

The Interview: Chef Brandon Sharp

The executive chef at Napa Valley's Solbar is blazing new territory in California cuisine

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Brandon Sharp is the executive chef at [Solbar](#), a Michelin-starred restaurant that's located inside Solage Calistoga, an 89-room resort and spa located in California's Napa Valley. At Solbar, the relaxed vibe of the spa carries right on over to the restaurant, which is a lot more casual and chilled out than some of its more upper-crust neighbors.

Sharp's regionally inspired food, however, is just as good, and makes the most of the freshest, most in-season ingredients. There are healthier options like a "tangle of raw spring vegetables" with Greek yogurt ranch dressing, king trumpets, dried French onions, and pickled mustard seeds along with more decadent options like confit of Niman Ranch lamb shoulder with first crop fava beans, fava leaves, wheatberries, black trumpets, and green garlic mousseline. The restaurant also boasts Napa's largest champagne list!

Sharp has spent time at some of the country's finest restaurants, including [Gary Danko](#) in San Francisco, [Restaurant August](#) in New Orleans, and the [French Laundry](#) in Napa Valley. He was also honored as a trail-blazing chef by Cooking Light with "The Healthy Cooking Award" in 2011.

The Daily Meal: What was your first restaurant industry job?

Chef Brandon Sharp: I got my start as a busboy at Chi-Chi's in Greensboro, N.C.

When you first walk into a restaurant, what do you look for as signs that it's well-run, will be a good experience, etc.?

Clean ceiling, clean floor, clean aprons. Those'll tell you all you need to know.

Is there anything you absolutely hate cooking?

Sautéed soft-shell crab. Hot-fat shrapnel everywhere.

If one chef from history could prepare one dish for you, what would it be?

I'd probably ask Masa Takayama to make sushi nigiri until one of us gave up.

What do you consider to be your biggest success as a chef?

Training others who will soon stand on my shoulders.

What do you consider to be your biggest failure as a chef?

Every time a plate is returned to the kitchen is a monstrous failure on at least one level, usually several.

What is the most transcendental dining experience you've ever had?

Eating French toast made from Tartine bread and drinking pink champagne early on one Sunday afternoon. That was years ago, in our Russian Hill apartment before we had kids, and we still talk about it like it's the holy grail of indulgence. The irony is that Tartine bread is about the best you can get, yet totally wrong for pain perdu, but that's not the point. Which helps me understand that a dining experience for our guests here in the restaurant is also not all, or even mostly, about the food, even though they're here for the stated purpose of eating.

Are there any foods you will never eat?

No, but there are some creatures with six, eight, or zero legs that I don't consider food.

Is there a story that, in your opinion, sums up how interesting the restaurant industry can be?

Not from my own experiences yet, but there's a great story from Fernand Point at La Pyramide that I'll paraphrase. He had two guys finish up a long lunch with lots of wine and argue over which of them would pick up the check. He had to come out to the table and break up their bickering. Finally one of them says, "OK, let's have a race for it. We'll run from the front gate of the restaurant, around the old Roman monument down the street, and back here. First one through the gate wins and buys the lunch." So the guys line up. Point says, "On your mark, set, go," and off the guys run, down the street, past the monument, and they just keep right on running. Free lunch.