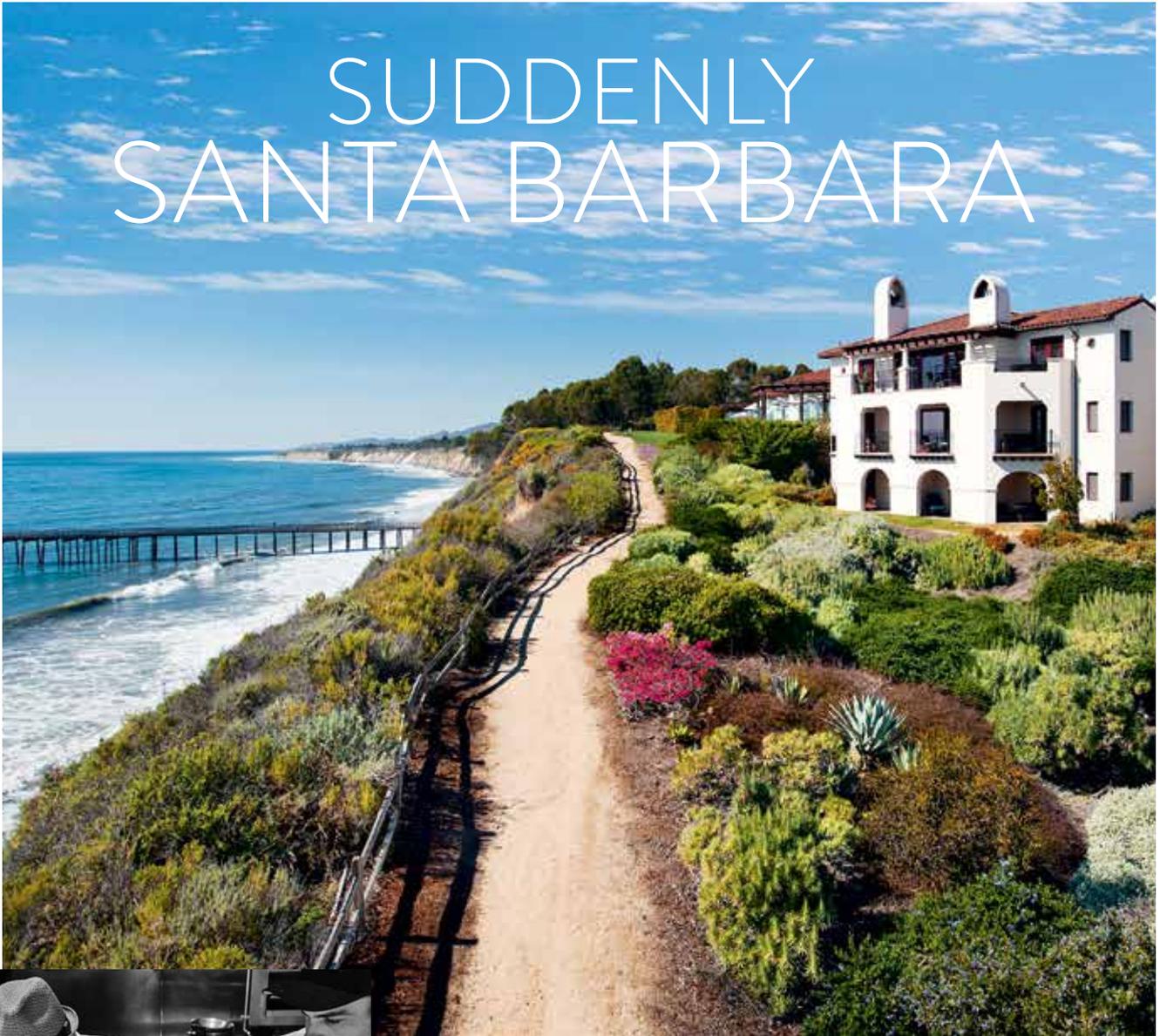


SUDDENLY SANTA BARBARA



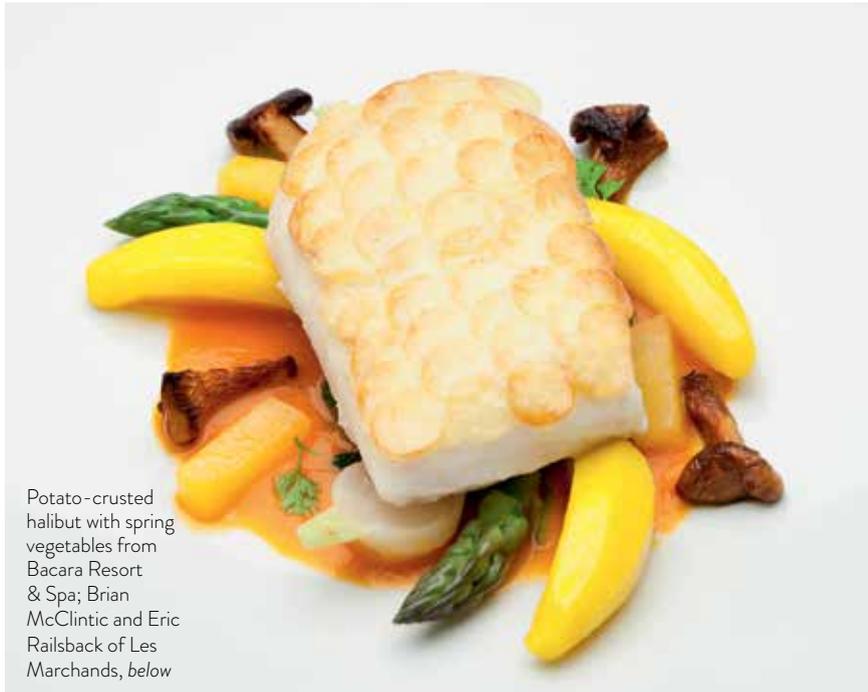
The Californian *grande dame* is being rejuvenated with a clutch of contemporary restaurants and spaces
By Carolina A Miranda



From top: a coastal path wends its way past Bacara Resort & Spa; Jason Tuley, centre, at work in Anchor Woodfire Kitchen; the tasting room at AVA Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara has never been the sort of city that succumbed to mindless trends. The architecture is classic, of the Spanish colonial variety. The drink of choice is wine, preferably from the nearby Santa Ynez Valley. And the socialising is easy – conducted aboard yachts and in breezy Pacific Ocean eateries, where century-old dishes like Crab Louie are served unironically. For decades, this serene California town, tucked between the Pacific Ocean and the rolling peaks of the Santa Ynez Mountains, just 150 kilometres north of Los Angeles, has been one of the country's most genteel hideaways.

But a coterie of fresh spaces is invigorating the city. Since it opened last winter, the whitewashed dining room at **Anchor Woodfire Kitchen** (anchorwoodfirekitchen.com) on lower State Street has buzzed with locals and out-of-towners that pop in for chef Jason Tuley's California-Mediterranean specialities,



Potato-crust halibut with spring vegetables from Bacara Resort & Spa; Brian McClintic and Eric Railsback of Les Marchands, below

such as house-made squid-ink garganelli dabbled with chilli and mint. Two blocks away, on East Yanonali Street, vintners Seth Kunin and Magan Eng have opened **AVA Santa Barbara** (avasantabarbara.com), a sleek industrial-chic tasting room that showcases wines from all over the county. Says Kunin: “I like to think that we’re really resetting the bar here.”

Santa Barbara’s lodgings have also experienced an upgrade. The venerable **Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore** (fourseasons.com/santabarbara) now boasts its own chef’s garden, where guests can arrange alfresco meals amid the apricot and avocado trees. At **Bacara Resort & Spa** (bacararesort.com), set on an idyllic patch of coast to the north of town, new additions include an Italian bistro serving fresh seafood (Santa Barbara is renowned for spiny lobster and sea urchin) and a tasting room that pours Foley Family Wines, including a succulent Firestone Syrah.

The biggest development, however, is perched in the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains. For almost a century, **El Encanto** (elencanto.com) was one of the city’s most renowned accommodations, but by the turn of the millennium the property had grown dishevelled. Now, an exhaustive seven-year renovation by Orient-Express has left the hotel sparkling. El Encanto reopened this April with 92 individually appointed bungalows equipped with marble bathrooms, vintage writing desks and private gardens studded with lavender and palms. Both the infinity pool and the terrace restaurant frame extravagant 180-degree views of the Pacific.

All the changes have drawn a new class of connoisseur to Santa Barbara.

Brian McClintic is a master sommelier who has worked at the Little Nell and Matsuhisa in Aspen. This summer, he and Eric Railsback, of Michael Mina’s RN74 in San Francisco, teamed up to open **Les Marchands Wine Bar & Merchant** (lesmarchandswine.com). Set in a brick-lined former fish plant that dates to the 1920s, the bar features a wide selection of California and European vintages, as well as a menu of fresh charcuterie. For full meals, guests can saunter into **The Lark** (thelarksb.com) next door, where chef Jason Paluska, also of RN74, delivers a rotating selection of farm-to-table New American fare.

McClintic says Santa Barbara is having a moment. “I’ve been coming here my whole life,” he says. “But right now, it’s just a world of possibility.” Travellers can say cheers to that. ◀



HOTELS, CALIFORNIA

A flurry of renovations this spring saw a number of esteemed Southern California properties get refreshed and refurbished. In Beverly Hills, the famed **Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel** has preserved its iconic pink and green decor, but reupholstered furnishings and bright new mirrors keep the Lounge the place to dip into classics like Caesar salad and steak tartare (beverlyhillshotel.com).

Down the coast, in Orange County, **The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel** has marked its 30th anniversary by redoing its 396 guest rooms and adding an open-air lounge offering hand-crafted yuzu cocktails and panoramic views of the roaring Pacific (ritzcarlton.com/lagunaniguel). Not to be overlooked is the **Loews Coronado Bay Resort** in San Diego. Long one of the city’s top hotels, a nine-month renovation has stripped away dowdy carpets in favour of bright ceramic tile. The brightest touch: the two-storey glass chandelier that greets guests in the lobby (loewscoronado.com).

In Santa Monica, the landmark Spanish Revival building once known as the Embassy Hotel Apartments has been recast as the **Palihouse Santa Monica** by boutique hotel impresario Avi Brosh. Stylish rooms blend Art Deco and contemporary design cues — all just three blocks from the beach (palihousesantamonica.com).

Nearby, the **Oceana Beach Club Hotel** received a top-to-bottom makeover as well as a new eatery: Tower 8, a casual Cal-Med fusion spot helmed by Michelin-starred chef Josiah Citrin (hoteloceanasantamonica.com).



From top: the Oceana Beach Club Hotel’s chic reception area; the refined lobby of the Palihouse Santa Monica