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LIFESTYLES

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DELIGHTS**
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COZY DECOR

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URBANE AND URBAN



With sumptuous steaks; distinguished décor; and headwaiters, like Lead Captain Matthew Peach, gussied up in black tuxedos, there's no doubt that Born & Raised exemplifies fine dining.

How much of the \$6.5 million that Consortium Holdings invested in its new luxury steakhouse in Little Italy went into stocking the bar's remarkable collection of Scotch whiskeys? **Born & Raised's** list reaches its peaty apogee with a 1964 Highland Park that costs \$750 for a 2-ounce pour. But be not bereft; other Scotch tipples are priced as low as \$16. Many local chefs have delightedly announced the death of fine dining in San Diego. And, indeed, their pork belly and kale-heavy menus do resemble requiems for culinary excellence. So Born & Raised offers the delicious shock of tableside preparation of items like mushrooms tartare, steak Diane and, most engagingly, omelets; headwaiters in black tie; deluxe steaks dry-aged on the premises; and multiple references to French cuisine. The double-decker on India Street features a posh dining room backed by Chef Jason McLeod's busy, heavily staffed kitchen. The open-air second floor is an ongoing hit. The vast and lovely menu sparkles with luxuries like tournedos Rossini, an opera of filet mignon, foie gras, truffles and Madeira sauce on toasted brioche.

JUST AS THE FRENCH CREATE hundreds of pastries using only eight basic cake recipes, Mexican cooks compose a near infinity of dishes based on a handful of ingredients: tortillas, beans, cheese, salsa, bread and, of course, eggs. Reading the long breakfast/lunch menu at the new **Fonda Don Diego Coronado**, near the bayside end of Orange Avenue, is like taking a class in culinary versatility. Among its attractions are locally unfamiliar dishes like motuleños, so wonderful the first time that this writer returned for seconds 48 hours later. Served

in a deep bowl, motuleños layers savory sustenance, beginning with terrifically tasty black beans capped with a corn tortilla. Above these, a trio of runny-yolk fried eggs hide under snippets of ham, a sprinkling of green peas, moderately spicy ranchero sauce and crumbled queso fresco. A crown of fried plantain slices adds sumptuous sweetness. The menu also lists elaborate tortas, traditional dishes like chilaquiles and many superb omelets, including one with three cheeses and the delightful herb called epazote.

A FEW BLOCKS AWAY on Kettner Boulevard, Bracero opened as a culinary and visual wonderland, with tables in such demand that reservations were about as scarce as affordable tickets to *Hamilton*. Then chef-partner Roberto Plascencia abruptly pulled out, leaving partner Luis Pena with the question of what to do now. The answer was to cut and paste South Bay's **Romesco Mexiterranean Cocina**, the duo's original Baja-Med restaurant, into the Little Italy space. However, over the years, Romesco had morphed from a daring upstart to something of a clone of the Saverio's Italian restaurants operated in Tijuana by the Plascencia family. So, yes, look for a good tapas bar; but also prepare to choose between Saverio's cheese-laden penne arrabiata and very traditional carne asada à la Tampiquena.

EMPTY GASLAMP RESTAURANT SPACES rarely stay that way long, and one on Market at Sixth that has seen lots of coming and going now is called **The Smoking Gun**. With chef Kevin Templeton's steady finger on the trigger, this one pleases casual diners with a menu of "urban street food"



The Smoking Gun's packing some plumb-delicious cocktails such as Cinnamon Toast Punch (left), Strawberry Fields (right) and its namesake The Smoking Gun (foreground).

and an inventive drinks list that goes on and on and encompasses many creative boilmakers. Downtown's only eatery to house a lifestyle store stocked with shoes, skateboards, sunglasses and such, Smoking Gun specializes in things like cornbread (tasty when spread with agave-chive butter, and interesting when married to torn biscuits) baked and served with mushroom sauce as "homemade stuffing." Bold flavors are common, like baby back ribs coated with spicy barbecue mustard.

"FUN" IS A WORD WE LIKE to use about new eateries, and it certainly applies to Gaslamp's **Queensborough**. The upstairs dining room, two stories high and floored with tiny decorative tiles, is musically gifted and a pleasure to behold. Spice etches a pair of lips into the foam atop the New Yorker cocktail, varied seasonings flavor the house popcorn, and sooner or later it's time for a hunk of peach cobbler that chef Taylor Houseman bakes according to a 100-year-old recipe. ♦