

T+E

# San Francisco's New Order

How a blooming SF food scene is scooping up top culinary awards



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By Nelson Tam



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**AT ABOUT 4:45 P.M.** on a summer's Friday night in San Francisco, a line forms outside State Bird Provisions. The restaurant won't open for another 45 minutes. Conversation amongst those

waiting sounds like that of die-hard music fans waiting to see their favourite band. A recent recipient of recognition from multiple tastemakers such as the James Beard Foundation, the restaurant is enjoying

the fruits of well-deserved publicity. But the chefs and owners Stuart Brioza and Nicole Krasinski, a husband-and-wife duo, are not alone in the spotlight. The Foundation's annual awards — also known as





the “Oscars of the food world” — pinned 15 nominees in the city this year.

The list included San Francisco stalwarts Gary Danko for “National Best Chef” and Charles Phan’s Slanted Door for “Outstanding Restaurant.” Newcomers like Thomas McNaughton of Flour + Water for “Rising Star Chef” and Rich Table for “Best New Restaurant” (which lost to State Bird Provisions) also made the list.

Though Mitchell Davis, Executive Vice President of the James Beard Foundation, doesn’t vote on the awards, he certainly agrees with the

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judges. “I can’t get enough of San Francisco these days. It’s always been a great dining town but it hasn’t always been an exciting dining town. Now I think it’s exciting.”

So how did this tiny city become an exciting dining town? While small in size, San Francisco manages to dwarf any other U.S. city for restaurants per capita with 39.3 restaurants for every 10,000 households. ➤ Eating out is simply a big part of the culture in San Francisco. Davis adds, “People eat out, they

entertain out, they meet their friends at restaurants.”

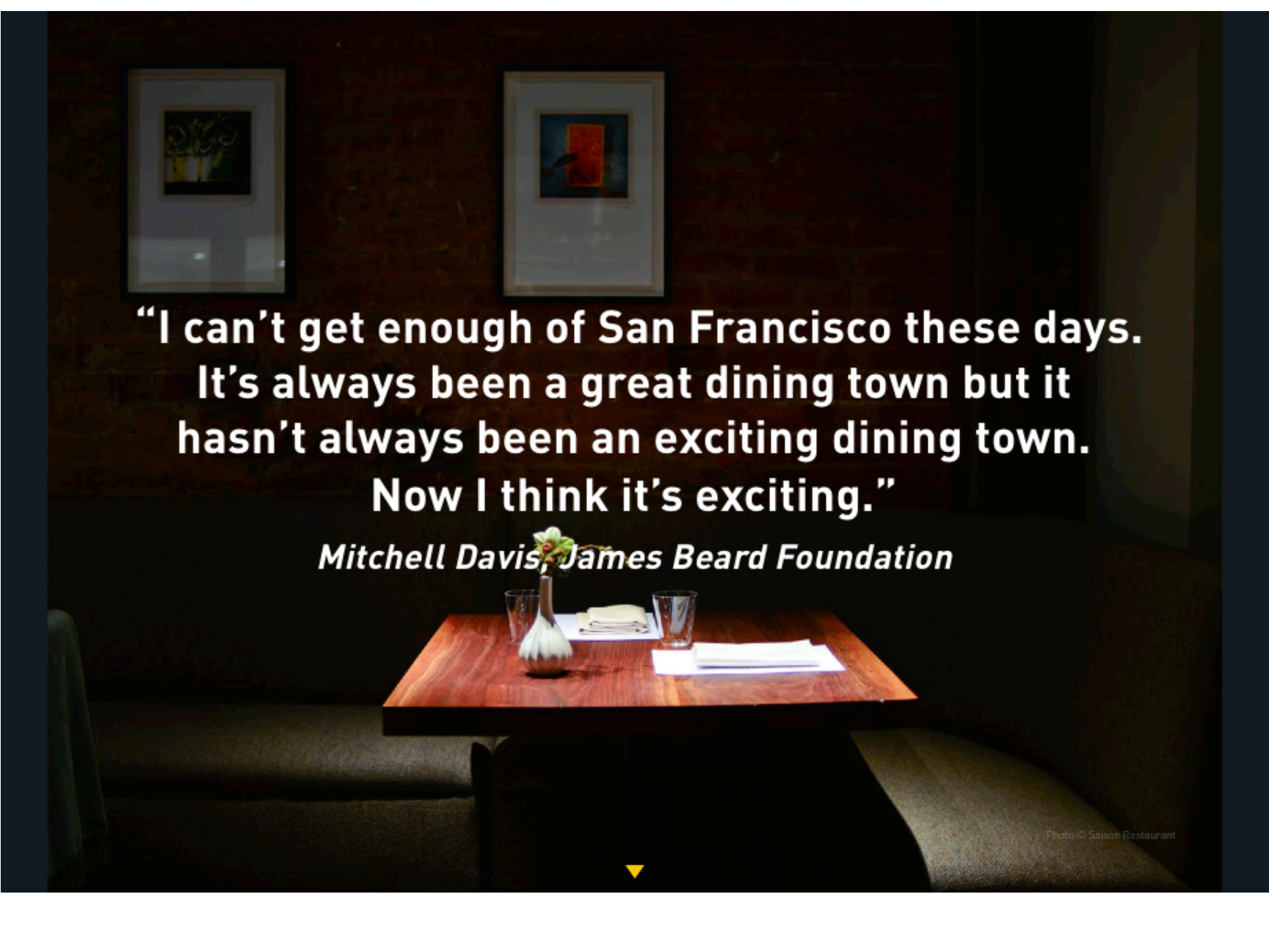
But it’s not just about enjoying the eating-out lifestyle. San Franciscans have witnessed a rich, diverse, culinary evolution.

Milestones include the original gold-rush incarnation of the Tadich Grill in 1849 – which today is one of America’s oldest restaurants. There was the first arrival of Castagnola’s on Fisherman’s Wharf in 1916, and the birth of the Mission burrito in the early ’60s, which has



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*Mitchell Davis, James Beard Foundation*

since been poorly imitated the world over.

Also in the early '60s, Cecilia Chiang arrived, falling into the restaurant business accidentally but vowing to teach everyone about authentic northern Chinese food with the opening of The Mandarin. Who knew her students would include the likes of James Beard, Julia Child and Alice Waters, the godmother of the California Cuisine Movement? Chiang received a Lifetime Achievement Award from James Beard earlier this

year. Waters always said Chiang did for Chinese cuisine what Julia Child did for French fare.

Erica Peters, Director of Culinary Historians of Northern California, explains this crucial relationship. "When California cuisine gets going, Cecilia Chiang's right there with Alice Waters and they're friends, they're travelling in Europe together. So there isn't a divide in that ethnic food is low class, and not following the trends. In San Francisco, ethnic food

does follow the trends or makes them."

With the opening of Chez Panisse, Waters really led everyone towards the new culinary light, not only in California but also worldwide. "She's great at selling people on her idea of fresh, great, simple but unique dishes," adds Peters. This idea would be further elevated almost a decade later with the opening of Thomas Keller's French Laundry.

In 1995, Charles Phan changed the game by



giving Vietnamese food the California cuisine facelift: white tablecloths, high-end ingredients, wine and cocktails. Before moving to the Ferry Building, the Slanted Door also helped put the Mission District on the map with regards to fine dining.

Today, Mission District fixtures like Delfina and Bar Tartine prove, along with newer offerings like chef and owner Danny Bowien's Mission Chinese Food, that the neighbourhood is one of the city's main food destinations. Bowien has helped this cause, taking home a James Beard Award for "Rising Star Chef" this year. Chef and

owner Joshua Skenes also contributed, only moving the two-Michelin-starred Saison out of the neighbourhood earlier this year.

Skenes says it's no surprise how San Francisco attracts such great talent. "This place has great wine production, great seafood and shellfish, great olive oils and dried goods, and amazing produce and a phenomenal way of life." Does the "phenomenal way of life" mean being surrounded by great food, nature and pleasant year-round weather? Or is it simply about having the freedom to allow your heart to be your culinary compass? Something has been changing



Photo © State Bird Provisions



in San Francisco. More and more chefs are following their hearts, holding their knives high and unafraid of falling on them. They are moving beyond traditional California

cuisine and fine dining.

As State Bird Provisions chef and co-owner Nicole Krasinski put it: “We don’t want to fit that box anymore.

You know if you cook delicious food, people will come.”

In a way, she sounds more like a rock star than a chef. ■

