



Mega-clubs and rooftop pool parties are so last decade, at least in San Diego, where the latest must-be-seen spots are all about craft cocktails and a singular vibe. We're talking secret speakeasies and goth-punk dance dens, kitschy-chic cantinas and whimsical wine bars. You won't find Top 40 or queues around the block—just decidedly eclectic design, drinks and DJs. As different as they are, downtown's new offerings share one thing in common: personality. Meet some of the local personalities who are making it happen.

A man with tattoos on his arms, wearing a white dress shirt, a pinstriped vest, and a light-colored tie, stands in a dimly lit bar. He is holding a glass with a yellow drink and a slice of citrus. The background features a red leather booth and a dark wall with a framed picture. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's face and the texture of his clothing.

# the dukes of downtown

BY ANNAMARIA STEPHENS // PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY K. FELLOWS



Flash a Cheshire grin as you step inside Vin de Syrah, a whimsical wine bar bedecked in pops of kelly green and Wonderland-inspired accents.

OPENING SPREAD: BARTENDING BROTHERS MATTHEW, MARSHALL AND NATHAN STANTON KEEP THEIR CLOTHES AS CLASSIC AS THEIR COCKTAILS.

THIS SPREAD: RABBIT LAMPS AND FAUX BOXWOOD HEDGES (TOP) ARE PART OF DESIGNER MICHAEL SORIANO'S (OPPOSITE) WONDERLAND-THEMED MASTER PLAN AT VIN DE SYRAH.

**THE STANTON BROTHERS | THE DRINKSLINGERS**  
 “We used to throw parties at our house and got tired of cleaning up,” laughs Nathan Stanton, when asked how he and his younger twin brothers, Marshall and Matthew, got into the hospitality biz. (“I knew it was right since my early days at Chuck E. Cheese,” quips Marshall.)

The brothers Stanton started their small San Diego empire with El Dorado, a Wild West-gone-hipster haunt on the edge of downtown, where a mounted white buffalo head keeps watch as retro Westerns screen on TVs and bartenders in fedoras—including Matthew—sling old-timey cocktails like the Clover Club (rye whiskey, lemon, egg white and housemade grenadine) and the Corn ‘N Oil (black rum, lime, housemade falernum).

Nathan, meanwhile, serves up his skills over at Noble Experiment, where he is co-owner and head bartender. Before opening, his staff got expert training from a master mixologist borrowed from New York’s acclaimed Milk & Honey.

With Marshall, who occasionally bartends at El Dorado, Nathan also launched a new Little Italy bar called Craft + Commerce, which celebrates micro-brews—including some San Diego labels—along with beer and champagne cocktails. (Bartenders here got tips

from a staffer of Death + Company, another NYC bar specializing in couture creations.)

The brothers spent months sourcing unique materials for the décor, including weathered wood reclaimed from Wyoming snowfences and a bar carved from a giant butcher’s block. Speaking of butchering, says Nathan, Craft + Commerce’s food is “nose to tail”—an eat-it-all culinary trend that’s recently surfaced in San Diego.

All three siblings offer similar thoughts on what makes a good bartender. “Personality,” says Nathan. “Definitely somebody who can communicate and make anybody comfortable and happy,” adds Matthew. “Service,” says Marshall.

The whisky lovers agree on a favorite drink: the Old-Fashioned.

“It’s so simple but so good when done correctly,” explains Marshall. “Usually it isn’t, unfortunately.”

But make no mistake. With the Stanton brothers, it’s always a perfect mix.

#### MICHAEL SORIANO | THE DESIGNER

He may be responsible for some of the coolest interiors in San Diego—the award-winning Pearl Hotel in Point Loma, downtown’s fantastical Vin de Syrah and old-school rec room Analog Music and Burger Bar—but don’t call Michael Soriano an interior designer. He prefers “creative director.”

“I try my best to employ as many local artisans and craftsmen as I can,” says Soriano. “These places are the culmination of a lot of different peoples’ designs. I’m more like the orchestrator.”

He’s being modest. He made a midcentury-referencing masterpiece with the Pearl, a formerly dodgy motel. And with Syrah, he conjured a subterranean escape from the hustle and bustle of downtown—if you can find it, that is. The down-the-rabbit-hole entry is splashed with graffiti and blasted with steamy air from a pair of heat condensers. And the door is hidden behind a faux boxwood hedge, masking a camera that captures the fumbling, screened inside for everyone to see.

“It sets the tone,” explains Soriano. “When you realize you were on TV looking like goofheads, you just have to laugh.”

So flash a Cheshire grin before you step inside, where a whimsical wine bar bedecked in pops of kelly green and Wonderland-inspired accents awaits. Wine goblets and vintage mason jars holding lights that flicker like fireflies dangle from gnarled old grapevines on the ceiling.

Seating includes high-backed striped booths, a four-piece settee with shaggy pillows and winged armchairs flanked by a faux fireplace and a trompe-l'oeil pastoral mural.

Soriano succinctly sums up Syrah's success: "All the girls like it, and if the girls like it, the boys like it."

Just down the street, Analog is meant to be "the boy counterpoint" to Syrah. "The design references are from 1975 to 1985," says Soriano. "I call it fun, fresh and funky with a really heavy dose of Foxy Brown."

A muted palette of mustards and browns matches up to "hardcore, masculine" materials: hardwood, concrete and bold graphics. Soriano says the "burger lounge/bar/karaoke bar" takes its inspiration from a '70s recording studio—think albums and cassettes. A back bar is made up of more than 700 tallboy aluminum cans, while a dueling Pong game is projected above leather-tufted booths. And the food offers up twists on classics: a lobster corn dog, for example.

"It's playful and doesn't take itself too seriously," he adds.

Much like the designer himself.

#### MAURICIO COUTURIER | THE DON

From barback to in-demand impresario, Mauricio Couturier has climbed the industry ladder with chutzpah. He's capo of the wildly popular El Camino restaurants in South Park and Little Italy—with a North County outpost in the works—and has lent his imaginative design skills to a pair of downtown's coolest eye candy: Voyeur and Noble Experiment.

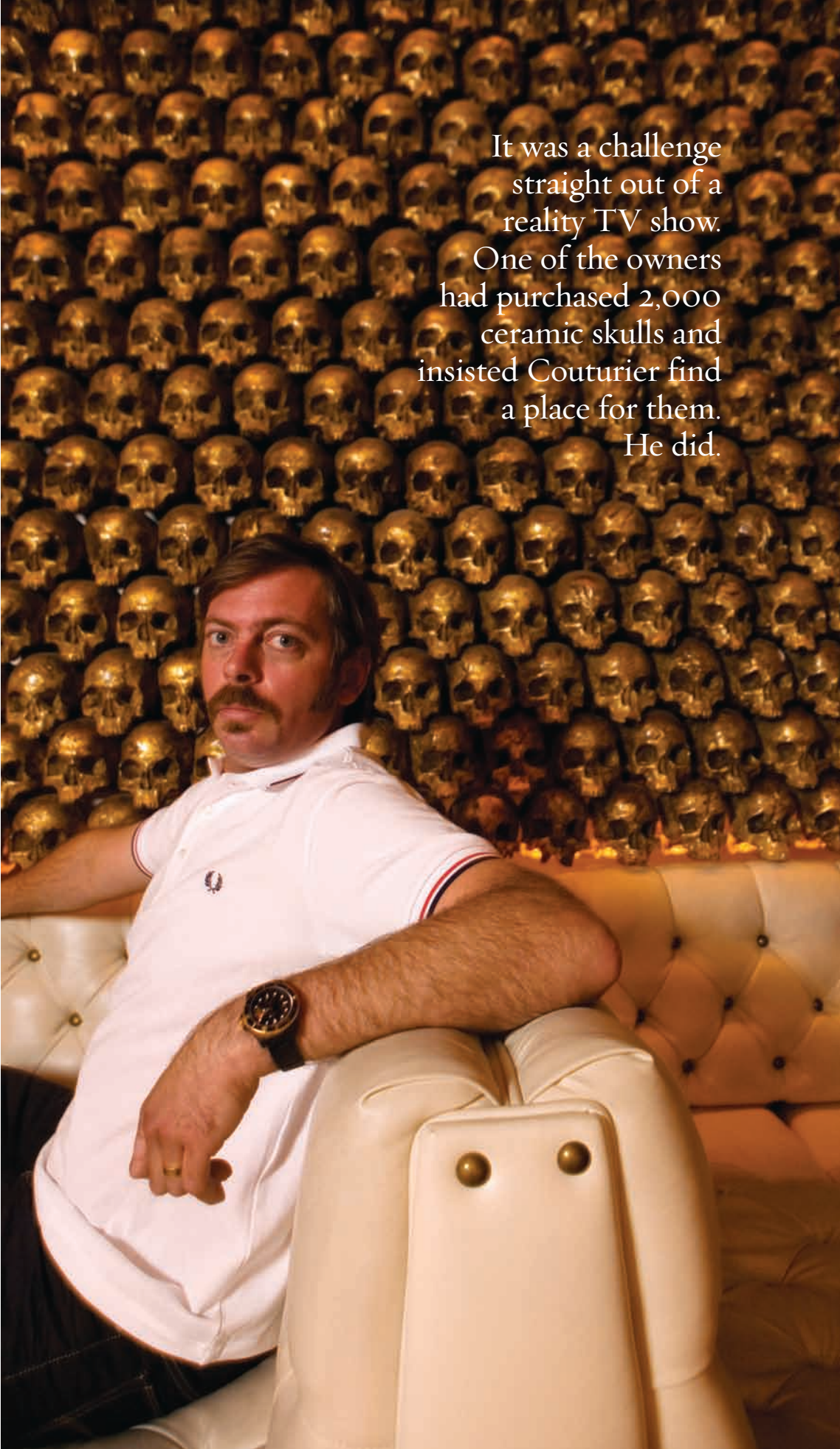
At age 19, he started at an eatery called Olé Madrid, doing prep, washing glassware and plying the trade. In time, he became Olé's de facto graphic designer, which led to a seven-year stint as a multimedia designer after the place was sold in '99.

"I got educated about the programs people use to make 3D video games, and I started to think about putting that technology to use in the rapid prototyping of interiors and exteriors," says Couturier.

Couturier's first foray into nightlife was Little Italy's Airport (now reinvented as El Camino), a sleek space-age lounge under the flight path with staff outfitted in orange tarmac jumpsuits and mod stewardess shifts. His design work caught the attention of the owners of Voyeur, who gave him carte blanche for the design of the edgy new nightclub.

"I wanted to do a fusion of modern with baroque, and they really wanted it dark in there—Mad Max meets Louis XIV."





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He did.

The end result? Golden AK47 lamp bases, inky wrought iron, blood-red leather furniture studded with shell casings and lipstick cams that peep on unsuspecting patrons. Couturier also installed a dazzling LED wall, which pulses behind go-go dancers who writhe to hard-hitting house/electro beats from international DJs such as MSTRKRFT, Bloody Beetroots and Steve Aoki.

Around the same time, Couturier designed the first location of El Camino, a hipster take on a Mexican cantina. El Camino's kitsch-chic includes day-glo Virgin Mary lights, Chicano graffiti murals of día de los muertos skeletons, lucha libre wrestlers and drinks served out of glass boots, which Couturier had custom-made in Mexico—all an amusing mash-up of grit and glam.

"I'm from Mexico, so I understand the good things and the more tacky things. But I also really like clean, modern design."

Couturier was then called upon to design a sexy speakeasy-style club named—in a nod to both Prohibition and the owners' desire to create something San Diego had never seen—Noble Experiment. (It's hidden behind a door fashioned from beer kegs in the back of Neighborhood—and if you don't have a reservation, you're not getting in.)

That project kicked off with a challenge straight out of a reality TV show. One of the owners had purchased 2,000 ceramic skulls and insisted Couturier find a place for them.

He did. Painted gold, they line the back wall like textural wallpaper, a striking complement to white leather banquettes and checkerboard floors. A crystal chandelier dangles below framed antique oil paintings plastered to the ceiling, giving a haunted-house feel, and a flatscreen above the entryway flashes the image of a deer that blinks if you look long enough—a little creepy after a couple of the bar's perfectly executed classic cocktails.

"There's so much powerful technology to use as a tool," says Couturier, who will soon launch a line of offbeat wallpapers. "And for me, one thing keeps leading to another."

#### IKAH LOVE | THE DJ

A member of San Diego's party-starting elite, Ikah Love, who grew up in Pacific Beach, still remembers his first two albums (on vinyl, natch): *Rock for Life* by Bad Brains, and the 12-inch of De La Soul's *Potholes in My Lawn*. But it was his mother's collection that started it all.



“I probably listened to it more than she did, and now own more of it than she does,” he says. “It ranged from Motown classics—Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding—to the full Beatles collection. And then it had popular post-punk stuff like Elvis Costello. It had Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan and ‘70s singer-songwriter stuff. I latched on to the whole gambit.”

Love, who’s been a DJ for a decade, says he handles gigs that range from strictly hip-hop to crowd-pleasing mainstream music. But in his ideal scenario—like every Saturday at the El Camino in Little Italy, where he’s resident DJ—Love spins what he loves: everything, with an emphasis on old-school soul, funk and R&B.

He says he’s deeply in tune with what’s happening on the dance floor. “I’m so hyper-sensitive to that. It can be the most blissful yogi experience or it can be a psychological game of Tetris.” (Either way, he’s on it.)

At El Camino, he offers an entire evening of entertainment. In addition to his DJ sets, Love and the Super El Camino House Band play ‘60s and ‘70s soul-jazz and funk that was sampled during the golden era of ‘80s and ‘90s hip-hop, re-interpreting it along the way.

“There’s that moment in the club, where I’m feeling it and I’ve accepted the challenge to push it a little further, and bring the people with me. There’s a higher level of energy or vibration or consciousness. People are really, really there.”

OPPOSITE: MAURICIO COUTURIER POSES IN FRONT OF THE WALL OF GOLDEN SKULLS AT NOBLE EXPERIMENT, A SPEAKEASY-STYLE BAR HE DESIGNED.

ABOVE: DJ IKAH LOVE AT LITTLE ITALY’S KITSCHY EL CAMINO.