

# CHEF TAE DICKEY, BRIDGING CONTINENTS THROUGH BIGA

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The only reason I hadn't gotten to Biga in downtown San Diego sooner is that I thought it was about the pizza. And, pizza, as a sole purpose, is not enough reason for me to head downtown. Then, I met Chef Tae Dickey, owner and executive chef at Biga. Chatting a couple of minutes with him and watching him handle duties at an outdoor popup event was all it took to realize that Biga had to be about so much more than pizza.

And, it is. And, it isn't.



So it was that after a lonely work week spent at a conference in a dreary, wet, gray, Pacific Northwest town, [Fluffy Unicorn](#) and I sortied from the airport to downtown on a weekday evening, ostensibly for an impromptu, uncomplicated, easy, “*Welcome back to the land of the living*” dinner at Biga.

And, it was. And, it wasn't.



There are plenty of new Italian-esque places opening around town serving pizza and more while boasting of importing their ingredients from the home country for... “authenticity.” On one level, you might understand that. First, it sounds really cool to say that everything is “authentic and imported”. Then, there are certain items like San Marzano tomatoes grown in the volcanic soil of Vesuvius or the gamut of cured meats that almost literally define the genre which, in any iteration, are superior to anything else of their kind found on the planet.

But, on another level...no. Just, no. Because importing a select amount of “authentic” ingredients and surrounding them with whatever commoditized staples fell off the food delivery truck sometime in the previous week or so is not an authentic style of food preparation either in Italy or in San Diego...or most places in between.



Then, there's the type of Italian that Tae is now communicating to San Diego through his food at Biga. And, around these parts, the translation can be pretty simple. It means surrounding those "authentic" imported ingredients with the freshest of local ingredients that have started to put San Diego Coastal style cuisine on the lips of foodies far and wide, where we have the best, if not the only, winter tomatoes in the world and most of our other staples can often be sourced fresh out of the ground or water, or from the purveyor that pulled them out...minutes away.

You won't find it much of a surprise, then, that the menu at Biga changes according to what's available fresh and locally. In fact, the evening we were there, Chef Tae pulled up to the busy curb outside of Biga on the corner of Broadway and Sixth and unloaded a couple of crates of fresh produce he had just picked up from the North Park Farmer's Market...minutes away. Then he went in the kitchen, washed his hands and got to work.



And, so it went. Fresh offerings began to flow out of the kitchen, some with cheese, most covered in olive oil, all with herbs, some grown on site. It was a parade of fresh produce combined with traditional flavors that gave us a newfound and unique perspective on Italian food and had us imagining we were sitting at an outdoor patio in the shadows of Vesuvius, eating whatever the Mom & Pop proprietor had harvested and prepared that day, but with the familiarity of local San Diego style flavors and textures.

And, while a chef's entire menu and value system cannot be described by a single dish, perhaps his philosophy can. In a way, Tae's style and many of Biga's offerings can be summed up through... a pizza. After courses ranging from olive oil saturated heirloom tomatoes, roasted beets and squid ink pasta, Tae brought out his *primo amore*, his "first love", the pizza he first had in Southern Italy that ignited his, heretofore unknown, Italian cooking genes.



The pizza is a simple thing, a hand crafted creation. The crust is how you would imagine a cracker would be at its sexiest, al dente, when it it has enough chewy moisture to give you something to sink your teeth into without crumbling, with the perfect amount of browned crisp at the edges to filter the flavors and provide textural contrast.

The sauce was comprised of San Marzano tomatoes, sweet with a tease of bitterness, maybe with a hint of garlic. But it wasn't the kind of dish where the herbs or aromatics mattered enough to agonize over each of them. House made mozzarella and some sprinkled prosciutto cotto were accompanied by the story that this was the bite that started Tae's Italian culinary journey 16 years ago.



Thank you, Universe.

In terms of pizza, this one doesn't knock your socks off with a hammer. Rather, it distracts your feet in one direction while it seduces your shoes in another, leaving you wandering blissfully barefoot through rolling fields of contentment. Flavors tend to migrate rather than race to their respective stations on your palate. The entire package, encompassed in each singular bite, is a pervasive influence, milder than you might expect, but, constant. The pizza, like the entire dinner, was a throwback to a time when a good meal was had with every bite, allowing you to enjoy the company who shared it with you, rather than competing for your attention.

Tae is setting new boundaries at Biga, proving that the wheel doesn't need to be reinvented, rather reintroduced in a new location. He may be leading the charge to rediscovering that the secret to truly great food doesn't lie in its manipulation, but in its thoughtful application. The entire story of Biga has yet to be written, and, ultimately, it may be a tale that ends at the beginning, being about the pizza. But there's so much road to cover in between. Enjoy, and Cheers, my friends!