

May 2025

# 805 LIVING

*The* **Travel** *Issue*



# A Seaside Renewal

THE ELLWOOD RESTAURANT MAKES WAY FOR  
NEW DINING MEMORIES AT A BELOVED SITE ON GOLETA BEACH.



A Seafood Platter from the raw bar at The Ellwood at Goleta Beach (above, left) includes shrimp cocktail and snow crab claws, with cocktail sauce and lemon, and Kumamoto oysters. A large beachside patio (above, right) makes the most of the view.

**D**uring a bustling dinner service at **The Ellwood at Goleta Beach** ([theellwood.com](http://theellwood.com)), Omar Khashen, founder and operating partner of the new upscale oceanfront restaurant takes a moment to reflect on the three-and-a-half-year journey that brought him and his team to its opening. “In 2021, my friend Joe “Diggs” Dies, who is now a partner in the business, told me that the space was becoming available, Khashen says. “When I came up and saw it, I fell in love with it.” With a 25-year career developing and operating restaurants, nightclubs, bars,

and music venues, including oceanfront concessions on state beaches in Orange County, Khashen recognized the unique nature of the beachside property next to UC Santa Barbara and was determined to create a special gathering place there for the community and visitors.

The project began when he won the bid to lease the County of Santa Barbara–owned property at the foot of the wharf on Goleta Beach, which was formerly the longtime home of the Beachside Bar-Cafe. “We gutted and rebuilt 90 percent from the ground up,” says Khashen, who credits his team and notes that partner and builder Brian Escalera and director of operations



Chris Jow were integral to the process. “We were pretty far into construction when the building flooded. We had to pivot and redesign the beach-facing side and a lot of the patio.” Shoring up the building for the future called for construction of a 3-foot-tall reinforced seawall.

The setting is what chef Craig Riker cites as the inspiration for his menu of elevated but approachable coastal cuisine. “The focus is on seafood, since we’re right on the ocean,” he says. “And California is such a melting pot of different cultures that on the Central Coast alone you have Chinese influence dating from the 1800s, Spanish, Mexican, and more. We’re also lucky to have such great local ingredients year-round.”

Riker draws, too, from 25 years of culinary experience, which began after his graduation from Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts (now closed) in Pasadena. He has worked at the acclaimed Rustic Canyon restaurant in Santa Monica, alongside Evan Funke, and at restaurants in renowned hotels, including the former Montage Beverly



The menu by chef Craig Riker (above) celebrates the restaurant’s location beside the Pacific (above, right) with seafood dishes, like Ōra King Salmon Poke (left): a melange of the raw fish, local strawberries, grape tomatoes, and miso-tahini dressing topped off with edible flowers and a sprinkle of sesame seeds. Lead bartender Michael Monteleone (below, left) pours a coconut rum-based Seafoam Darby cocktail. Indoors, large, cushy booths (below, right) encourage shared group meals.

Hills; The Ritz-Carlton Bacara, Santa Barbara; and El Encanto, A Belmond Hotel, also in Santa Barbara. Locals may recall his work at Oliver’s (now closed) in Montecito and Alisal Ranch in Solvang, as well, but his most recent stint was at The American Club in Singapore.

“I’ve traveled and cooked in a lot of different countries,” says Riker, “and we tend to cook what we want to eat. I don’t lean toward focusing on one type of cuisine.” The menu reflects this in dishes like the Ōra King Salmon Poke from the raw bar and the 16-ounce *char siu* (Cantonese-style) Tomahawk pork chop, which is marinated in a traditional sweet and savory sauce, then grilled. “I also like to do twists on some of the classics,” says the chef, “with little surprises >







Founder and operating partner Omar Khashen (top) fell in love with the restaurant's oceanfront site the first time he saw it. A Crudité Vegetable Bowl (above) features locally sourced produce, French onion dip, and house-made chips. The Bad Bunny cocktail (left) is a mix of Amarás Mezcal, pressed carrot juice, ginger, lime juice, and Scrappy's Firewater Bitters, garnished with a dried blood orange wheel and skewered rainbow carrot ribbons. A cucumber *aguachile* (lime-and-chile marinade) streams from a pitcher over the Hamachi Crudo (below), a yellowtail dish complemented with cucumber slices, citrus segments, avocado, and jicama.



here and there." A case in point is the creamy clam chowder poured tableside over a gratin of Vermont white cheddar and potatoes—an upside-down version of a traditional soup *en croûte*.

The menu is designed to offer a variety of experiences. "We enjoy the sharing and familial kind of vibe," says Khashen. "The idea is to order a few things and share, but it's also easy to order individually." Large plates designed for sharing include

the aforementioned pork chop; a grilled whole branzino punched up with chimichurri; and a roasted Jidori half chicken with chicken jus, garlic sauce, pickled turnip, and flatbread. Pasta aficionados will appreciate the Fusilli alla Vodka with 'nduja, Calabrian chiles, and vodka sauce; and the short rib and mushroom pappardelle, which owes its multidimensional flavor to a wild mushroom *soffritto* (an aromatic sauté of diced onions, carrots, and celery). Standouts among the sides are the silky-smooth Joël Robuchon-style mashed potatoes and the roasted brussels sprouts studded with toasted pecans and chopped avocado in a white balsamic-cashew butter glaze.

For dessert: a sharing plate of Pistachio Butter Cake is topped with vanilla gelato, chopped pistachios, and fresh local strawberries, while a sundae showcases the gelato in a pool of warm caramel and fudge with a sprinkling of crumbled pretzels and frozen fresh strawberry shavings on top.

General manager Antonio Gerli doesn't just keep things running smoothly with the help of assistant general manager Lauren Plumley, he also developed the wine list of 150 labels, including Santa Barbara County classics and international bottles.

The emphasis on variety even applies to seating options, which range from a large beachside patio with an outside bar and fireplace to indoor dining rooms and a raw bar displaying a rotating selection of fresh oysters. An expansive bar area lined with roomy booths offers the full menu and is a stylish spot for a handcrafted cocktail, like the signature High Fashion, a mixture of fat-washed Black Market Ellwood Private Barrel Rye, date syrup, and bitters. Throughout, a modern aesthetic in a neutral palette with subtle pops of color allows views of the Pacific to take center stage.

"I was surprised by the amount of people who tell us that they had their first date here, or a proposal, or met here, or used to come with their family as kids," says Khashen. "We want to make sure it will be here for a long time. This is a special place." ♦

