

SBLS

Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

November/December 2025



ON HOLIDAY



basque cuisine meets modern craft

Acclaimed chef Dom Crisp brings his Basque-inspired cuisine to Santa Barbara at Dom's.





CIOPPINO PASTA

WRITER
Andrea Manokian

PHOTOGRAPHER
Silas Fallstich

“Legacy, intentional and personal” are the three words Raj Nallapothola, Chef Dom’s business partner and co-owner of Dom’s Taverna, uses to describe their new Basque-inspired restaurant. After dining here, I’d unhesitatingly add a fourth word: “delicious,” one likely left out only because it’s far too obvious.

Legacy. Tucked away on Victoria Street, Dom’s Taverna may be the city’s newest culinary hotspot, but its shell is far from new. The building itself has long been a fixture of Santa Barbara’s history. During the 1920s, it served as the headquarters of the California Electric Company, a contracting firm instrumental in rebuilding the city after the devastating 1925 earthquake, often referred to as the “Great Quake.” While many structures tragically collapsed, this one endured. More recently, the space was home to Trattoria Vittoria, an Italian restaurant that closed its doors in 2024. On this night, its former owners are dining just a few feet away from my partner, Atticus, and me.

Intentional. Simple yet refined, everything at Dom’s Taverna—from the menu to the food to the design choices—feels purposeful. The dishes are delicious and minimal, with no unnecessary fluff. Natural flavors are allowed to speak for themselves, and in turn, they leave you speechless. The ingredients are carefully procured, always fresh and sourced locally whenever possible.

We have the pleasure of speaking with the restaurant’s designer, Zlata Nikonovskaya of Z&R Design, who also happens to be Raj’s wife. She shares that the restaurant’s design is inspired by the coastal scenes she has experienced throughout Europe, and her hope is that the space invites warmth and encourages diners to linger and savor their meals, as people naturally do in Europe. The oceanic blue tiles, an original exposed brick wall, an open kitchen concept and a bubble chandelier above the glamorous bar all come together to create a comforting space. She also mentions that the bar has been a fixture in the building for years, with rumors suggesting the marble top dates back as far as the 17th century.

Personal. Raj and Chef Dom are friends. When asked how they met, Raj explains that Dom was one of his first clients for his company, Torónix Gourmet, which imports fine foods, wine and spirits from Spain. As it happens, their story and decision to open this restaurant together are meaningful. He adds that the wood used throughout the restaurant comes from Dom's family farm—the very tree beneath which he and his wife were married. “It's a personal project,” says Raj, speaking not only of the restaurant but of the details that showcase the pair's personal touch.

The restaurant marks Dominique Crisp's Santa Barbara debut. Many people may already be familiar with his culinary prowess; he was the Executive Chef and Culinary Director at The Lonely Oyster in Los Angeles' Echo Park neighborhood. His career also spans other Los Angeles establishments, including Saso and Blue Plate Oysterette, among others, showcasing a career defined by innovation and mastery of Basque cuisine.

Our incredibly kind waitress, Robin, recommends some drinks to get us started. As a white wine enthusiast, I order a glass of Txomin Extaniz. When it arrives, I'm fond of my choice because its light, citrusy flavor will no doubt complement our coastal-inspired meal. Atticus sticks to his usual pale lager, and with that we're off to a clink and ready to dig in.

I'm delighted to see crudo on the menu, a dish I can't resist ordering whenever it's an option. I've tried it countless ways—adorned with edible flowers, topped with heaps of microgreens, or garnished with the flesh of blood oranges. And yet, the crudo at Dom's still manages to impress, largely thanks to its refreshing simplicity: freshly caught bluefin tuna, dotted with a few sliced olives, topped with uni, and just a light drizzle of oil. The fish is impeccable, practically melting on the tongue, and sliced slightly thicker than usual, which highlights its natural flavor. The olives are a delightful surprise, and the uni is the best I've had. Leave it to Dom's to turn a former uni skeptic into a convert.

“They really let the food do the talking,” says Atticus, practically reading my mind. Dom's Taverna doesn't need to rely on heavily garnished dishes, overly sauced plates or food seasoned to excess. Their ingredients are so fresh and so outstanding, they simply don't need any reinforcements.

Next, we sample the “surf & turf tartare,” a delicacy I'd been eager to try ever since seeing its photo on the restaurant's Instagram account. It consists of raw minced

Wagyu topped with a healthy amount of roe (fish eggs), and surrounded by truffle chips. When it arrives, I can't help but admire the beauty of the dish—it really is a stunning sight. Savory with a potent salty punch, the dish makes for a great shareable appetizer. The Wagyu is delectable, reaffirming that exceptional ingredients are non-negotiable at Dom's.

It's a tough decision deciding between the “whole fish Basquaise,” “grilled bone-in steak” and “txuleta frites,” but we ultimately land on the frites. The dish arrives cooked to medium-rare perfection, just as we had hoped. And although we're given steak knives, the steak is so tender we don't need them. The fries are crispy and well-seasoned, and in all honesty, this is easily the best steak frites we have sampled in the area, and one we will undoubtedly return for. The char on the steak is flavorful and pronounced, no doubt a result of the restaurant's Josper oven, which grills and roasts at high temperatures using charcoal.

We end our memorable evening with not one, but two desserts—one of them off the menu, which I believe will forever linger in my dreams. We order the “torrija” from the menu, a sweet creation credited to Chef Dan that consists of brûléed bread pudding served with a side of vanilla ice cream. It tastes of early school mornings with the family, Christmas day, and, as Atticus perfectly puts it, “fancy home cooking.” Like something you specifically remember your mother or next-door neighbor baking, the dish carries a familiarity that evokes nostalgia for anyone who experiences it. Raj mentions that it's his mother's favorite and that she's inquired about the recipe.

The latter, off-menu dessert is a cashew cheesecake adorned with heaps of caviar. Once again, the dish makes it incredibly clear that ingredient sourcing at Dom's is of the highest quality. I reluctantly let Raj know that this dessert has changed me, for better or worse, because every dessert I try afterward is bound to disillusion me. Alas, it's a fate I'm willing to accept as I devour the delicacy—a unique savory and sweet pairing that somehow works beautifully when enjoyed together.

Our bellies full and our hearts content, we're practically gleaming as we head out the door. As I leave, I turn to my right and see famed comedian and writer Larry David enjoying a meal with his entourage. While we walk out, I glance back at the signage hanging above the century-old building. Just like the space the restaurant calls home, I have no doubt that Dom's Taverna will become a Santa Barbara staple, woven into the city's food scene for generations to come.*



ENSALADA RUSA