

A TASTE OF

SANTA BARBARA

From the seafood served across the city to the wine produced in the shadows of the Santa Ynez Mountains, Santa Barbara offers a true taste of California

WORDS: NICOLA TRUP

THE FOOD TOUR EAT THIS, SHOOT THAT

"Santa Barbara doesn't do chain restaurants — that's not our jam," says Tara Jones Haaf. "Downtown has about 400 restaurants, and pretty much all of them are family-owned."

The establishment we're hovering outside isn't open yet, but Tara has connections. On her Eat This, Shoot That tour she shows guests her favourite places to eat, offering food-photography tips and samples along the way. All our stops are in the Funk Zone, a district squeezed between the ocean and Highway 101, where once-derelict warehouses have evolved into restaurants, bars, boutiques and flats. Many of these former industrial buildings initially sprang up to serve the nearby train station, but as transporting goods by rail became less common, they fell out of use and artists moved in, attracted by cheap rents.

A few decades ago, says Tara, the neighbourhood was considered "sketchy", and the air was filled with the odour of the local fish market, putting the 'funk' into the Funk Zone. The market has since moved, but Santa Barbara's strong seafood culture remains. The waters of California's Central Coast are rich in everything from salmon and rockfish to abalone and sea urchins, dished up in harbourside seafood shacks as well as fine dining restaurants.

Tyger Tyger, which shares its pink paper lantern-bedecked space with an ice cream

parlour and a coffee shop, uses local seafood in its Southeast Asian-inspired dishes. Sitting out on the terrace, we're brought plates of huge summer rolls. But before we can take a bite, Tara shows us how to capture the perfect picture for Instagram. Slightly over-exposing the photo (which I'm surprised to learn can be done on a phone) makes the dish look brighter and more tempting, she says, as does a sharp focus: "When you get in nice and close, you're telling the camera you don't want it to focus on anything else," she tells us as we all wait for our smartphones to self-adjust.

Pictures snapped, I tuck into a summer roll stuffed with soft, fat prawns, shredded carrot, noodles, lotus root and a generous amount of herbs. It's served with a deliciously mild, homemade fish sauce, and washed down with sweet, earthy Thai iced tea.

We spend the rest of the tour meandering across the Funk Zone, which, despite rapid gentrification, retains its creative spirit. There are several galleries and artists' workshops, and it's the only part of the city where street art is legal. We pass murals of people, animals and abstract designs, some long-standing, some more recent. "One of the coolest things about the Funk Zone is that it's constantly shifting and changing, art-wise," Tara says.

Over the next few hours, we make seven stops, gradually filling our bellies at places including Mony's Mexican Food, another family-run joint, which Tara bills as having "the best salsa bar in town". On the deck

outside the compact taqueria we tuck into beautifully soft, shredded chicken served on delicate corn tortillas and — in my case — loaded up with spicy habaneros, and tangy pineapple and pepper salsa.

We drink — and photograph — blonde beer at the father-and-son-owned Figueroa Mountain Brewing Company ("You want to backlight your beer to illuminate it"), and try lobster bisque at Enterprise Fish Company, a seafood spot that's been in business since the 1970s, but is sadly closed permanently, due to the state lockdown, shortly after my visit. Judging by the snaking queue outside, I won't be the only one mourning the loss of its thick, glossy, copper-coloured soup. But then, the Funk Zone will never be short of places to eat.

Three-hour Eat This, Shoot That tours of the Funk Zone cost \$109 (£83), including tasters. eatthisshootthat.com

THE CHOCOLATIER TWENTY-FOUR BLACKBIRDS

Mike Orlando isn't your typical artisan chocolatier. He doesn't have a culinary background and didn't train with the experts in Belgium. He's a scientist by trade: before making chocolate for a living he was an analytical chemist at a university, and his past is writ large across his shop/laboratory.

Twenty-Four Blackbirds sits along what's known as the Haley Corridor, a central, though still somewhat off-piste district of



IMAGES: ROB STARK; BLAKE BRONSTAD; AVIL IMAGES; TYGERTYGER/VISIT SANTA BARBARA

creative, independent businesses, from a cafe specialising in cocktail-like coffees to a former mill-turned-multipurpose space, housing a restaurant, brewery, boutique and more. It's the perfect neighbourhood for Mike, who takes an unusual approach to his craft.

"One of the things that got me interested in chocolate was fermentation," he says as we walk around his workshop, which is filled with microscopes, machinery and things in jars. He offers me a taste of some cacao juice that's had cocoa beans fermenting in it; the process is what gives the chocolate much of its flavour. It's sour, with a long, breadly finish.

We walk through a humid room where Mike is growing cacao trees, pineapple plants and vanilla, because, he says, they like a similar climate. Later, he breezily mentions he's gene sequencing cacao.

Mike works with a handful of origins at a time. "All new origins go through multiple roasts, multiple batches, multiple tastings. I'm working with a new one from Thailand and it's super acidic," he says as we approach the roasting machine (a chicken rotisserie oven he adapted, as it's gentle on the beans). The roast can control that acidity, he tells me, a toasty, tangy scent wafting over us.

"Our chocolate is just two ingredients: cocoa and organic sugar from Brazil," Mike says, proffering a couple of plain bars. The Madagascar is relatively sweet, while the Dominican Republic is more malty. But it's the filled chocolates that really show off Mike's Wonka-esque tendencies.

"We try to do a small number of interesting flavours," he says, gesturing to a glass cabinet full of glossy, colourfully hand-painted half-spheres. He offers me an 'old fashioned', a play on the classic cocktail, filled with bourbon that's been distilled enough to remove the alcohol entirely. Inside, the sweet, thick

caramel tastes salty, smoky and slightly burnt. I try other confections filled with cardamom and black pepper caramel, and togarashi, a Japanese spice mix.

"I try to bring out the sweet and savoury. If I'm eating carnitas, or something, I'll think about the component flavours." And with that, Mike hands me a cacao juice and cinnamon jelly sweet for the road. Another experiment that's paid off. twentyfourblackbirds.com

THE LOCAL TIPPLES

URBAN WINE TRAIL

"Santa Barbara does one thing really well, and that's eat. But we also do another thing, and that's drink." Tara's words are ringing in my ears as I head off on the Santa Barbara Urban Wine Trail, a collection of 30 wineries that have banded together to promote locally produced tipples.

Thanks to the microclimate around the Santa Ynez Mountains, Santa Barbara borders some of California's best wine country. It's the only range in North America to run east to west, rather than north to south, its unique geography allowing a sea breeze to blow from the Pacific through the fertile valleys.

A wide range of grapes thrive in this area, from pinot noir and chardonnay to syrah and grenache — although merlot is a touchy subject. The 2004 film *Sideways*, set nearby, caused what became known as the 'merlot slump', after the main character railed against the grape. "It was so bad, merlot farmers had to pull their vines up because they were making zero money," Tara says. Some, however, continued to produce it, or returned to the grape after the film's effect wore off.

Wine Trail map in hand, I set off, starting in the Funk Zone, at Pali Wine Company. Although this unassuming grey building



Santa Barbara Shellfish Company's lobster roll

This landmark restaurant has been dishing up seafood on the pier since 1980, and the lobster roll is one of the most popular dishes on the menu.

SERVES: 4 **TAKES: 30 MINS**

INGREDIENTS

- 2 Maine lobsters (around 680g each), or 450g lobster meat
- 3 tbsp mayonnaise
- 1 celery stick, finely diced
- 85g capers, drained
- 2 chives, finely chopped, plus extra for sprinkling
- 4 New England-style split-top rolls, or soft white hot dog buns
- melted butter, for brushing

METHOD

- 1 Boil a large pan of lightly salted water, then cook the lobsters on a rolling boil for 6 mins until the shells are bright red.
- 2 Scoop the lobsters out of the pan and set aside to cool. Break open the shell with a lobster cracker (or nut cracker), then remove the meat from the claws and tail, being careful to pick out any pieces of shell. Roughly chop the tail meat, keeping it in larger chunks.
- 3 Tip the the lobster meat into a large bowl and mix with the mayonnaise, celery, capers and chives. Season to taste.
- 4 Lightly toast the rolls on a griddle pan (or under a grill), then generously brush the insides of the rolls with the melted butter. Top with the lobster mix, sprinkle over some more chives and serve.



Truffles at Twenty-Four Blackbirds

Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Sunrise on the seafloor; Tyger Tyger; street art in the Funk Zone; pork khao soi at Tyger Tyger



looks more like an estate agent's office than a winery, round the side is a more promising view: a terrace draped with lights that sometimes hosts live bands. Inside are wines on tap; Pali produces pinot noir and chardonnay from grapes grown in vineyards along the West Coast, including its own plot in Lompoc, an hour north of Santa Barbara. I order a 2018 chardonnay and sip it in the afternoon sun, its light oakiness a world away from the chardonnays that have given the grape a bad name on our side of the Atlantic.

From here, it's on to Riverbench, a leather-and-marble space specialising in sparkling wines. I wind my way between dressed-up couples on dates to sit at the bar, where I'm poured a few tasters. "I get a fruit-forward vibe here, maybe pink grapefruit or sour cherry," the bartender says of the 2016 pinot noir brut rose. She's right; it's fruity, but still acidic enough to have a clean finish. Next, I sip the 2015 blanc de noir (earthy, with a mineral texture).

It's dark by the time I arrive at Kunin Wines, a shack-like bar that looks like it's been transplanted from the bayous of Louisiana to this spot, two blocks from busy State Street. I open the door and the drinkers packed inside the tiny bar turn to see who's joined them. I pull up a stool and chat to Duncan, the barman, who — despite his American accent — turns out to be a fellow Brit, and a former music journalist.

He puts together a tasting flight, starting with a 2016 viognier he promises will taste like "peach and pear on the palate". He's not wrong; it's slightly sweet and perfect for a warm night like this. I try Special K, a fruity, full-bodied red made using several grapes, including two I've never tried before: mourvedre and counoise.

As I sip, locals pop in to say hello to Duncan and ask where I'm from and what I'm doing here. There's a distinctly neighbourhood feel, and, a few glasses in, I don't want to leave. But I have to — this being Santa Barbara, it's time to eat again. urbanwinetrailsb.com ●

From top: Tasting room at Kunin Wines; sea urchins, Santa Barbara Fish Market

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Los Angeles is typically served by BA and Virgin Atlantic. It's a 1.5-hour drive to Santa Barbara. ba.com virginatlantic.com

WHERE TO STAY

In 2021, Harbor View Inn has room-only doubles from \$306 (£233); Belmond El Encanto has B&B doubles from £257. harborviewinnsb.com belmond.com elencanto.com

MORE INFO

santabarbaraca.com



SANTA BARBARA SPECIALS

Sea urchins

The waters off the coast of Santa Barbara are rich in uni, or sea urchins, which are harvested year-round and dished up at restaurants across the city. You might see them served with raw scallops and slices of lime at the Santa Barbara Shellfish Company, or as part of a biryani at modern Indian restaurant Bibi Ji. shellfishco.com bibijisb.com

Merlot

Despite the 'merlot slump', you'll still find some top-notch merlot produced in the area around Santa Barbara. For a taste, pay a visit to The Valley Project winery, or Conway Family Wines' Deep Sea Tasting Room, both of which offer wines by the glass and bottles to take home. thevalleyprojectwines.com conwayfamilywines.com