

# TOP DOGS

BRETT MILLER AND ROBERT WATSON BRING LUXURY TO PACIFIC BEACH

OCEANFRONT

BY HEIDI METCALFE

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What do you do when chicken tenders and a cheeseburger no longer hit the spot? When you need more than a Bud Light draft to quench your thirst? If you're local restaurateur Brett Miller, founder and owner of the Moondoggies enterprise, you open an upscale contemporary Mexican restaurant, Gringo's Cocina y Cantina on Mission Boulevard. Then, you set your sights even higher — almost 30 feet higher — and open the first luxury boutique hotel to grace San Diego in nearly 20 years, Tower23.

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Welcome to the inventive, entrepreneurial world of Brett Miller, a man who always has his finger on the pulse of beach nightlife and style.

"I saw early on that if you create the right atmosphere, you can create the right party," says Miller, 37, who at 20 made his foray into the world of hospitality by hosting legendary Halloween parties at San Diego State University.

"I think I put on the first booze cruise," he chuckles. "I couldn't even drink, and I was selling out parties on an old boat in the bay."

Miller is, undoubtedly, a visionary. As soon as he got his hands on a real estate license, he launched headfirst into revitalizing the Pacific Beach (PB) nightlife by purchasing a little bar on Everts Street called Moondoggies (now known simply as The Dog). He was just 22 years old.

From there, he opened Moondoggies of La Jolla and a few years later, the beloved Moondoggies on Garnet Avenue. There's no arguing Miller's coterie of bar and grill enterprises are the cornerstone of beach nightlife for every young twenty-something in San Diego.

But when this State grad hung up his college partying shoes, things began to change.

"Don't get me wrong — we still take a lot of pride in our food at Moondoggies. I believe in PB," Miller says. "But I'm getting older. I'm moving into that older demographic," he laughs. "My tastes are changing and my standards are getting higher. I want to create something that caters to that."

Miller's latest venture, Tower23, a joint partnership venture with PB landowners Vern and Mary Taylor, will bring a sophisticated urban experience to the beach. A high-end, luxury boutique hotel within mere feet of the historic Crystal Pier, Tower23 will include oceanfront dining as well. The hotel will feature a 10,000-square-foot contemporary steak and seafood restaurant and lounge, Jordan Surf-Sky-Spirit, that promises to bring all the sizzle of South Beach to a neighborhood long known for its tattoo parlors and board shorts.

"I could have easily built in the Gaslamp District," Miller says. "But I really believe in PB, and I want this to be an asset for the locals here in this community."

Tower23 is a five-year-old project for Miller. One that began when he and the Taylors decided to develop the oceanfront site that would become Tower23. But when it came to organizing, structuring and putting together a stand-out hotel experience, Miller looked no further than his old college friend, Robert Watson.

The two met while Watson was a sophomore at USD and stayed in touch when graduate school took him across the pond to London.

"Brett and I both pursued careers in the hospitality industry after college. He was opening restaurants, and I was managing them. I went the way of the corporate world and got my training in the trenches there." He continues, "We wanted to be able to do some-

thing together one day, and it's all fallen into place, which is largely the reason we've come together now — to grow BOND Urban Habitat, a Hotel and Restaurant Development and Management Company."

BOND will manage the hospitality and operations side of the new hotel. Prior to co-creating BOND, Watson, held numerous executive positions within some of the most successful hotels and restaurant companies in the industry — Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, Kimpton Hotel and Restaurant Group and W Hotels.

"I've dragged my family to seven different cities in the past 13 years," he says. When Watson moved to L.A. to serve as regional manager of the W Hotel Western properties, his kindergarten-age son was given a tough assignment.

"My son had to draw a picture of his house, and, well, he drew the W Hotel," Watson laughs. "My son's teacher sat him down and said, 'Bryce, your house isn't really that big. I know you don't have servants that stand outside of your door.' Well, we had to explain to his teacher that he actually did live in a house that big. He lived in a hotel!"

Now Watson and Miller both reside at the north end of PB, and Watson says he is here to stay.

"I'm really bullish on PB," Watson says. "We're ahead of the curve in terms of what is naturally going to happen here. We want to take this town to a whole new level by opening a highly serviced, stylized destination experience with substance."

There is natural synergy between the two friends. They're two highly driven men, about the same age, with unique experiences on both ends of the hospitality spectrum. What Miller brings to the table in his ability to grow and sustain successful restaurants in San Diego, is complemented by Watson who adds the final touch — the finesse and polish coming from a career in upscale hotel/restaurant management. Both Miller and Watson are very excited about bringing a new style of hospitality to San Diego, and they say BOND will be announcing more new projects in the near future.

But ask Miller what's on his mind these days and you'll get a surprising answer.

"I'm thinking about restrooms," he says. "I want the restrooms in Moondoggies to be bigger, brighter, better."

In addition to opening T23 in early June 2005, he also plans for a major overhaul and redesign of Moondoggies.

"I feel there are some bars in PB that are stepping it up a little bit, they're getting nicer," he says. "When T23 opens up, all of PB is going to be a little bit nicer."

And that, folks, is something we can all look forward to.