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## San Diego seeking entree into fine-dining elite

By Peter Rowe, STAFF WRITER

Has anyone seen San Diego's reputation as a dining town? Depending on who you ask, it's:

a) Sinking, dragged down by overhyped and underperforming restaurants.

b) Rising, buoyed by superb produce and a cadre of creative young chefs.

c) Treading water, overshadowed by San Francisco, Portland and — good gravy, has it come to this? — Louisville.

In this year's James Beard Foundation Awards, the food industry's Oscars, the Kentucky city took two nominations. San Diego, twice Louisville's size, earned half as many nominations: a single nod for chef William Bradley and Addison, the Grand Del Mar hotel's restaurant.

When it comes to fine dining, is San Diego a one-grill town?

"They've definitely got good chefs and good produce,"

SEE **Fine dining, A9**



William Bradley (left), executive chef at Addison at the Grand Del Mar, and fish chef Shawn Gethin. *Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune*



"San Diego has all the characteristics to make it a beautiful dining destination. ... It just takes time," says Chef William Bradley of Addison at the Grand Del Mar hotel. *Charlie Neuman / U-T*

## FINE DINING

CONTINUED FROM A1

## Executive chef left Blanca after seven months

said Kate Krader, restaurant editor at *Food & Wine*. "But it doesn't seem like the food is as good as it should be."

This is changing, Bradley insisted: "San Diego has all the characteristics to make it a beautiful dining destination. We have wonderful produce, wonderful people, wonderful climate. And we have wonderful restaurants."

Then where's our wonderful culinary reputation? "It just takes time," Bradley said. "We're getting there."

To become a top restaurant city requires more than great ingredients. Signature dishes are a plus, as is the buzz supplied by TV ("Top Chef Masters," "Iron Chef") and cover stories in glossy magazines. You also need a distinctive culinary voice, one that reflects a region's culture.

San Diego's food scene has never rivaled that of New York or San Francisco, but how many cities can make that claim? The local culture seems tailor-made for the national culinary obsessions of the moment. Local produce; sustainable seafood; hormone-

and antibiotic-free meats; dishes that are casual yet sophisticated — they all fit San Diego like a Padres jersey on an outfielder named Tony Gwynn.

Besides, who doesn't like a little sunshine on their plate?

"The whole idea of San Diego is active, outdoors, it's everything that Southern California is supposed to be," said Trey Foshee, executive chef at George's at the Cove. "But how we translate that into food is a tough thing."

It's been done. Cities such as Portland and Seattle are nationally known for their coffee, cocktails, charcuterie and creative embrace of the Pacific Northwest's natural bounty.

"I feel that both Portland and Seattle are firing on all cylinders," *Food & Wine*'s Krader said.

San Diego, in contrast, needs to rev up its sputtering dining scene: "If it made more noise, we would go there more often."

That's not Eastern chauvinism, Foshee insisted. In 1998, when *Food & Wine* tapped Foshee as one of the nation's best new chefs, he was working in Sundance, Utah — and he wasn't the only Westerner in the magazine's Class of '98. "Our group, we were a bunch of people from nowhere."

He stays in touch with the magazine and its San Diego-bound critics. "Honestly, they are usually disappointed," he said. "A restaurant may have a cute concept, but it's never quite there yet."

Much of the country, Kerry Kapich maintained, would disagree. Kapich, an executive at the San Diego Convention & Visitors Bureau, cited a 2007 survey of Phoenix, Dallas and Chicago residents. Many mentioned San Diego's "very healthy" food. These days, tourists ask about our produce and craft beers.

Visitors and locals are ill-served by San Diego media, Foshee

said, which hasn't done enough to spotlight local chefs, such as Jason Knibb of Nine-Ten and Carl Schroeder of Market and the new Bankers Hill Bar + Restaurant, or the farm-to-table movement. "We do not have a critical voice in San Diego," he said.

But Foshee also criticized his profession, urging local restaurants to nurture homegrown talent. Our distinctive cuisine, he predicted, will come from our native sons and daughters. "Someone who grew up in this environment, understands it in his bones — that's where the better food is going to come from."

Do we want better food if it's experimental? Jason Neroni left Solana Beach's Blanca last weekend after seven months as executive chef. He insisted his return to New York City had nothing to do with San Diego's tepid response to his cuisine. But it didn't help.

"I like San Diego and, at Blanca, that was probably the best food I ever did," Neroni said. "But I felt like only 20 percent got it."

The other 80 percent spurned his nose-to-tail pork dinners and complained about the chicken breast, which looked pale after being prepared *sous vide*, in vacuum-sealed plastic pouches. "It's not uncooked," Neroni retorted. "You're just used to chicken that has grill marks on it, and has been overcooked."

Neroni praised the local culinary corps, especially Bradley and Knibb. "But it's probably going to take a little bit of time for them to hammer away and change things."

Bradley agreed. The South Bay native guided several Phoenix resort restaurants before coming home four years ago. Under his leadership, Addison is the only Southern California restaurant to win five stars from the *Forbes* Travel Guide and five diamonds from AAA.

"There are some great chefs here," he said. "We just have to be patient. It takes time."

Speaking of time, Rubio's, the fast-food chain that was sold this week, rolled out San Diego's signature dish a quarter-century ago. Isn't it time for something new?

Neroni hopes so. He quickly tired of customers scanning Blanca's menu, then saying half in jest, "Where are the fish tacos?"