

# Oceanside Indulgence

by JEN ISAACMAN

EXECUTIVE CHEF CRAIG STRONG makes no excuses when leading the culinary team at Studio at Montage Laguna Beach to excellence. Since he took up the post in June 2009, Studio has accumulated an impressive list of accolades, including Three Stars from Los Angeles Times, a place among Food & Wine Magazine's Top 50 Hotel Restaurants, the Best of Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator and is rated one of Zagat Survey's America's Top Restaurants.

With a love for cooking that goes back to his early childhood, Strong's career has spanned from acclaimed kitchens in California, Utah, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C. and Barcelona. While he is best known for his expertise in modern French cooking with California influences, Strong's extensive culinary experience has created a chef that knows no culinary bounds.



MONTAGE LAGUNA BEACH  
30801 South Coast Highway  
Laguna Beach, CA 92651

**You've now been at Studio for a little over two years. How has the restaurant changed since you first started working there?**

The experience and ambiance of Studio have remained the same, but my menu and dishes are ever changing, taking inspiration from the seasons and my travels. One big change that I am very excited about is the new Studio Garden, which was just completed in April and is located right outside the entrance to the restaurant.

**Have you always enjoyed gardening, or is this a newly developed interest?**

I developed my green thumb at a young age. My mother and grandmother encouraged me to experiment with the tomatoes and zucchini grown in our family's garden, and allowed me to manage them on my own - a huge responsibility for an eight-year-old.

**Speaking of the Studio Garden, what are the most popular "garden to table" appetizers, entrées, and desserts?**

One of my signature appetizers is the squash blossom tempura stuffed with Brandade and served with Romesco, a sauce I learned to make in Barcelona. Our guests also love the Hamachi Sashimi with nasturtiums - edible flowers from my garden. For an entrée, the mint-crusted lamb with fresh mint and pea tendrils. For dessert, definitely my blackberry tart, served with a lavender pastry cream.

**Are you a globetrotter? If so, do you get inspiration for your dishes from places you travel to?**

I had the pleasure of working in Barcelona, Spain from 1998-2000. The Spanish emphasis on olive oil and fresh seafood paired with the Mediterranean climate greatly influenced my style of cooking and still does to this day. I was also introduced to a variety of curry while visiting a close friend in Trinidad. I am currently featuring a Wild Alaskan King Salmon Scallopini with lentils, raisins, mushrooms and curried cream.

**When you're not cooking up creations in the restaurant, where can we find you dining?**

You can find me entertaining friends and family at home with simple fare and great conversation. When I go out, I like to experience Indian, Japanese and Mexican street food.

**What other chefs do you draw inspiration from?**

I admire the creativity of Heston Blumenthal from the Fat Duck in London. I had the opportunity to spend time in his kitchen and observe his creativity first hand - an amazing experience.

**What are your favorite pastimes?**

My two favorites are home gardening and golf. Nothing beats a day outdoors.