

# San Francisco's iconic Nob Hill neighborhood reemerges

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*By Neal Tumage, Special for USA TODAY, Published on January 14, 2015*

A hand-painted sign in front of San Francisco's Nob Hill Stanford Court Hotel reads, "Cool stuff here". A peek inside reveals two young tech types in distressed jeans eating pulled pork sandwiches at a bar table tricked out with mini iPads.

In nearby Huntington Park, hip cats munch stuffed portobello "magic mushrooms" delivered by Sprig, the internet and app-based company whose kitchen is led by former Google executive chef Nate Keller. And over at the Hill's long-reigning grand dame, the Fairmont Hotel, the buzzy big-screen TV-fitted Laurel Court does brisk business in flatbreads and street tacos off its bar menu. Chef Andrew Court's dinner menu showcases highly nuanced (roasted fairy pumpkin) and hyper local (foraged Sonoma mushrooms) fare.



Yep, Nob Hill is cool. Again.

It's out with the old, in with the new. In this neighborhood, daring culinary personalities are eager to shake things up and show off San Francisco at its most electric and eclectic.

That includes the Scarlet Huntington's Big 4 Restaurant, where executive chef Kevin Scott announces, "I'm making American cuisine relevant again to a new generation."



Out come (to a packed house of multi-generational nosherers) local sand dab fillets, perfectly roasted delicata squash, charred Brussels sprouts — and a card announcing an upcoming beer pairing dinner with local craft brewery Anchor Brewing (where rabbit terrine and ale-braised short rib are on the menu).

Local historian Ron Henggeler calls Nob Hill's return to relevance as he sees it: "the gold rush all over again."

Once the exclusive stomping ground of the elite and wealthy, founded by San Francisco's "big four" railroad tycoons, the new Nob Hill crowd is fueled by those who've come to the city to seek and make their fortunes, says Thomas Klein, Nob Hill

Association board member.

"They're coming up to the Hill to stay at the hotels here, eat at the restaurants and cafes — and they want whatever is right now. As far as the food scene goes," Klein continues. "That means all the buzz words: farm-to-table fresh, local, organic and sustainable."

Henggeler says it's been a challenge to fully convince the younger generation they can find such 21st-century bounty on the Hill.

"All of the growth and action is in SoMa (South of Market), which has traditionally been the industrial section," Henggeler says. "The change has already occurred in NoMa (North of Market) in neighborhoods such as Russian Hill. Nob Hill has to deliver the same kind of vibe."

Klein says Live Nation's Masonic concert venue has helped accomplish just that. "Shows by Broken Bells and the Pixies keep the 18 to 35 year-olds coming back up to the Hill. They experience a culinary scene that's vibrant and evolving."

That includes longtime local fave Nob Hill Cafe, and upstarts such as Aliment and the year-and-a-half-old Flour & Co where chef-driven seasonal cuisine rule the roost.

Flour & Co general manager Sergio Guajardo feeds the influx of young families with organic, house-made baked goodies along with a curated selection of breakfast and lunch menu items. "We don't cut corners," he insists.

The shift in the Hill's demographic, "it's much gamier now," he says, fits well with he and owner Emily Day's "made from scratch with no overnight prep" philosophy. That's perfectly executed in off-the-grid salads, artisanal sandwiches and begging-to-be-eaten desserts such as the recent spiced pumpkin cake and the brown sugar nut pie.

A similar scenario plays out over at the industrialized, open-kitchen space of Sweet Woodruff, owned by the same team as another new Hill culinary hot spot Sons & Dughters. Sous chef Dominico Booker's menu is tight and focused. And of course, market driven. Find a spicy mac with house-made hot sauce, a Sweet Mercy sandwich of house-made bacon and fig jam with arugula, apple and havarti, and a Hippie Bowl with black beans, sautéed lemon-garlic kale, avocado, tomatoes and goat cheese. Wine pairing suggestions are indicated on the menu. And if anyone cares to veer off the menu with a spontaneous tasting menu, Booker is more than down with that.

That anything goes attitude, a mirror of Big 4 Restaurant, where talent and artistry are as valid as whimsy and instinct, captures best why the Hill is giving SoMa, Mission and Pacific Heights a run for their money — and clientele. And why Mark Hopkins' Top of the Mark, celebrating its 75th anniversary, has been rediscovered by young gents as the place to propose, if not just drink up, text and chow down tapas -- even do an impromptu wine tasting.

Cool stuff. A reason to follow the crowd up California Street to the only place in town the cable cars intersect, where the establishment is being re-established one dish at a time.