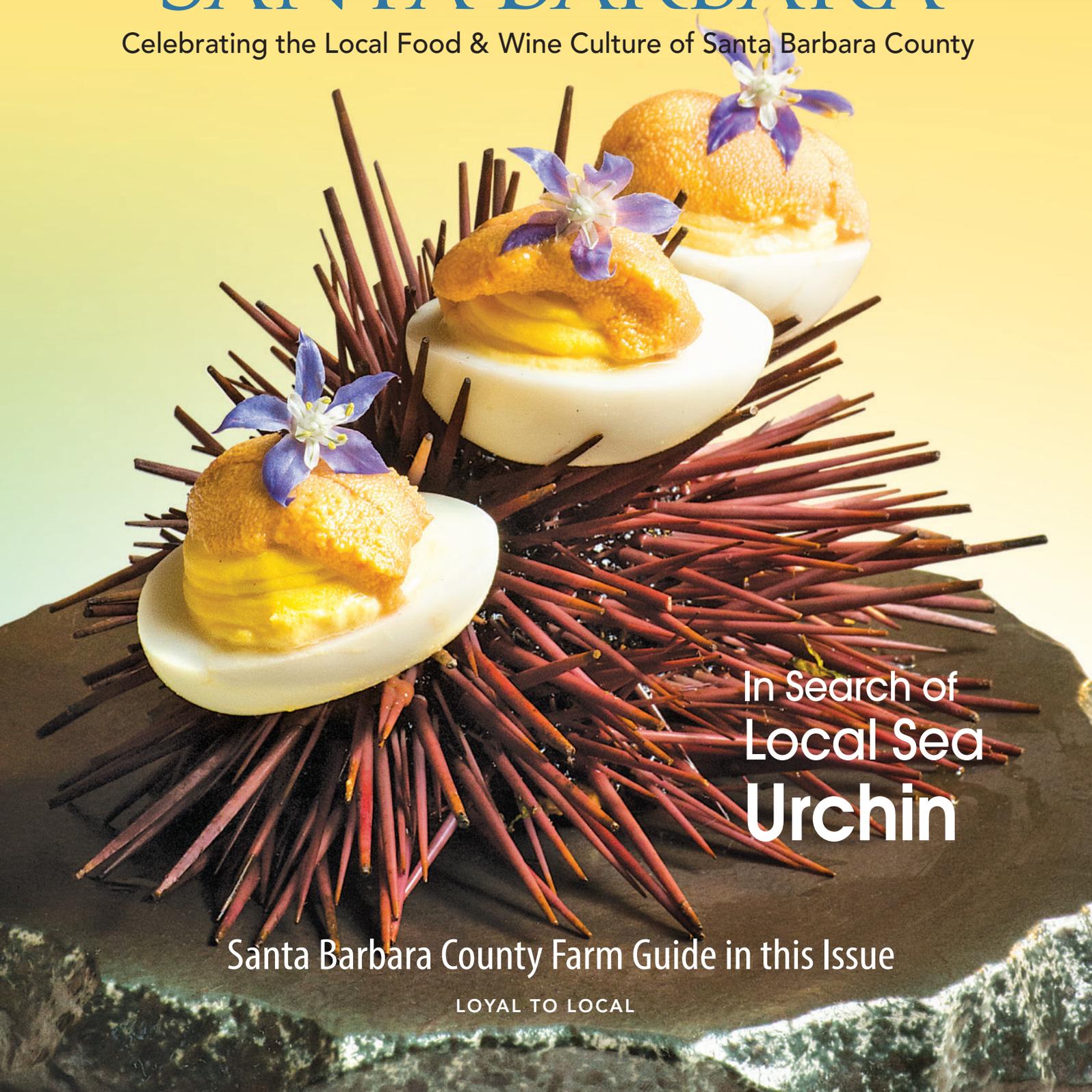


# *edible* SANTA BARBARA

Celebrating the Local Food & Wine Culture of Santa Barbara County



In Search of  
Local Sea  
**Urchin**

Santa Barbara County Farm Guide in this Issue

LOYAL TO LOCAL

# In Search of Local Sea Urchin

by John Cox

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRAN COLLIN AND JOHN COX

**A**s dusk settles over the Santa Barbara harbor, a convoy of box trucks and pickups line up along the wooden dock. Men pace back and forth, occasionally scanning the horizon before staring back into the screens of their smart phones. Somewhere out of the distance the low drone of a diesel engine snaps the motley crew into action, pulling trucks into positions and hoisting bins onto the dock.

A diminutive fishing boat, stout and weathered, glides to a stop along the pilings. The fisherman grabs a dock line from the group above. A crowd of tourists has gathered, and they peer down at the boat with growing interest.

Within a few seconds the fisherman has thrown open the hatch, revealing a hold overflowing with red urchin. As the hoist on the dock begins to raise the first bag of urchin, the crowd points and murmurs, mesmerized by the giant bags bristling with long undulating spines. The hoist positions the bag high above the waiting truck and into the careful arms of a man who guides it into position before pulling a drawstring and releasing the urchin into a blue plastic tote.

This process repeats for about 15 minutes, bag after bag, until each truck is stacked to capacity. Papers are signed and the trucks roll away into the night, leaving the crowd to wonder about these strange creatures and ponder their final destination.

Many locals speculate that these urchin, along with other local sea delicacies, are shipped away to foreign markets. After all, following the near collapse of the Japanese urchin fishery in the 1980s, export of urchin became a Santa Barbara gold rush. With many local fishermen looking for work after the collapse of the local abalone fishery, and the Japanese paying top dollar for urchin, fishermen in Southern California cashed in over 27 million pounds of urchin at the peak of the urchin fishery in 1990. At its height, urchin was California's single most valuable

ocean export. Many fishermen were able to buy homes and make a comfortable living off of urchin exports alone.

Sadly, as with many fisheries around the world, supply and demand is cyclical, driven by influences far outside the local community. In the case of sea urchin, supply dwindled largely because of two separate El Niño events that reduced kelp beds along the coast. During the same time period Japan started

looking toward Russia and Chile for more consistent urchin imports.

By 2001 the California catch had steadily declined to 8.8 million pounds and by 2016 dropped to just 5.3 million pounds, a level not seen since the infancy of the fishery in the early 1970s. The current annual catch of the urchin fishery in Santa

Barbara is around 3 million pounds, due in part to a recent reduction of permits.

If you consider that there are roughly 90,000 people in Santa Barbara, there ought to be around 34 urchins per person, per year. Yet it seems difficult to find this delicacy in Santa Barbara itself. Unlike other shellfish like spiny lobster, which has been popular throughout much of California's culinary history, sea urchin hasn't always been embraced by the local community.

In the late 1960s, kelp harvesters began to notice that large areas along the coast were becoming barren and unproductive. Upon closer investigation, they observed that these areas had been overtaken by colonies of voracious urchin that were consuming the kelp beds at an alarming rate. Since many industries, from breweries to cosmetic companies and food processors, rely on kelp-based alginates for their products, a campaign was launched to eradicate the "pests." Divers hauled up loads of urchin to be smashed with hammers or crushed by bulldozers. Boats carpeted entire areas of coast and reefs with quicklime to destroy the urchin populations.

At its height, urchin was California's single most valuable ocean export. Many fishermen were able to buy homes and make a comfortable living off of urchin exports alone.

Opposite: A bag of spiny urchins.



The truth is that over 90% of the local urchin catch goes to processors in Southern California for distribution throughout California and the United States.



Chefs and food connoisseurs have long regarded urchin as a rare and revered delicacy, but the general public seems largely uninterested. For many, snacking on urchin has been a disappointing experience. It's the texture, or the smell, or the taste that puts them off. So, what makes for a good urchin experience? Just like any other raw shellfish, it depends on the quality of production and the freshness of the product. In Santa Barbara, we have the opportunity to sample some of the best and the freshest—if you can get your hands on one.

On a recent afternoon, having observed boats unload truckloads of urchin the previous evening, I decided to embark on an urchin tour of Santa Barbara. My first port of call: a freshly shucked urchin at the Santa Barbara Fish Market. It was a fine specimen, filled with vibrant gold uni, or gonads (sometimes incorrectly called roe). The spines still quivered and the shell retained its deep purple hue. Despite its apparent freshness, just moments after the urchin was shucked the uni began to weep a yellow liquid, a sure sign it was a female beginning to spawn (male urchins secrete a white liquid when spawning, and are said to be more sweet and desirable than the female). Within a couple of minutes, the uni had almost completely melted before my eyes, leaving a viscous soup that tasted of mildly bitter seawater. It was a fine urchin, and I was eager for more.

I was foiled. Despite a carefully planned itinerary, stopping at the few restaurants known for including local urchin on their menus, I was told the same thing: They were waiting. Tonight, or tomorrow at the latest, the “urchin lady” would be out getting the urchin, and would return with the best and the freshest. By the end of the evening, I couldn't find another urchin, but I tracked down the diver herself.

Stephanie Mutz isn't your typical urchin diver. She has carved out a unique niche that allows her to sell smaller amounts of premium urchin direct to restaurants and consumers. Unlike the more traditional method of unloading thousands of pounds to a single processor, Stephanie's direct-market approach earns her a greater price per pound than commodity divers get and provides her customers the highest-quality product. As she explained, “When you are selling tons of urchin at a lower price there is an underlying motivation to focus on quantity over quality.”

The truth is that over 90% of the local urchin catch goes to processors in Southern California for distribution throughout California and the United States. These packing facilities meticulously separate the gonads from the shells and viscera by rinsing them repeatedly in saltwater baths. In order to stop the delicate urchin from breaking down once they are packed into wooden trays, processors often add alum to the rinse. Nitrates are also sometimes used in the rinse to maintain the bright color of the urchin.

When used in tiny quantities these ingredients work wonders in preserving the visual standards of the urchin, but they can also sometimes add bitterness to the packaged





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product or mask the age of the urchin. Many chefs and divers alike speculate that people who dislike urchin have very likely experienced a product that was either inferior in quality or simply not fresh.

When Stephanie dives, she selects her urchin harvesting areas very carefully, to make sure the urchin are fully developed and up to her standards. As she puts it, “When the urchin don’t meet our expectations, we don’t sell them.” In order to be legally collected an urchin must be at least 3¼ inches, an indication that the urchin is old enough to have spawned. Due to recent El Niño events, Stephanie said, “these urchins have been growing very slowly and many will actually be older than four years by the time they reach harvest size.”

El Niño events can be devastating. In 2015 the surface temperature in the channel hit 78°. “Guys were throwing up underwater because it was so hot. Seafood didn’t like it either, especially shallow species like urchin. We got hot water, hot weather, domoic acid, algae blooms and no rain! We got all of the crap from El Niño and none of the good stuff. The El Niño is like a forest fire underwater, it clears everything out. The waves and swells bombard the bottom and create a clean slate.”

When asked what she thinks about the future of the urchin fishery, Stephanie was optimistic. “The urchin population has sustained itself because of regulations. It’s cool to see that they have made it through even given the adverse conditions.”

Weather events aren’t the only challenge for urchin. Sea otters, an apex predator of the kelp forest ecosystem, were nearly driven to extinction by fur traders in the 1800s and have only been restored by careful conservation efforts. For the urchin, however, these adorable marine mammals are deadly. Otters specialize in their hunting habits. Some target whelks or abalone, and a few even learned to hunt birds. But those sea otters that specialize in hunting urchin have been known to eat up to 1,500 individual urchin in a single day!

As far as the commercial fishery is concerned, this means that just six urchin-craving otters, each gobbling up roughly 550,000 pounds per year, could wipe out the entire local commercial catch. This doesn’t even take into account threats from other natural predators of the urchin like spiny lobster and sheephead.

Fortunately for Santa Barbara divers, the majority of otters live on a stretch of coast between Santa Cruz and Morro Bay. In the late 1980s a small population of otters was introduced to San Nicolas Island in order to protect the species from a localized collapse. Shortly after this re-introduction, fisherman, military and oil companies petitioned for a “no otter zone” from Point Conception to the Mexico border, but this has recently been overturned causing alarm throughout the commercial fishing community.

Nobody is more aware of the local marine environment and urchin populations than the fishermen themselves. “I want this resource to last more than anyone out there! I depend on this as my livelihood,” explained Stephanie.

Deckhand Brett Hall on F/V Risa Lynn unloading urchin at the harbor. Opposite: Stephanie Mutz diving for urchin.





FRAN COLLIN

Above: The author, Chef John Cox, opening and cleaning urchin for his dish, pictured opposite, Deviled Eggs with Uni served on the urchin spines.

The California Sea Urchin Commission recently helped implement new regulations that would drop the number of statewide urchin permits from 300 to 150. In the previous lottery system, a new permit was issued when an existing permit was retired. The average age of a permit hold is 67 and over the last decade almost 100% of the commercial catch was performed by 150 divers. This means there is a huge liability with inactive permits. If market conditions changed, and more divers started

to use the available permits, it could be detrimental to the urchin supply. The new lottery requires that 11 permits need to be retired before one new permit is issued. This will continue to be the standard until the number of permits drops to 150.

Aside from two local seafood stalwarts—Santa Barbara Shellfish Co. at the end of Sterns Wharf and The Santa Barbara Fish Market (which isn't a restaurant, but will open and clean urchin for customers to take away on a bed of ice) at the



harbor—it seems like few local restaurants regularly feature fresh urchin on their menus.

It's not surprising that chefs shy away from these primordial sea creatures. Can you blame them if the thought of cracking open an armored shell bristling with poisonous spines isn't on the top of their priority list? Why should they bother working with fresh urchin when they could simply buy it in trays ready to go? The answer is simple: quality.

Two relative newcomers to the Santa Barbara restaurant scene, Bibi Ji and The Bluewater Grill, have both opened with signature urchin dishes. Chef Jessi Singh of Bibi Ji features fresh Uni Biryani on their regular menu. It's their local take on a classic Indian rice dish, beautifully presented inside the urchin shell. At Bluewater Grill, Chef Chanel Ducharme features local urchin as a blackboard special when he gets it from the harbor—serving it in the shell with house-made furikake saltines.

Early on, both chefs had to contend with late winter storms and rough seas that frequently keep divers out of the water, but at the time of publication Bibi Ji plans to keep it on the regular menu and Bluewater Grill hopes to put it on their regular menu in August.

What is it about urchin that makes chefs go to such lengths to include it on their menus? For me, I think that urchin as an ingredient evokes the purest unadulterated essence of the sea. Imagine for a moment that I was going to prepare a menu for you that would celebrate the bounty of the Santa Barbara coast. I would begin that meal with a simple urchin dish, perhaps garnished with a pinch of briny-pickled sea vegetables. I would ask you to eat the urchin in a single bite, to close your eyes and, as the urchin rests on your tongue, breathe in deeply through your nose before exhaling through your mouth.

This process, known as retronasal olfaction, is often utilized by sommeliers to grasp the nuances of wine. When we smell through the back of the nose, we induce a perception of smell that can trigger memories. The moment you begin to exhale your mind should be transported; you might find yourself walking by the beach at low tide, or on a childhood vacation to the seashore. For me, urchin evokes memories of foraging along the Big Sur coastline.

Just like fresh chanterelles suggest walking over damp leaves in an ancient oak forest, or the way artisan goat cheese conjures up the haze of wildflowers in a grassy field, urchin connects our palates to primordial memories of the ocean. Whether you are at a fine-dining restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, a traditional sushi bar in Tokyo, or in the comfort of your own home, tasting a freshly harvested Santa Barbara urchin will transport you back to this stretch of coast we are so lucky to call home. 🍷

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**John Cox** is the chef partner at The Bear and Star in Los Olivos. When he isn't in the kitchen, or at home on his boat in Santa Barbara, he loves traveling the world in search of new culinary experiences.

## Where to Find Local Urchin

Here are some places you can count on to serve local urchin, although availability varies and new places pop up all the time. The best thing to do is ask if a restaurant sources local urchin. If they do, thank them for supporting our local seafood industry!

### Regularly Serving Fresh Local Urchin

#### **Bibi Ji**

734 State St., Santa Barbara  
BibiJiSB.com

#### **Blackbird**

36 State St., Santa Barbara  
TheHotelCalifornian.com

#### **Bluewater Grill**

15 E. Cabrillo Blvd., Santa Barbara  
BluewaterGrill.com

#### **Industrial Eats**

181 Industrial Way, Buellton  
IndustrialEats.com

#### **Loquita Santa Barbara**

202 State St., Santa Barbara  
LoquitaSB.com

#### **Santa Barbara Fish Market**

117 Harbor Way, Santa Barbara  
SBFish.com

#### **Saturday Fishermen's Market**

6–11am Saturdays at the Santa Barbara Harbor  
CFSB.info

#### **Santa Barbara Shellfish Company**

230 Stearns Wharf, Santa Barbara  
ShellfishCo.com

### Serving Local Urchin on Occasion

#### **The Bear and Star**

2860 Grand Ave., Los Olivos  
TheBearAndStar.com

#### **Bell's**

406 Bell St., Los Alamos  
BellsRestaurant.com

#### **Convivo**

901 E. Cabrillo Blvd., Santa Barbara  
ConvivoRestaurant.com

#### **Frankland's Crab and Co.**

1295 Coast Village Rd., Montecito  
FranklandsCrabAndCompany.com

#### **Full of Life Flatbread**

225 Bell St., Los Alamos  
FullOfLifeFoods.com

#### **The Monarch**

1295 Coast Village Rd., Montecito  
ScratchRestaurants.com