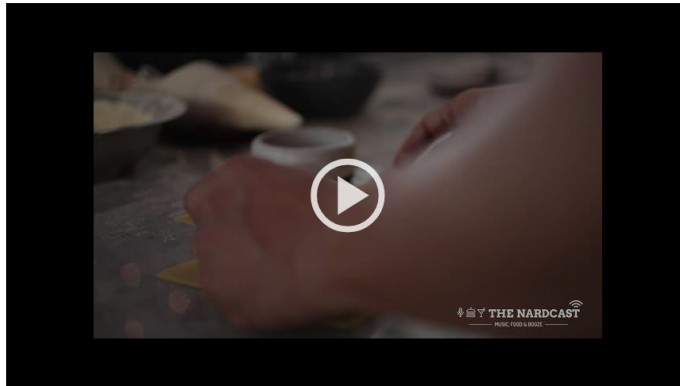




The San Diego Union-Tribune

# True Italian taste at Biga



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A lot of San Diego restaurants serve good Italian food. A few serve food that *really* tastes Italian.

Three of the latter that immediately come to mind — [Bice](#) in the Gaslamp, [Bottega Americano](#) in the East Village and [Antica Trattoria](#) in La Mesa — all have chefs born in Italy.

## Biga

**Where:** 950 Sixth Ave., downtown San Diego

**Phone:** (619) 794-0444

**Online:** [bigasandiego.com](http://bigasandiego.com)

Add downtown San Diego's 8-month-old [Biga](#) to the list of places with authentic-tasting Italian cuisine. But while the perfectly al dente pasta tastes like Mamma made it and the 200-year-old "biga," or dough starter, originates from Italy, Biga's chef/owner doesn't.

Tae Dickey is a native of Maryland and a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America who made a pit stop in Orange County before opening his first venture here.



Chef Tae Dickey is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. *Jernard Sutton photo*

Welcome, chef. Now please don't leave.

What Dickey lacks in Italian roots, he makes up for in spirit, skill and reverence for artisanal Italian cuisine. After four meals at Biga, Dickey's Twitter bio — "pizza lover, italian food aficionado, lover of all foods authentic and true to their origins" — doesn't ring like branding bluster.





Biga's biga, or dough starter, makes Neapolitan pizza crust that's tender, yeasty and chewy, just like in Naples. COURTESY PHOTOS

Just taste that Neapolitan pizza crust, whose biga “mother dough” could be declared a San Diego civic treasure. Rendered crispy and chewy from barely minutes in one of the restaurant's two 900-degree wood-fired ovens, the crust has that yeasty-sweet quality I've tasted in Naples, the mother of all pizza cities.



Biga's 100-year-old biga, or starter dough, hails from Italy. Photo courtesy of Biga

Those ovens and that biga also turn out stellar focaccia and sandwich rolls. A friend and I had the focaccia one night after I asked a server walking by with some if it was made in-house. She said yes and then moments later returned with some for us to try.

That's how the service is: friendly and smart. Only once was it friendly but slow. The kitchen was also somewhat sloppy, forgetting an ingredient here, sending out a sub-par chocolate tart there. But way more often than not, I've eaten at a table or at the expansive, white Carrera marble bar with a smile on my face.

Roasted purple and yellow beets are as flavorful as they are visually vibrant, and a simple smear of homemade smoked ricotta on the plate delivered a clever contrast. Charred heirloom carrots — lots of dishes here get the “cucinato a legno,” or wood-fired, treatment — were sugared by the heat, making the accompanying cardamom cream more than a pretty embellishment.



Gorgeous roasted beets get a swipe of smoked ricotta from Biga.

I've loved every pizza I've had, from the white to the wild mushroom, the guanciale and Sicilian Castelvetro olives to the truffle decadence, and dessert includes the best quick-fried ricotta zeppole (doughnuts) this side of a Bronx street fair.

But I'm just mad for Dickey's homemade pasta. Only available at dinner, as is table service, it's the pasta that elevates Biga from an Italian restaurant to an authentic one. The saucing is creative, yet restrained, allowing the light, tooth-perfect, fresh pappardelle, tagliatelle, casarecce and strozzapreti to be the star on the plate.

Strange as it sounds, it's a pleasure to eat Italian food that tastes so Italian.

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Fresh herbs are picked directly from Biga's 15-foot living herb wall in the open kitchen.

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