing to Jimenez's supercreative spins on traditional fare. (Not surprising from a guy



SHOWSTOPPER Tony Nguyen, seen here at AnQi's glam bar, follows mentor Helene An's advice: Cook light enough so guests can try many different dishes.

10 OF-THE-MOMENT CHEFS

who says the best advice he's ever received is to push yourself out of your comfort zone—wise words from TAPS' Tom Hope.) Take Jimenez's ham and cheese salad (\$14): Baby arugula provides a spicy base for the burrata and cured pork. There's stone fruit, a bourbon vinaigrette and, to top things off, coffee crunch. If you're lucky, he'll tell you how he makes it too. 330 W. Birch St., Brea Downtown, 714.529.1224, macallanspubbrea.com

SHACHI MEHRA, ADYA

While you won't find the chickpea chaat (\$6) in the lineup at her soon-to-open kitchen in Irvine (or in Anaheim), ask for it, so you too can try those crispy wheat crescents, the spiced chickpeas, the tamarind chutney, that tart yogurt. It's one way she honors her culture with modern fare, particularly through spice and texture. (Perhaps that's why she says chiles are a must.) On the menu? The Bombay sandwich (\$7): grilled cheese done "Bombay-style." adyaac.com

**JASON MONTELIBANO,
EATS**

Always trying to push the envelope—that's this executive chef, whose flair for out-of-the-box fare (with attention to Filipino techniques) beckons foodies. On their tables: the crispy pork (\$10)—the maple-vinegar glaze boasts a sweet and tangy balance. And his specials are so playful, like his upcoming Kamayan dinner. It's a Filipino meal where you sit at a communal table and eat with your hands—from banana-leaf plates. 17900 Jamboree Road, Irvine, 949.225.6780, eatskitchen.com

**ADAM NAVIDI,
OCEANS & EARTH**

Wherever this green-food god has gone for the past 16 years, his pan-seared MSC Chilean sea bass (\$38) has gone too. It's on the menu at this eatery, where you can taste the fruits of his aquaponic Future Foods Farms. But the sea urchin and stinging nettle dip (\$13) is piquing our palates now. "Sea urchins have

plagued me [while] surfing," he notes. "And nettles are a nuisance for farmers. But they're nutritious. I put them together to make a dish that represents the good and bad of [land and sea]." 20305 Yorba Linda Blvd., Yorba Linda, 714.970.7027, oceansandearthrestaurant.com

TONY NGUYEN, ANQI

When this executive chef appeared on Bravo's *Recipe for Deception* earlier this year, he faced off with O.C.'s Jason Quinn. But he won, with a soup (pickles were his secret). Then there's his French onion pho—it was the hit of the 2015 James Beard House Dinner. And when his sizzling rice (\$35) with lobster debuts, it'll have the same effect: It's cooked on a Himalayan salt block and brought out with "much fanfare." Applause, please! South Coast Plaza, 3333 Bristol St., Costa Mesa, 714.557.5679, houseofan.com/anqi

**CARLOS SALGADO,
TACO MARÍA**

When a chef earns a James Beard Award nom for tacos, you know they're special. We think that's because of the corn maize that forms the "backbone" of his cuisine. Salgado sources the "colorful, delicious 'land-race' varieties" from Masienda in NYC. He uses the product in multiple ways during his prix fixe dinners (four courses \$75, with wine \$35), to display its diversity. A shell-shocker: the *taco de esturion* with smoked Passmore Ranch sturgeon. 3313 Hyland Ave., Costa Mesa, 714.538.8444, tacomaria.com

**CODY STORTS,
GRITS FULLERTON**

Pork is tops for this devil-may-care fella, and it's everywhere at his new joint. Take the Thai Balls (\$17), chock-full of pork outlet—and pancake batter with fish sauce—maple syrup, cilantro, shallots and jalapeno. "It's a mix between my love of Asian flavors and appealing the need for fried chicken and waffles," says Storts, who also made a cameo on *Recipe for Deception*. And don't get us started on his beer dinners. 133 W. Chapman Ave., Fullerton, 714.449.0939, gritsfullerton.com

TONY NGUYEN PHOTO BY BOBAK RADBIN