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SAN DIEGO  
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DECLARATION OF  
INDEPENDENTS  
THE GREAT INDIE BOOKSHOPS  
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DINING;  
INTERIOR  
MOTIVES  
BROADWAY'S  
NEXT BIG  
THINGS  
HIGHER SPIRITS;  
ROOFTOP BARS





Left to right: Giant wicker baskets double as furniture at Bondi; Laurel's swingin' bar; geometry is chic at the Guild; the hexagon-shaped entryway at Starlite.

# interior *Motives*

Winning design provides a visual feast at these local eateries

BY ANNAMARIA STEPHENS

Never before has design been such an integral part of the general public's vernacular. Affordable design-driven stores like Target and household designer names such as Jonathan Adler and Kelly Wearstler are a testament to Americans' growing appreciation for the touches that make a house a home—or a restaurant a dining experience. Nowhere, perhaps, is this trend more evident than in San Diego, a city that once coasted by on old-money fine dining with little flair. These days, however, it's easy to find top-notch places where the décor is as unforgettable as the food. Here are a few of the best.

## Top Design: The Winners

### *Starlite*

Husband-and-wife design/build firm Bells&Whistles created this custom space that literally stops first-timers in their tracks. A heavy, tinted-glass front door encased in a hexagonal wood-plank entryway leads directly to Starlite's gleaming-white, sunken square

bar, a visual counterpoint to the colorful display of top-shelf spirits rising behind it. Above the centered bar hangs a striking chandelier crafted from varied lengths of stainless steel tubing, angled at the ends to allow the embedded lights to twinkle and reflect in the mirrored ceiling. Mounted staghorn ferns punctuate textured stone walls that run the length of the main room. Other natural décor elements, such as polished wood paneling and cork tiles, complement gold pendant lamps and luxe black leather booths. Starlite's daily menu emphasizes simple but excellent flavor profiles based on local, sustainably farmed produce, seafood and meats. The restaurant's flat-iron steak is a favorite entrée. Pair it with an old-world wine and finish the evening with a snifter of Pappy Van Winkle's—Starlite is one of just two bars in town to carry the aged bourbon. 3175 India St., Midtown, 619.358.9766

### *Laurel*

When restaurateur Tracy Borkum (Kensington Grill, Chive) took over a couple of years ago, Laurel was an established





favorite with the upscale dining set, but its stodgy tone-on-tone décor wasn't likely to entice younger, hipper tastemakers. A dramatic makeover changed all that. Whimsy and glamour collide with oversized black-and-white baroque-motif wallpaper, plush chartreuse velvet banquettes, houndstooth-print armchairs, a massive crystal chandelier and bunches of long-stemmed red roses suspended underwater in tall vases. It's the kind of smart and sexy look you might expect from a chic French boutique hotel, not Bankers Hill. The menu, too, has retained its quality while receiving a much-needed infusion of creativity and wit. Now fine wines share menu space with cocktails like the Elderbubble (elderflower, champagne and raspberry vodka). Starter dishes pull flavors from an international palette, while main entrées stick mostly to the French and Mediterranean straight-and-narrow, with the occasional accent of Pan-Asian. 505 Laurel St., Bankers Hill, 619.239.2222

### *The Guild*

Barrio Logan—one freeway stop from downtown and a long-blighted home to warehouses and takeout taco shops—seems an unlikely place to open a fine-dining establishment. Yet this custom-designed, industrial-contemporary lounge space, all stainless steel, glass and concrete, might just be the neighborhood's much-needed push toward gentrification. Owner/creator Paul Basile handled every last architectural and design element, from the one-armed wood-and-metal chairs to the picture window that peers into his adjacent workshop, where welders' sparks add as much warmth to the décor as bright orange-and-green accents. Toeing the line of modern ethics, Basile used predominantly pre-existing, recycled and renewable materials throughout the Guild, whose name nods to its emphasis on artisanship. Ingenuity carries through to the food, too. The menu features small-plate options focused on flavors and textures that are daring but rooted in traditional cuisine—a tuna sashimi served with zesty wasabi foam or pesto-infused mozzarella with chilled tomatoes. Wine-by-the-glass selections abound, but the cocktail list is limited to beverages made with liquor substitutes like soju. 7805 Newton Ave., Barrio Logan, 619.564.7584

### The Runners-up:

#### *Bondi*

Down Under is known as a land of big, bold and brash, so it's no surprise that Australian restaurant Bondi follows suit with its innovative and larger-than-life design. Wall partitions made from lava rock and mesh wire divide the large space. Up front, booths that resemble large wooden birdcages hang suspended just above the floor. Massive abstract metal creations dominate the dining room, and in the bar, lighted ceiling sculptures look like something straight out of the Great Barrier Reef. Bondi offers a wide selection of Australian beers, a dangerously delicious sparkling Shiraz and traditional Aussie treats such as meat pies and pavlova. 333 Fifth Ave., Gaslamp Quarter, 619.342.0212

#### *Jsix*

Rows of velvet Moroccan fez hats hanging on a black wall are just one of the quirky design elements in this see-and-be-seen restaurant, part of the chic boutique Hotel Solamar. Textures intersect in every direction: Stainless steel and the visible metal grills of the open kitchen meet sheer curtains in rust and copper tones and a ceiling lined with huge clusters of plaster flowers in relief. Many of the design elements take their cue from the Spanish-Moorish architecture made so famous by Balboa Park, while the standout food draws flavors from the length of the West Coast (white corn and chile poblano soup, for example). 626 J St., Gaslamp Quarter, 619.531.8744

#### *Café Chloe*

Chocolate-brown glass tiles and creamy ivory café tables whet the appetite at this Paris-inspired East Village bistro, named for the owners' young daughter (whose darling silhouette appears on the cameo signage). Café Chloe showcases thoughtful sophistication, from the purse hooks under the half-moon bar up front to the stack of décor and lifestyle magazines meant to keep solo visitors company. High-design elements including framed black-and-white photographs and white Philippe Starck Louis Ghost chairs blend seamlessly into the warm, welcoming décor. And the food, which includes bistro favorites such as a fromage plate and steak frites, is served stylishly with black paper-lace doilies and marble stands. 721 Ninth Ave., East Village, 619.232.3242

#### *Extraordinary Desserts*

This second location of Hillcrest's beloved dessert place is a study in contrasts. Out front and inside, wall-length pieces of stainless steel are perforated with bubble-shaped cutouts, giving the feeling of airiness. Inside, modern metal-and-wood tables and fixtures share the high-ceilinged space with a giant serene Buddha head and a charming assortment of oh-so-chic gift items. But presentation is where Extraordinary shines. Fragrant rose petals and dustings of edible gold lend a vibrant, feminine pop to decadent desserts and beverages. Sugary snacks aren't the only option, though; you can also order sandwiches and other light fare, as well as sumptuous wines and bubbly. 1430 Union St., Little Italy, 619.294.7001 ☉