



# Meet The Chef Behind Five-Star Studio In Laguna Beach

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Studio Chef Craig Strong, *Photo Credit: Jody Tiongco*

As the saying goes, “Leave no stone unturned.” This sentiment rings especially true at the Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star [Studio in Laguna Beach](#), California, an eatery helmed by chef Craig Strong, where no detail goes unnoticed.

In fact, a meal at the Five-Star [Montage Laguna Beach](#)’s signature restaurant is like an orchestral masterpiece for the palate. Each bite flows seamlessly into the next. And it’s all executed by a staff that is trained to deliver flawless, elegant service.

Like with a Wagnerian symphony, expect to spend at least a few hours enjoying chef Strong’s full repertoire of culinary delights. That said, the tasting menu is the way to go — and you can customize it to create the optimal dining experience.

Imagine oysters that are presented like flowers, each with a different seasoning, Dungeness crab risotto with vanilla mascarpone or a smoked duck breast that simply melts in your mouth. The gorgeous, panoramic Pacific Ocean views aren’t too shabby, either. Hot tip: Book a table an hour before sunset for a stunning natural show that wonderfully pairs with the meal. How does chef Strong manage to consistently deliver magical moments in the kitchen while also earning accolades from Forbes Travel Guide? We caught up with the local Southern Californian to find out.



Studio, Photo Credit: Montage Hotels & Resorts

**You spent quite a bit of time early in your career cooking in Spain. How does that cuisine influence you today?**

Having different influences on my style of cuisine is great. Spain's cuisine is based on Mediterranean flavors and uses olive oil as the fat of choice. It fits Southern California to have dishes that are based on olive oil and seafood.

**Who inspires your style of cooking?**

The culinary team at Studio is amazing. We have a melting pot of cultures with each chef having a different perspective. We brainstorm dishes and the collaborative effect is better than any one individual could produce.

We travel, read, dine out and then share experiences to keep Studio evolving. I'm lucky to have such a talented group of chefs around me.

**Studio is known for its incredible tasting menus. On a recent visit, we were blown away with your vegetarian dishes. As a non-vegetarian chef, where does your inspiration come from?**

The current vegetarian menu has the theme of classic dishes reimaged vegetarian style. It was great fun to create. These classic dishes have lasted the test of time because they are so balanced.

I know they will taste good when we creatively change the protein, while still maintaining the spirit of the original.

**What ingredients are you obsessed with?**

Vinegar and citrus. We have been making housemade vinegars at Studio that are very unique. At home, I have kumquat, Meyer lemon, lime and orange trees.

I love to brighten up dishes with a punch of acidity. It keeps the palate fresh and intrigued.

**What restaurant/dining experience has left the biggest impression on you?**

The Fat Duck in London. I spent a few days in the kitchen and then dined there. Heston Blumenthal is an amazing chef and, at the time, my friend Kyle Connaughton was the head of the test lab.

They are two of the most creative people who I've met. [They created] delicious dishes with great presentations. Best of all, both chefs were humble and open to sharing new ideas.



Chef Strong's Colorful Culinary Creations, *Photo Credit: Montage Hotels & Resorts*

**Which accomplishment are you most proud of?**

I'm proud when I feel like I'm part of the development of chefs who work with me and then get promoted. Building the industry, one chef at a time, by passing down lessons from my mentors to the next generation makes me feel like I am part of a great tradition.

**Which tool in the kitchen can you not live without?**

My sauce spoon. It's like a painter's favorite brush. I have had and used the same one for more than 17 years. With it, I can place the sauce just where I like it to go.

**In your own words, what does Studio's French-California cuisine mean to you?**

The backbone of the food is based on classic French cooking, which is the layering and "coercing" of flavors to make dishes that are balanced and delicious.

"Modern" is incorporating new techniques that add unique textures and presentations. Additionally, modern is lighter. That usually means less butter and cream; I use just a little less than my mentors.

**Which dishes are not to be missed at Studio?**

Beet tartare on our vegetarian menu or lobster soup for appetizers; Japanese beef, which you need to ask for, as it's not printed, but something wonderful to indulge in; and the chocolate sphere with its dramatic presentation.

**If you weren't a chef, what would you be and why?**

A farmer. I have worked at night my whole life and farmers work in the mornings, which sounds good to me, and I like the idea of being outside with nature.

**Where is your favorite place to unwind?**

My wife and I had our most memorable vacation at Wakaya in [Fiji](#). The water is pristine, the island has its own farm with vegetables, chickens, lamb, pigs, fresh tropical fruit, and it has the most amazingly kind people living there.