

# SAN DIEGO HOME/GARDEN

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Fall Interior Design Report  
A Secret English Garden

OCTOBER 2014

## ODYSSEY OF A KIND



Tiraditos served on blocks of Himalayan pink salt, make for an elegant presentation at Indigo Grill.

**T**O GIVE PHILIPPE BELTRAN free run with a restaurant's décor is to invite him to run wild, as he did with the redo of India Street's relentlessly popular **Indigo Grill**. One supposes Odysseus, restlessly sailing the wine-dark sea to unknown harbors, inspires him, and the new look skims away on foamy crests of fun. The windowed wall that semi-encloses the terrace reminds us of bistro fronts along Paris' Boulevard du Montparnasse, near which Philippe was born. In this space, cords snaking between funky lights look like roughed-up velvet but actually are well-used fire hoses. Inside, jazz and cascading voices resound among peach stucco walls, stone-clad columns and so much atmosphere that you barely need eat to feel satisfied. Chef Deborah Scott founded the restaurant, and signatures like her spicy Skirts of Fire steak salad embroider the menu, which she otherwise hands off to Chef Jason Maitland. His Latin-inspired list smacks you in the face with cleverness (and silliness like Flaming Hot Cheetos, defined as "pigs ears, lime zest, Cotija, Handi Wipes"). Peruvian-style "cebiches" feature seafood cut and marinated to order, as do the similar tiraditos, which are doused with tangerine-chili vinaigrette and served atop blocks of Himalayan pink salt (foraged by Philippe on his travels?). Local bass served as a tiradito has an irresistibly novel character. Queso fundidos bubble around town; Maitland combines ritzy P'tit Basque cheese and house-made chorizo in an iron skillet that empties well before you want it to. There's much more, including grilled ahi ribs and a brûléed rice pudding that takes up residence in the memory.

**WATCHING A FRENCH GUY** PRESENT a bottle of wine is like watching a young Baryshnikov when he first danced on American stages: assured, involving, utterly in command of his



Christophe Laifa presents wine with French flair at Bellamy's in Escondido.

material. Christophe Laifa, the new dining room manager at **Bellamy's** in Escondido, brings an exacting grace to the art of showing and explaining a bottle to appreciative clients. Simply to see the way he holds it is to be transported to Paris, which loaned Laifa to San Diego some years ago. His preparation for the restaurant main stage included several years as a buyer for La Grande Epicerie de Paris, the luxurious Left Bank supermarket. Mornings at 2 a.m., Christophe prowled the Rungis food halls buying the finest foie gras, caviar and fish, which he then drove to Le Bon Marché, arranged in displays and so forth — making for long days. No wonder America beckoned.

**TACOS ARE NOT ROCKET SCIENCE.** Fold a corn tortilla around something edible and you've got one. Then again, places such as Javier Plascencia's well-appointed **Romesco** in Bonita offer specialties otherwise unobtainable locally. Worth a visit for supremely succulent bone marrow sopos and roll-your-own beef cheek tacos, Romesco delights with unexpected dishes like Grandma's Tacos de Fideos, filled with

spaghetтини, cream, Spanish chorizo, salsa verde and more. Have your cake and eat it too.

**THE 44 GOLDEN LETTERS** mounted on a wall at Hillcrest's nicely redone **Lotus Thai** represent the full Thai alphabet, and frequent diners doubtless will learn to read the language. The new look, clean and stylish, includes a Warhol-like series of wood panels with various depictions of pink-toned lotus. Food presentations also are artsy, like the attractive chicken larb, a sweet-tart-spicy treat interwoven with slivered chiles that, over time, bite you back. Just down Fifth Avenue, **La Bonne Table** is a tiny corner bistro with much atmosphere and an oo-la-la menu that runs from house-made pork rillettes (a creamy, ravishing paste) to convincing bouillabaisse and, but of course, mousse au chocolat.

**AS TRENDS GO**, shrimp 'n' grits certainly are having their moment in San Diego County, and Brandon Fortune of L'Auberge Del Mar's **Kitchen 1540** likely is the chef responsible. He featured the dish at his Aquamoree (now closed) in La Jolla and highlights it on his new, inventively Southern menu at L'Auberge. Local tomatoes are always a good idea; and when green ones are available, Brandon fries them and piles on garnishes of cool gem lettuce leaves, buttermilk-lime dressing and blue cheese. If you typically don't eat dessert, try his "low 'n' slow baked bread pudding": a sweet, tart, citrus-tinged symphony of flavors that include bourbon-toffee caramel, a candied pecan crumble and orange-y "Creamsicle" ice cream.

**BUSY YOUNG MAN**, that Alex Thao. After abandoning Hillcrest (his Celadon at Sixth and University was a long-running hit), he is busy colonizing the Gaslamp Quarter, especially the stretch of Fourth Avenue where the new, Korean-themed **Saja Kitchen** joins his Rama and Lucky Liu's. Bigger news: He's transforming the landmark Royal Thai space on Fifth Avenue into a trendy Vietnamese place with, he boasts, a "name" chef from Los Angeles. ♦



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