

**W**ith its year-round idyllic weather, you'd never know it was winter in San Diego unless you picked up on the signs in this Southern California city: ice rinks on the beaches, lights on the palm trees and a preponderance of golf enthusiasts here for the annual PGA Buick Invitational Golf Tournament. You'd also be hard-pressed to find any indication of the local government's recent turmoil. But one thing about San Diego is unmistakable: the conservative seaside town has been getting in touch with its hip side lately. A billion-dollar redevelopment of the downtown area has yielded a sophisticated dining and nightlife scene that has spread all the way to Carlsbad.

Two newly opened luxury hotels introduce visitors to the emerging Gaslamp Quarter, in the heart of downtown. The **Keating** (432 F St.; 619-814-5700; [thekeating.com](http://thekeating.com)), a thirty-five-room boutique, is the first venture into hotel design by Pininfarina (the Italian team behind Ferrari-Maserati). Spaces with high ceilings and exposed brick walls showcase modern Italian design, and the rooms are outfitted with Egyptian-cotton linens and Lavazza espresso machines. Around the corner is the landmark **U S Grant Hotel** (326 Broadway; 619-232-3121; [starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com)), relaunched as part of Starwood's Luxury Collection after a \$52 million renovation.

Flat-screen TVs and WiFi were added, plus specially commissioned French and Native American artwork for its classical Beaux Arts bones. The 270 rooms were redone with imported custom carpets, white-on-white Italian linens and stone and marble baths.

Those who love to be pampered will appreciate the constellation of spas in the suburbs. The latest star is the 10,000-square-foot haven at the Mediterranean-style **Rancho Valencia Resort and Spa** (5921 Valencia Circle; 800-548-3664; [ranchovalencia.com](http://ranchovalencia.com)), in Rancho Santa Fe. The spa has ten treatment rooms with private patios and a Vichy room for hydrotherapy.

No matter where you stay, take advantage of the area's many cultural offerings. From January 13 through February 18, Matthew Broderick portrays an astronomy professor in *The Starry Messenger*, a new Kenneth Lonergan play at the **Old Globe Theater** (1363 Old Globe Way; 619-234-5623; [theoldglobe.org](http://theoldglobe.org)). An anticipated arrival on the fine-arts scene is the expansion of the **Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego** (1100 Kettner Blvd.; 619-234-1001; [mcasd.org](http://mcasd.org)), which will be unveiled in January and will display a site-specific work by Richard Serra. At the museum's La Jolla branch, don't miss Nancy Rubins's playful installation of rowboats, canoes and surfboards.

A coterie of acclaimed chefs, meanwhile, has migrated from jobs in New York and London. Tony DiSalvo opened **Jack's La Jolla** (7863 Girard Ave.; 858-456-8111) in 2005 after a six-year stint as executive chef at New York's Jean-Georges. DiSalvo's multilevel place includes an oyster and sushi bar, a grill, an upscale dining room and a wine bar. Last year, Bruce Logue, a protégé of Mario Batali, landed at **Vivace** (7100 Four Seasons Point; 760-603-3773), the signature restaurant at the Four Seasons Aviara, in Carlsbad.

His menu offers delicious regional Italian dishes. The most exciting young chef is Gavin Kaysen, who has become a local celebrity for bringing his innovative take on French cuisine to **El Bizcocho** (17550 Bernardo Oaks Dr.; 877-517-9342), the restaurant at the Rancho Bernardo Inn. The braised

short ribs and the lamb loin with foie gras confit and winter truffles are worth the twenty-five-minute drive from downtown, particularly considering that after Kaysen represents the United States in the prestigious Bocuse d'Or competition in France this January, he may not remain at El Bizcocho for long.

With all eyes on the increasingly fashionable San Diego scene, however, he probably won't stray too far. —SALLY HORCHOW

## LETTER FROM SAN DIEGO



**From left:** King salmon at Vivace; an art installation by Nancy Rubins.

