

# NOBLEMAN

STYLE & SUBSTANCE FOR THE MODERN GENTLEMAN



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# WORKING IN HARMONY

# CRAIG STRONG

BY LAURA BUCKLE >> PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAY KANG

Known for his modern French cuisine with California influences, Chef Craig Strong, of Studio at Montage Laguna Beach, developed a love for cooking at an early age. One of eight children growing up in San Diego, he was inspired by his mother and grandmother to first experiment with tomatoes and zucchini grown in the family's vegetable garden that was his to manage. At age 19, he attended L'Academie de Cuisine near Washington, D.C., where he studied under some of the most respected chefs in the area, including Chefs Françoise and Pascal Dinot. From that moment on Chef Strong's career took him all over the USA and then onto Europe, specifically Barcelona, before returning to California, where he gained many high accolades including Michelin One-star ratings.

Having eaten a couple of times at The Studio at The Montage, I can assure you his food is a true reflection of his many accolades, every dish on his menu is harmonious, which is – as I found out during this interview- is a very important word for Chef Strong.



**Your resume is beyond impressive and your career has taken you to many different places, are you settled now at The Montage in Laguna Beach?** Absolutely, I have a wife a young daughter and we feel very settled here. My daughter is thriving in school and socially we have made some great friends. It is a great place to live, I'm a keen mountain biker and consider myself very lucky to have the trails in my backyard. I love the community feel, the arts and of course the beauty of Laguna Beach. The Montage has everything I love about a luxury brand, I love the service we provide, the attention to detail, the elegance, but with the unique relaxed nature of Laguna Beach. Previous places I have worked have been very formal, but here there is an understated eclectic, diversity, which I love.

**You have been the executive chef of Studio Montage since 2009. Have the tastes of customers changed during your time there?** Over time, I have seen a rise in people following a vegetarian diet. This is southern California and people really care about their health and well being. Therefore I felt it was very important to add a vegetarian tasting menu, one that would enable people to have the same dining experience as meat and seafood diners. I feel that in many places the vegetarian menu is kind of an afterthought, the same amount of attention went into the planning of our vegetarian menu and I'm very proud it.

**When you're designing a complete meal, what factors do you take into account? How do you achieve harmony/balance?** I love that you used the word "harmony" it's a very important word for me. I was lucky enough to have been taught by some amazing mentors, who taught me that to be an amazing chef it's all about the "orchestra". Dining is about the "whole" experience, the music being played, the silverware, the plates, the glass, the ambience etc. For me there is also the harmony in the kitchen, The Molteni stove is the heartbeat and surrounding it are the chefs, working together in a harmonious place. During my training, and in my early years, I was very much conditioned to being shouted at and shout at my staff in order to be productive. Over time I have come to realize that being harmonious is much more effective, the energy in my kitchen is one of respect and balance. The harmony in my menus, again can be compared to a piece of music; there must be a beginning which is light and colorful, the middle, which is slightly richer and the end which is the crescendo of the piece where it all comes together.

**Are there any other cuisines you are interested in that maybe do not feature on the Montage Menu?** We describe our food as Modern French Cuisine with Californian influences. California is such a hugely diverse melting pot of cultures that the people who work for me are from all over the world; Korea, the Philippines, Mexico to name but a few. Therefore, behind the scenes there are many other cultural cuisine techniques that are being used in our kitchens all the time to enhance our menu. We all work together, sharing ideas. I have learned many techniques from my staff and vice versa.

**You're stranded on a desert island. What five foods would you want with you? What would you make?** Well, as I'm on a desert island I'm presuming there are fish in the ocean, so that's covered... I would definitely need citrus; I love the acidity and the freshness it gives to a dish. In my garden at home I grow kumquats, lemons, limes oranges and figs, I can't get enough! Next up would be olive oil, where would we be without olive oil? Garlic for sure, it adds something to every meal, Some kind of green vegetable and a chilli.

**So, basically you would make ceviche?**  
Yes, you are right! I would live on ceviche...

**Are you affected by reviews at all? What is your opinion on food writers?** Of course you are going to take a negative review to heart, not just from a food writer from a customer. If someone leaves a lot of food on his or her plate, I want to know why. I want to make sure everyone is happy. When I came back to the USA after Barcelona I took the chef position at the Ritz in Pasadena and was reviewed by Irene Verbila, a very well renowned food writer. I had no idea she was in the restaurant. The only thing I can remember is a table where a lot of guests were asking me many questions. Her review on me came out September 2nd 2001. 9 days before the terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York. After that terrible attack, many businesses and restaurants closed and suffered. I truly believe the power of that one review saved my career. I was humbled by the power of one person's words. Therefore I never take a review for granted.

**During your career, what has been your most stressful experience?** During my time at the Ritz Carlton in Atlanta, Chef Paul Bocus, who in my opinion is one of the greatest chefs of all time and Joel Antunes, also a very well renowned and talented chef who I have the upmost respect for, were embarking on a task to cook 5 dinners around the USA. Whoever organized the event did not take into account the time difference within the United States. After a very long day at work in Atlanta, I received a phone call from their PR team to say they had booked me a ticket to Philadelphia, where I would need to spend the night and the following day prepping the ingredients to ensure that everything was ready for chef Bocus and Antunes to cook. I literally worked for over 36 hours to make sure everything was done. Anytime I feel overwhelmed I think back to that day as it taught me that anything is possible.

And it seems with Chef Strong, anything really is possible. A world class chef, committed family man, mountain biker, community player, inspirational boss he does it all.  
In perfect harmony.

