

# TASTE

2022

## GOLDEN AGE

THE RISE OF  
CALIFORNIA  
CUISINE

INSIDE  
COFFEE IN THE DESERT  
THE FIFTY DOLLAR MARTINI  
RESTAURANT DIRECTORY

PALM SPRINGS LIFE®



# CALIFORNIA DREAMING

FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, CALIFORNIA CUISINE HAS BEEN HAVING A MOMENT. WHILE THE WILD STYLE OF COOKING REMAINS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE, DESERT CHEFS AGREE: IT'S DELICIOUSLY INSPIRING.

STORY BY DERRIK J. LANG  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATE ABBOTT

When he took the reins of The Pink Cabana, executive chef Ethan Brown introduced a mix of fresh throwbacks and Mediterranean-style fare.



**F**resh. Artisanal. Multicultural. Balanced. Casual. Ask five different chefs to describe California cuisine, and you'll hear at least five different words.

For half a century, California cuisine has evaded the technical rigidity associated with other established culinary genres, becoming as omnipresent in Los Angeles and the Bay Area as it is right here in the Coachella Valley and the High Desert. The open-minded, farm-to-table philosophy of California cuisine has exploded far beyond the Golden State, continually arousing every imaginable facet of the food world.

"It's going the long way rather than taking a shortcut," explains *Inside the California Food Revolution* author Joyce Goldstein, who worked as a chef and teacher at Berkeley icon Chez Panisse and owned and operated groundbreaking San Francisco restaurant Square One before becoming an author and consultant.

The origins of California cuisine stretch back to 1952 when Helen Brown's *West Coast Cookbook* was first published. Brown advocated for embracing ingredients found in one's own neighborhood instead of simply relying on what was available in a grocery store. The book, beloved by culinary titans like James Beard, became a template for cooking that was at once classical and contemporary.

The movement was cemented in the late 1970s when chefs like Alice Waters at Berkley's Chez Panisse, Sally Schmitt at Napa Valley's French Laundry, and Judy Rodgers at San Francisco's Zuni Cafe were more entranced by the bounty from nearby farms and purveyors than established culinary traditions, crafting comforting dishes like spicy crab pizza, tomatillo tortilla soup, and espresso granita.

"When we first started cooking what would become known as California cuisine, having an open kitchen and a wood-fired grill was a big deal," Goldstein says. "They were revolutionary at the time. Now, when you walk into a restaurant and see those things, you don't bat an eye."

Besides an emphasis on lighter, seasonal ingredients, Goldstein notes that California cuisine is also heavily influenced by the state's melting pot of cultures, including Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Mediterranean, Persian, as well as Indigenous populations.

"When it comes to ethnic influences, there are those natural ones, like when you grow up eating ginger, you don't think it's weird because you've had it forever," Goldstein says. "There's also the more modern, trendy element of fusion, where cultures are combined on a plate, which can lead to some good food but often leads to very confused food."

Keeping food as authentic, and simple as possible is key to crafting dishes that quintessentially represent the Golden State. For chefs in the Coachella Valley and High Desert, that often means marrying locally sourced elements, like citrus and stone fruit, with fare that flourishes in other parts of the West Coast, such as seafood and other proteins.

"When you have really good ingredients, you don't wanna screw it up," Goldstein says. "That's the bottom line."

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— GREG GROSSMAN

## GREG GROSSMAN

*Executive Chef and General Manager*

**GiGi's Restaurant and Bar, Palm Springs**

[gigipalmsprings.com](http://gigipalmsprings.com)

When he set out to create GiGi's at the V Palm Springs hotel, restaurateur and executive chef Gregory Grossman looked to the past, specifically what folks were eating when they visited Palm Springs in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. The result is a menu that celebrates the city's supper club heritage — and makes it healthier.

"I wanted everything to be lighter and more vegetable focused," says Grossman, who started a healthy meal delivery service when he was 19 and previously oversaw the Mediterranean restaurant Orea in Southampton, New York. "Each of the entrees have different vegetable components. I'm leaning into citrusy flavors, pickled elements, and those types of trends that truly embody California cuisine."

The reimaginings at GiGi's, which opened last fall, include a crab cake composed of hearts of palm, a decadent halibut "meunière" en croûte served atop cauliflower almondine gratin, and a lobster thermidor that's been reborn as a breezy pasta dish instead of the doused-in-butter original. The throwback touches extend to the wallpapered dining room bathed in shades of pink, green, and gold.

Grossman's showstopper is The Whole Sha-Bang, essentially a Noah's Ark of every hors d'oeuvre on the menu: bruleéd fig toast, tiger shrimp cocktail, chicken a la king croquettes, deviled eggs, "everything bagel" crispy rice on smoked salmon, chicken truffle sausage pigs in a blanket, tuna tartare cigars, and a big bowl of GiGi's Onion Caviar Dip with waffle chips. It's served on a tea tower and available in combinations of two, four, six, and eight.

"I get palette fatigue," Grossman says. "I think a lot of people do. When I go out with friends, we order a bunch of appetizers and entrees and share everything. The days of one dish per person per course are semi-over, so I just wanted to do something fun where you can sit by the fire pit, have some cocktails, try different flavors, then go out on the town."



— Every appetizer on the menu at GiGi's is represented in The Whole Sha-Bang.





**ANDREW COOPER  
AND RENE REYES**  
*Executive Chef and Chef*  
**Morgan's in the Desert, La Quinta**  
*morgansinthedesert.com*

Since taking charge of culinary operations at the La Quinta Resort & Club more than five years ago, Andrew Cooper has always been fascinated by the abundance of zesty fruits and vegetables in the Coachella Valley, creating dishes centered around locally grown dates, kale, grapes, and potatoes. Recently, he racked his brain about how to incorporate regional proteins.

"I was actually looking down at the La Quinta flag on my desk and noticed there was a quail on the bottom, and I started asking around if anyone knew anything about quail," the executive chef says in Morgan's lounge before dinner service. "It turned out one of our team members actually had a quail farm on his property."

The visual cue galvanized Cooper to experiment: He lacquered the plumed pheasant featured on the city of La Quinta's seal with a jus made of rich dates, the valley's most famous export, and rounded it out with some local pasilla peppers and fingerling potatoes.

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Morgan's menu features a seasonal soup inspired by Coachella Valley's bounty.

"We can't directly source seafood because we're two hours away from the ocean," he says. "There are no cows here. There are horse farms, but we're not putting horse on the menu. Being that there are a bunch of quail farms here, I thought, 'Let's try it and have fun with it.'"

Cooper is adamant about sourcing ingredients as locally as possible. When the resort's signature restaurant does feature fish on the menu, it comes from Santa Monica Seafood, which follows sustainable guidelines established by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. For the veteran chef, a strong connection with vendors is vital.

"It's all about building your relationships with your farmers, growers, and purveyors and being able to get inspired by what's coming in next because then you can work with them and say, 'What are you planting for next season?' That helps us get prepared by researching the ingredients and finding out what we can do with them."

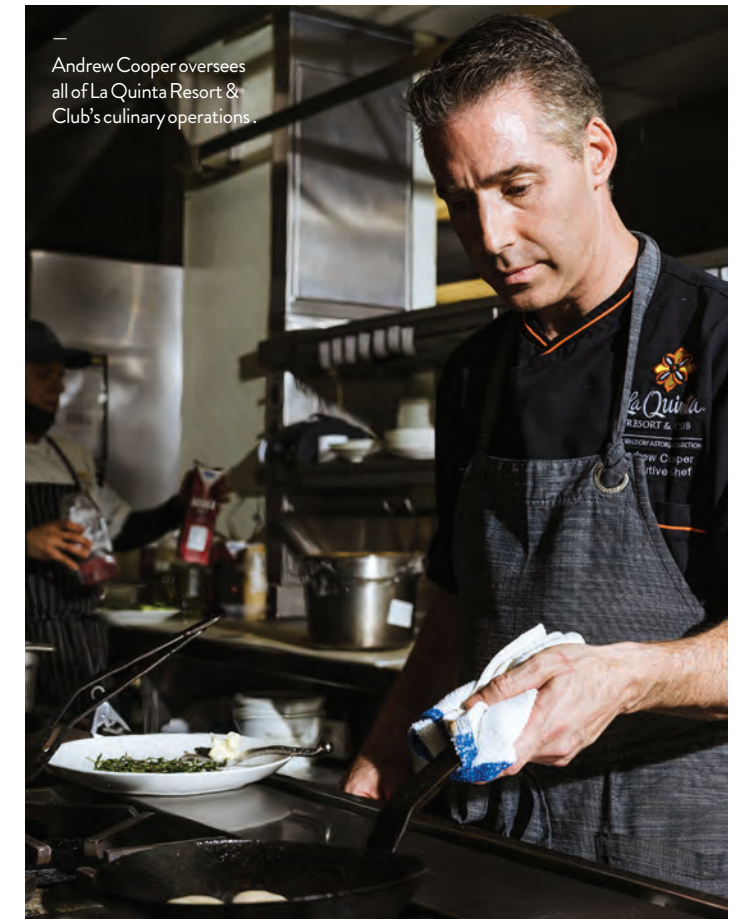
The approach is mouth-wateringly apparent in a long-running staple on Morgan's constantly evolving menu: a farmer's market soup that relies solely on whatever is in season — cauliflower, onion, potato, pumpkin, pepper, carrot, corn — and the chefs' imaginations.

"I'm a corn fanatic," chef Rene Reyes says. "When you see corn soup on the menu, it's coming from my kitchen. I love yellow corn. There's more natural sugar in it. Adding fresh paprika, garlic, or bacon to it gives it this whole other flavor."

Cooper and Reyes aren't certain how frequently quail will be among the offerings at Morgan's. However, when sweet Indio corn is in season, the duo say that diners can undoubtedly expect the caryopsis to appear in some fashion or another on the menu.



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The roasted quail with date jus was inspired by the La Quinta city seal.



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Andrew Cooper oversees all of La Quinta Resort & Club's culinary operations.



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In each of his dishes, Rene Reyes incorporates produce from the valley.



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The mezze selection includes labneh, hummus, and pickled vegetables.



## ETHAN BROWN

*Executive Chef*

**The Pink Cabana, Indian Wells**  
[sandshotelandspa.com](http://sandshotelandspa.com)

California cuisine has been part of Ethan Brown's cooking career from the start. After falling in love with the eccentricities of the food scene while washing dishes at a restaurant near where he was raised in Texas, then serving in the Marine Corps for a few years, Brown enrolled at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco.

"My plan was to always be a chef," he recalls during a recent break from lunch service at his stylish Sands Hotel & Spa eatery. "I'd been stationed on the West Coast and was drawn to San Francisco, so it was an easy transition to go to culinary school there when I was done with my service."

On his days off from school, he'd trek up to Napa Valley to learn about (and indulge in) cheese, produce, and pastry. The likes of Bouchon Bakery and Restaurant Gary Danko provided Brown with a nuanced insight he didn't have access to while growing up on a diet of barbeque in Austin, Texas.

"When you think of California cuisine, my brain goes straight to Chez Panisse [in San Francisco]," he says. "That's ground zero for California cuisine. They were doing all the right things: using local, seasonal ingredients and speaking directly to the Bay Area. Everything was happening there."

After joining The Pink Cabana last year, Brown put his own spin on the menu, adding touches like tagine and mezze that nod to the restaurant's Moroccan-tinged decor and a gargantuan club sandwich that honors Indian Wells' tennis club pedigree. His rendition stuffs organic turkey, swiss cheese, bacon, lettuce,

avocado, tomato, cucumber, and an ample layer of alfalfa sprouts between two slices of toasted sourdough.

"I love the idea of reconsidering California cuisine," Brown says. "In the Palm Springs area, there's so many other factors than what was happening in the Bay Area when the concept was starting there in the 1970s and '80s. During those days in Palm Springs, they were doing Wellingtons, table side service, lots of things that we think of as unhealthy today."

For Brown, the key to California cuisine is fluidity. While he's keen to keep a few staples on the menu, his desire is to continue to introduce diners to sensations they may have never experienced.

"We print our menu in house with the intention that as farms develop and new stuff comes our way, we can adjust," he says. "When you go into a restaurant and see a menu on paper, it's a big check mark that you're probably in a seasonal, farm-driven place."

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Ethan Brown bakes na'an each day then finishes it off on the grill.



"I LOVE THE IDEA OF  
RECONSIDERING CALIFORNIA CUISINE."

— ETHAN BROWN





The eatery tripled outdoor dining space during the pandemic.

## NIKKI HILL AND CLAIRE WADSWORTH

Co-Owners

La Copine, Flamingo Heights  
lacopinekitchen.com

“You want a true example of California cuisine?” La Copine executive chef Nikki Hill asks before slapping down an order ticket on the counter and reading it aloud: “All-vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free. Now, *that’s* California cuisine.”

For the married co-owners of the darling High Desert diner turned foodie destination, mindfulness and practicality are as much of a consideration as ingredients, which are mostly sourced from farther afield because of La Copine’s remote location in Yucca Valley.

Hill prides herself that the majority of her unfussy dishes bursting with deliciousness can be modified for every dietary concern, such as the Wild & Free, her signature chicken salad (or avocado, for the meat averse) with arugula, little gem lettuce, shaved fennel, pickled shallots, lentil sprouts, sunflower seeds, and currants drizzled with poblano vinaigrette.

“We don’t have an oven on our line,” says Claire Wadsworth, who manages the front of the house while Hill runs the kitchen. “And we don’t have a saute station, which is why we’re a daytime eatery and don’t do dinner. At night, people want fish, shortribs, steak, pasta, and stuff we can’t really do, so that’s why Nikki came up with this dinner-ish menu.”

Hill’s latest California-style offerings include a shrimp roll oozing with a housemade Kewpie-style mayo and a veggie-heavy

take on *socarrat*, Spanish crispy rice topped with charred zucchini, red pepper escalivada, saffron, and crunchy pea shoots. (Culturally, *socarrat* is known as the best part of paella that’s reserved for guests of honor.)

“Everything is eclectic,” Hill says. “I don’t really identify with one type of cuisine. For example, we have this smoked salmon dish that feels like it could be from a Jewish deli, but it also feels very California because it’s on top of a latke made with sunchokes.”

Hill and Wadsworth are no strangers to overcoming the technical challenges of food preparation. La Copine, which translates to girlfriend in French, started as a brunch cart in Philadelphia before the couple honeymooned in Joshua Tree and decided to never leave.

During the pandemic, Hill and Wadsworth tripled La Copine’s outdoor patio space. When indoor dining resumed, they opted to keep the increased capacity to meet demand they’ve experienced since being written up by *The New York Times* and *Vogue*. The move forced Hill to bid adieu to her much-lauded fried chicken because the fryers just couldn’t handle all the orders.

“It’s like being a musician,” Wadsworth says. “You don’t want to just be known for one song the rest of your life. You fight it because there are other things you can do.”

“EVERYTHING IS ECLECTIC.  
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WITH ONE TYPE OF CUISINE.”

— NIKKI HILL



La Copine’s shrimp roll, fig and beets, and *socarrat* represent the eatery’s quirkiness.