

## Executive Chef Saga Horner brings fresh to the menu at Zel's Del Mar

By Kristina Houck

If you order the bison burger or veggie burger at Zel's Del Mar, you can be assured it will be served on a freshly made bun. Executive Chef Saga Horner makes the brioche buns, as well as tableside ciabatta bread, from scratch every day.

"I want this place to be great," Horner said. "That's why I'm here."

The Del Mar restaurant opened four years ago, but Horner overhauled the entire menu when he was hired about 18 months ago.

From burgers and flatbread pizza, to salads and sandwiches, the San Diego native describes the menu as "American cuisine with world influence."

At the beginning of each season, the restaurant offers a tasting menu so guests can try the latest dishes. The three-course tasting costs \$35.

Six months ago, Horner decided the restaurant should serve house-made fresh bread. Now, the Solana Beach resident is adding a homemade cheeseboard to the menu.

"The food definitely stands out because everything is made from scratch daily," Horner said.

Next? He plans to brew his own beer.

"It's in the early stages, but it's going to happen here," Horner said. "That's what we want to do — make everything in-house and have it be like an artisan restaurant. I'm a firm believer in the craft."

Horner grew up in Carmel Mountain Ranch. His father is a financial advisor and his mother is a former caterer. Of the five children in the family, Horner was the only one who would frequent the kitchen like his mother.

"She has always been my culinary influence," said Horner, whose mother, Elizabeth, studied at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. "Growing up, I was the only one in the kitchen all the time. I've always had a passion for it."

After graduating from Rancho Bernardo High School and briefly attending Palomar College, Horner enrolled in Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Portland.

He completed a culinary internship at Portland-based McCormick and Schmick's Harborside at the Marina. Then he worked as a sous chef at Macadam's Bar & Grill, which he helped launch.

"The best thing about Portland — I would go forage my own mushrooms in the woods," he said. "I would go catch 20-pound steelhead trout out of the river. I'd go to the coast and go crabbing once a week with my fellow culinary students."

Horner brought his love of fresh ingredients to his menus.

He helped open La Costa Grill in Carlsbad, where he created the Happy Hour menu and managed the oyster bar. He then became the sous chef of Prepkitchen Del Mar. Horner was promoted to executive chef three weeks before a fire damaged the restaurant, which reopened a year later. Following a year-long stint at Solace and the Moonlight Lounge in Encinitas, Horner was hired as the executive chef of Zel's Del Mar.

"Every day that I go to work is a challenge, but it is fun," Horner said. "I feel like I'm so lucky to be able to go to work and enjoy what I'm doing the entire day."

"The food is awesome," he added. "We have such a variety of things on the menu; there's something for everybody. I think if somebody hasn't tried Zel's, they're missing out."

Zel's Del Mar is located at 1247 Camino Del Mar.

For more information, call 858-755-0076 or visit [www.zelsdelmar.com](http://www.zelsdelmar.com).



Executive Chef Saga Horner.  
Photo/Kristina Houck



Cheese plate. Photo/Kristina Houck