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# Everything you need to know about Kingfisher and why it's the hottest new restaurant in San Diego



The diver scallops dish at newly opened Kingfisher, a modern Vietnamese restaurant and cocktail bar in Golden Hill. (Kimberly Motos )

After a t  
Californi  
cocktail

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BY PAM KRAGEN

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San Diego's hottest new restaurant of 2022 can't be found downtown. Nor is it in Little Italy, North Park or La Jolla. It's in the quiet residential neighborhood of Golden Hill, where Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery opened Jan. 14 on Broadway near 25th Street. Word got out quick.

Reservations at the modern Vietnamese restaurant and cocktail bar are now booked six weeks out, owners are rushing to expand seating by 20 percent and the menu's dry-aged duck dish is so popular that it sells out every night by 7:30 p.m.

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Owned by the family behind the Crab Hut chain and helmed by a bar manager and chef with deep roots in San Diego's hospitality industry, Kingfisher arrived two years later than expected due to the pandemic. But the creators say the extra time allowed them to perfect the Kingfisher recipe and create pent-up demand for a concept that they believe has never been attempted before in San Diego.

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The cocktail bar at Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery in Golden Hill. (Kimberly Motos )

Kingfisher is owned by sisters Ky Phan and Kim Phan and Kim’s husband, Quan Le, who together launched the Crab Hut restaurant company 15 years ago. The Huts are casual, American-style seafood boil-and-beer pubs in Kearny Mesa, Mira Mesa and Downtown. Back in 2019, the partners decided to open a more elegant venue that reflected their native Vietnamese heritage. The concept started out as a cocktail bar. Then it was going to be a bar with food and eventually it morphed into a restaurant with a full bar, according to David Tye, Kingfisher’s general manager and bar manager.



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Early on, t native to V think of Vietnamese food: pho and banh mi. Instead it would offer a more elevated

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style of the Vietnamese cuisine that emerged during the country's many years as a French colony.

The Phan family moved to San Diego from Houston in 1995 where their patriarch — a former South Vietnamese Army general-turned chef — worked his way up from dishwasher at a Chinese buffet to opening his own Vietnamese restaurant, Panda Rice, in El Cajon in 2000. The Phan sisters worked alongside their parents at Panda Rice and then, with Quan Le in 2007, they opened their first Crab Hut, with the goal of making enough money to allow their parents to retire, which they did.

“Kingfisher is a passion project for us,” Ky Phan said. “It shows our growth and pays homage to our parents’ small restaurant. In Vietnamese culture, food is always central in every event and gatherings. We would eat and chat for hours on end, however when other people think of Vietnamese food, it’s a quick lunch, a hangover cure, or a late-night snack after a night out at the clubs. We wanted to change people’s perception of what Vietnamese food is and what it can become.”

To bring their vision to life, the owners hired executive chef Jon Bautista, a longtime San Diego chef of Filipino heritage who served as chef de cuisine under chef-owner Trey Foshee at both George’s at the Cove restaurants in La Jolla — California Modern and Ocean Terrace — from 2013 to 2019.



Jon Bautista, executive chef at Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery (Jon Bautista)

Bautista, a 37-year-old Poway resident, said Le and the Phan sisters were regular tasting-menu diners at George’s and they liked his food, which was contemporary American fine dining fare. But Bautista said he’d never cooked Vietnamese in his 17 years as a chef. So to get it right, he spent many days and nights in the kitchen cooking side by side with the owners’ parents to learn traditional Vietnamese recipes.

“I didn’t want to come in like I knew everything. I wanted to stay true,” Bautista said. “What I’m cooking now, it’s me. I’m classically trained, so that’s the French. Vietnamese food is a lot of herbs and seafood and freshness, and my style of cooking is very light and clean. So what I learned from Trey fit perfectly. I needed to be grounded on what’s going to please the Vietnamese community and traditionalists, but also be approachable enough for the Americans that are coming in here.”

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Chef Jon Bautista's smoked dry-aged duck dish is so popular it sells out every night at Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery. (Kimberly Motos )

Before working at George's, Bautista cooked for Roy's Restaurant in La Jolla and Kitchen 1540 in Del Mar. Then after leaving George's three years ago, he worked full-time at Common Theory Public House and its hidden Asian speakeasy, Realm of 52 Remedies, on Convoy Street. He got laid off when the pandemic arrived. Seven months later, the Kingfisher team approached Bautista and asked him to come on board as executive chef, although the pandemic and construction delays on the Golden Hill space prohibited them from putting him on the payroll at the time.

Instead they paid him for a series of 10 monthly pop-up dining events around San Diego where he was able to test out the Kingfisher concept and begin building buzz in the community. Bautista said the pop-ups were a great proving ground for the menu, which he calls "unapologetic" in its outside-the-lines, tradition-meets-modern concept.

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The interior of Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery in Golden Hill, which opened Jan. 14, 2022. (Kimberly Motos)

Bar manager Tye also put in some heavy research time developing Kingfisher's drinks menu because — as a self-described “White Irish guy from Virginia” — he had no familiarity with the Vietnamese cocktail culture. In early 2019, Tye spent nearly three weeks traveling through Vietnam, Singapore and Bangkok, where he said he ate and drank his way through 88 bars and restaurants. He also made field trips to numerous restaurants and bars in the U.S. and Mexico City.

Like Bautista, Tye has a 17-year hospitality career, having worked locally at Lion's Share, Prohibition and Sycamore Den before joining Crab Hut five years ago. As a longtime local mixologist, Tye said he felt the need to make a bold statement with his Asian-inspired cocktails, but not scare anyone away.

To offer something for everyone, he evenly divided Kingfisher's 18 specialty cocktails into two categories. The “Minimalism” drinks are all creative twists on recognizable, traditional cocktails, like the Fuji Apple Old Fashioned and the top-selling Papaya Margarita. The “Maximalism” drinks are wholly unique and filled with unexpected ingredients, like the rum-and-kumquat French Architecture and the spicy tequila-and-tamarind drink Jungle Fang.



The Fuji apple

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“I knew if I went too far or too intense, I'd lose people. But if it was too simple, I wouldn't be happy,” Tye said. “For the Maximalist menu I wanted them to be esoteric

and to catch you off guard. I wanted to be challenging in a fun way and to throw the gauntlet down.”

The interior of Kingfisher was designed by Ocio Design Group in Bankers Hill. Its centerpiece is a showstopping 23-seat bar topped with an ornate crown piece that Tye said they're calling the “super bloom”: “It's really overarching, like a big wave is coming down on top of you or a big hug.”

Because customer demand has been unexpectedly high since opening, the owners are expanding the restaurant's capacity from the originally planned 84 seats to 105, though some of the new tables and chairs have been slow in arriving due to supply chain delays. Tye and Bautista said they're proud the restaurant has been warmly embraced by the community.

“It's really gratifying to be at the forefront of San Diego right now,” Bautista said. “We're the hottest restaurant in town right now, but we want to stay the course and be consistent and develop regulars. We don't want to worry about awards or the hype. We want to keep doing what we're doing.”



The beef tartare dish at Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery in Golden Hill. (Kimberly Motos )

Here's a look at some of Bautista and Tye's favorite items on their respective menus:

**1/2 smoked dry aged duck:** Bautista said this communal dish, which requires two weeks of chilled air drying, is so time- and space-intensive to prepare that he limits sales to just eight orders per night. It's served fanned out on a plate with rice noodles, lettuce wraps and nuoc mam chimichurri. “When you walk out that dish, people go nuts.” \$72

**Beef tartare:** Served with toasted quinoa, pickled ramps, watercress and a side of rice crackers. Bautista: “This one hits all the Southeast Asian flavors. It's a middle ground of Thai and Vietnamese. This one has a kick to it.” \$19

**Diver scallops:** Lightly poached scallops are served in the style of canh chua, which is a Vietnamese sweet and sour tamarind-based soup that includes pineapple vinaigrette, tamarind gelée, cured ginger and cherry tomatoes. \$31

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The vanilla flan with coffee sauce and miso whipped cream at Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery in Golden Hill. (Kimberly Motos )

**Vanilla flan:** This Vietnamese version of the caramelized egg custard dessert is less sweet than the Mexican version and less dense than the Filipino recipe. Bautista tops his with a coffee syrup made from Café du Monde chicory-infused coffee, miso whipped cream and sea salt. Bautista: “I think we found the perfect balance by adjusting the eggs and condensed milk.” \$12

**Saigon Moped:** Inspired by Tye’s experience dodging mopeds in Vietnam, this drink spotlights Asian ingredients like Japanese-made Roku gin, house-made “de-bitterized” bitter melon, sesame leaf, lime and marsh salt. Tye: “This was a real challenge to make for the menu. Asian clientele will recognize it, but not in this flavor profile.” \$14

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David Tye's Saigon Moped cocktail at Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery. (Kimberly Motos )

**Ozymandias:** Inspired by an 1818 poem by English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, this international cocktail is made with a crust of overcooked rice, Icelandic Aquavit, Mexican Abasolo unaged corn whiskey and Xtabentún honey anise liqueur. Tye: "It's my favorite, and it's the most far-reaching of all the drinks on the menu." \$15

## Kingfisher Cocktail Bar & Eatery

**Hours:** 5 p.m. to midnight Wednesdays-Mondays (closed Tuesdays)

**Address:** 2469 Broadway, San Diego

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

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