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And the James Beard Award Goes to...

...no one in San Diego. Here's why our culinary scene is overlooked year after year—and why it finally shouldn't be.

by TROY JOHNSON

The James Beard Awards are billed as the “food industry’s highest honor” and “the Oscars of the food world.” This year, Claudette Zepeda-Wilkins of San Diego restaurant El Jardín was nominated as a semifinalist. She’s a great chef. And she didn’t make it to the finals. In its 29-year history, no San Diego chef or restaurant has won a James Beard Award.

Every couple of years, a San Diego chef or restaurant will be named a semifinalist. Local media heralds the potential for national recognition of the city’s top food and drink talents. And every year, the predictable happens.

It’s time to say it: The James Beard Awards are not a national award. Which is fine. But let’s stop pretending they are until they devise a better, more inclusive system.

The James Beard Foundation is a great nonprofit that has championed and propelled chefs, restaurants, writers, restaurateurs, and bartenders to more acclaim, more hard-earned respect. I believe they do the best they can to cover chefs in every city. But it’s a big country. And San Diego is simply not in their coverage area. I imagine other cities also fall into their no-coverage zone.

JBA’s website lists the 2019 Awards Committee, and it’s full of reputable food writers and editors. Two are from Los Angeles, two from the Bay Area. None are from San Diego. I know of only one San Diego food journalist who has been cleared to vote for the JBAs. I asked JBA representatives multiple times to speak with someone about their San Diego coverage. They declined to comment.

That doesn’t mean they don’t travel to San Diego. But a quick look at the semifinalists over the last five years is pretty stark evidence. From 2015 to 2019, 163 chefs from the Bay Area were nominated for the award, and Los Angeles chefs got 102 nominations. Only six chefs from San Diego were nominated during this time period. This year, 44 Bay Area and LA-area chefs and restaurants were worthy of nominations, while only one from San Diego was.

I glanced over the nominations for the last decade or so but didn’t bother tallying. It’s the same.

This doesn’t make the JBAs an empty award. This year they made great strides to ensure minorities and

women had a bigger voice and a real chance. The chefs who win are almost always excellent chefs.

But the numbers tell a pretty vivid story—only certain cities in the nation really have a chance. San Diego isn’t one of them.

If the chefs and restaurants from one major city in California—the eighth largest city in the country—are not included in these awards, then it’s a pretty wild exaggeration to call them the “highest awards in the nation.”

I’ve covered San Diego’s restaurant scene for 12 years and have been able to travel a good part of the country eating at restaurants for Food Network, Cooking Channel, and Big Ten Network. I’m not going to lie. For a long time, San Diego simply didn’t have

quality restaurants on par with San Francisco, LA, Chicago, Portland, Austin, and many other cities. New York and San Francisco will probably always be the culinary meccas of the United States.

I conducted a poll among some of the top San Diego chefs, and all of them pointed to four who

should have already won a JBA and are among the best in the country: Carl Schroeder (Market), William Bradley (Addison), Trey Foshee (George’s), and Jason Knibb (Nine-

Ten). They also pointed to newcomers who deserve a look-see if and when the JBAs make it to town: Anthony Wens (Juniper & Ivy), Brad Wise (Trust/Fort Oak), Brian Redzikowski (Kettner Exchange), and Zepeda-Wilkins (El Jardín).

“It’s time to say it: The James Beard Awards are not a national award.”



Addison has more certified sommeliers and world-class wines than most restaurants in the country. Even with Napa and Sonoma in the Bay Area, they deserve to be nominated for their wine program just about every year.

In cocktails, one of the country’s best groups is Consortium Holdings (Craft & Commerce, Born & Raised, Noble Experiment, False Idol, Polite Provisions). Again, they deserve the short list every year.

Over the last couple of years, San Diego-based distiller Yuseff Cherney turned Cutwater Spirits into one of the biggest indie distilleries in the country (he recently sold to Anheuser-Busch InBev). Again, no nomination.

For beer, Stone Brewing Co. recently became the first craft beer company to launch in China.

The list goes on. It’s very clearly a problem with the James Beard Awards’ coverage. ■