

HOW TO EAT AND DRINK LIKE A LOCAL IN L.A.

SAVEUR

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Los Angeles

Our tribute
to the ultimate
food city:
dazzling
chefs, great
tacos,
heavenly
pizza, classic
cocktails,
and more;
plus 22 fresh,
fun recipes

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AN EATER'S GUIDE TO LA

Now that you've worked up your appetite, here are a few eating itineraries and restaurant recommendations to give you a taste of Los Angeles's vast and varied culinary landscape. (Find more of our LA favorites at SAVEUR.COM/LAGUIDE.)



TACO NIRVANA With its motherland just three hours south, the taco is the ultimate LA street food. An exemplary version is served at **El Parian** (1528 West Pico Boulevard; 213/386-7361), a 40-year-old restaurant in the Pico Union neighborhood, where the beef for the carne asada taco **1** is seasoned with salt and lime, charred, and then piled onto a handmade tortilla with onion, cilantro, and a red chile salsa. At **Los Cinco Puntos** (3300 East Cesar E. Chavez Avenue; 323/261-4084), an East LA standby that's been in the same family for 42 years, the *carnitas* tacos are filled with seasoned pork that's braised until tender and garnished with tart nopales (cactus). Want more pork? Try the *al pastor* tacos from **El Taurino** (1104 South Hoover; 213/738-9197); the meat is spiced lavishly with chiles and a citrusy adobo marinade before it's pit-roasted for several hours. And, while Angelenos will always love classic Mexican tacos, innovative cooks have looked elsewhere recently for inspiration. The **Nom Nom truck** (see www.nomnomtruck.com for location updates) serves tacos with Vietnamese flavors, like the lemongrass chicken topped with carrots, daikon, cucumber, and cilantro **2**. Another relatively new offering is the tofu taco **3**, grilled tofu flavored with chile oil, soy sauce, and garlic, from the **LA FuXion truck**, which specializes in Asian-Mexican fusion (see www.lafuxion.com for location updates). Among other meatless standouts is the potato *rajas* taco **4** (roasted potatoes topped with pickled onions, chiles, and guacamole), from the **Border Grill truck** (see www.bordergrill.com for location updates), the latest venture from restaurateurs Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger. —Javier Cabral

A KOREATOWN TOUR

LA's Koreatown, near Downtown, is a vibrant immigrant enclave: a rocking, all-night neighborhood of clubs and bars, of Korean driving ranges and Korean herbalists, karaoke rooms and supermarkets, movie theaters and bustling food courts (like the one in Koreatown Plaza, on South Western Avenue, below) that could have been



plucked straight out of Pusan. And then there are the magnificent restaurants, most of them specializing in a single dish or two. **Dae Bok** (2010 James M. Wood Boulevard; 213/386-6660) serves practically nothing but its signature pufferfish, sliced and tossed into a stew with vast quantities of chile and garlic. **Ham Ji Park** (3407 West Sixth Street; 213/365-8773) is a pork specialty restaurant known for its grilled pork ribs and a spicy stew of pork neck



IT'S OKAY NOT TO have too much of a history in Los Angeles. In fact, being without one is something of a tradition. The past here need reach no further back than the moment the lead character (in drop-dead heels, please) steps off the 20th Century Limited at Union Station and onto the palm-lined street. Over the course of the past hundred years or so, when it came to restaurants in LA, things could quickly get funny. Nothing was native here, so borrowed themes took on their own, distinctive character.

Consider L'Orangerie, the venerable and now defunct French restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard. Until it closed, a few years ago, you could treat yourself to a fine meal there, shielded from traffic by boxed hedges, and find that the evocation of the court of Versailles was in no way hampered by the working oil wells down the street. And still today, in the Atwater Village neighborhood, one can have a good prime rib at the Tam O'Shanter, an institution that dates from 1922 and has an interior modeled after a Scottish peasant hut: sagging roof, bulging walls, soot-darkened mantel. The original designer, Harry Oliver, didn't have any actual link to the Scottish Highlands; he'd perfected the look on Culver City movie lots.

Some call that superficiality; I call it lightness, the defining characteristic of LA dining. The knock against us as a city is that we're not real epicures, that we are health-obsessed weenies who care only if there's a star in the vicinity and will hardly eat because we must be doing squat thrusts at dawn up a canyon. The truth is that we are engaged by food but pair that passion with a sense of fun. It's not fakeness that bothers us but fakeness without heart.

True, like every other place in America, we once had our potted-palm dining rooms

where classical French food might be enjoyed, but one can only wonder whether the Angelenos who ate at those places took all that saucy food at face value or whether they thought it was just a bit of show business. With the rise of the motion picture industry in the 1920s, fantasy became part of the landscape of everyday life in LA, and the theme restaurant took root. At the Jail, a restaurant that opened in 1925 in Silver Lake, the waiters dressed as inmates. At Ye Bull Pen Inn, which opened in 1920 downtown, customers dined in rows of livestock stalls. No matter what the theme, most places served comfort-food classics, like fried chicken and steak. But at Don the Beachcomber, which opened in 1934 and kicked off a nationwide tiki trend, the Polynesian menu matched the setting.

And while not every eatery in town banked on fantasy—downtown LA in the 1920s was crowded with sterile-looking cafeterias that catered to the sober tastes of the hundreds of thousands of Midwesterners who were flooding into the city at the time—the movie business was the engine that drove our fine-dining culture for much of the 20th century. In the early years, the stars gathered at night in places like the swank Coconut Grove, in Midtown's Ambassador Hotel, where their comings and goings, documented in newsreel images in thousands of movie palaces, kept the rest of the country fixated on what was happening out here. In those flickering images was the inkling that Los Angeles, once a remote, dusty pueblo, was now a place with a vibrant culture all its own. It would take a few years, however, for that culture to find expression in food.

WELL INTO THE 20TH CENTURY, the fanciest restaurants in LA, like those in the rest of the country, were still looking to Europe

for their models. Places like Perino's—an Italian-owned restaurant on Wilshire Boulevard with a lengthy, haute-Continental menu—were still considered the epitome of stylishness in the 1940s and 1950s. When it came to food, imported cuisine was fine, but Angelenos of certain means eventually came to expect something more—a little sleight of hand, a memorable character. Romanoff's, which opened in 1941 on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, delivered both, in the person of owner "Prince" Mike Romanoff. The self-styled Russian royal was actually Herschel Geguzin, an orphaned son of a Cincinnati tailor. Everyone knew he was a fraud, but no one cared. On the contrary, guests seemed to admire him for his chutzpah.

Mike Romanoff's success also owed to this: he knew that for all of Hollywood's glamour, the inner workings of the city amounted essentially to a bunch of hard-nosed men eating lunch. Romanoff's, accordingly, was a boys' club, complete with stiff drinks, deep booths, rich French food, and waiters who were models of discretion. Cigarette girls roamed the big back room; the coveted five tables opposite the Art Déco bar were reserved for the real movers and shakers, and for Romanoff himself. In 1949, M.F.K. Fisher, not yet a doyenne of the food world but a recently divorced sometime screenwriter, expressed admiration for the restaurant's breeziness and pragmatism. "The attitude seems to be," she wrote in her book *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, "that all humans must eat, and all humans must make money in order to eat, and therefore the two things might as well be combined."

Romanoff had recognized an essential facet of LA culture, but an older restaurant had already begun to break through and represent something even more intrinsic about

LA Restaurant Milestones

1852 La Rue's, considered by some historians to be Los Angeles's first restaurant, opens for business. The establishment has mud floors and six wood tables and, according to one account, serves food that is "poorly cooked but generally served."

1908 The first French dip sandwich is said to be



served, in downtown LA. By whom is a matter of dispute: two restaurants that open this year—**Philippe's** and **Cole's**—claim to be the sandwich's birthplace. (A Cole's sandwich is pictured at left.)

1919 Joseph Musso and Frank Toulet open what will become **Musso and Frank Grill**. On the strength of classic dishes like flannel cakes

and Welsh rarebit, it will survive as the oldest restaurant in Hollywood.

1926 Herbert Somborn and Wilson Mizner open the original **Brown Derby**, a restaurant shaped like a bowler hat, on Wilshire Boulevard. Three more branches open between 1929

and 1941; only the Los Feliz location, which is declared a Historic Cultural Monument by the City Council of Los Angeles, still stands. The

Cobb salad, named for the restaurant's second owner, Robert H. Cobb, is invented here in 1936.



and the owner, a Frenchman named Patrick Terrail, was known to sport an elegant suit with sandals and white socks. But by Puck's own admission, the kitchen was still doing a butter-with-more-butter style of cooking.

Puck became famous at Ma Maison anyhow, publishing a popular book on French cookery in 1981 called *Modern French Cooking for the American Kitchen*. But with Spago, which he opened the following year, he became a legend. The first iteration of the eatery was located on Sunset Boulevard in what had been a Russian-Armenian restaurant. Puck saw it as something casual—the dining room had checkered tablecloths—and while there were certain connections to Alice Waters's Chez Panisse (the same German bricklayer had made both restaurants' pizza ovens, and they had the same enthusiasm for the produce of California), at first glance there wasn't anything momentous about it. But Spago was unlike anything LA had seen before. Here was a chef who had been raised on the French "mother sauces" and had chosen not to use them. Instead, he installed a grill and had a truckload of almond tree wood delivered weekly. In the kitchen, he fostered an atmosphere of pure improvisation. The chef Mark Peel, who had come over from Michael's to work as head chef, recalls the manic opening night. "We cooked with the menus propped in front of us to remember what the ingredients in the dishes were," he says. This was not cooking from a playbook that had been slavishly passed down from one chef to another.

BY THE TIME I MOVED here, in 1988, Los Angeles's role as a brilliantly inventive restaurant city had been cemented. I came as a cook, not a critic, carrying with me well-worn knives from Dehillerin in Paris, where I'd worked

for Guy Savoy, and from Bridge Kitchenware in New York, where I was a line cook at the '21' Club. Now the energy was pointing west. Everything seemed to be in flux when I got here. Even at the city's older, well-loved places like Valentino, in Santa Monica, chefs were changing their stripes. When Valentino's owner, Piero Selvaggio, opened the place back in 1972, it was a typical high-end *ristorante* with plenty of tableside pyrotechnics. "We didn't use anything like buffalo mozzarella," he recalls. "Mozzarella was something breaded and fried." But by the time I visited, Selvaggio was wheeling an olive oil cart around his dining room, pouring samples over bruschetta so that customers could appreciate the differences between regional oils.

IN THE MID-1970S, WOLFGANG PUCK WAS LIVING IN A RENTED ROOM WITH SHEETS ON THE WINDOWS AND AN EMMANUELLE POSTER ON THE WALL

I got a job on the line at Citrus, a new restaurant that the French-born chef Michel Richard had just opened among the production houses and sound stages in the raggedy southern end of Hollywood. At Citrus, Richard wasn't just mining the local terrain for the freshest beets or handmade charcuterie; he was going to the Thai grocery down the block and coming back to the kitchen with lemongrass and coconut milk. He was shopping at Armenian markets and bringing back things like *katafi* (shredded phyllo dough), which most of us had never seen before, and wrapping local Dungeness crab cakes with the stuff. One day, he became fascinated by watching one of the Salvadoran prep cooks eating a chayote salad. A few days later, we were plating up chayote slaw.

That you could play with culinary genres like that had become a given. Everyone was blurring boundaries: there was Roy Yamaguchi mingling Hawaiian foods like *abi* and macadamia nuts with European techniques at his restaurant 385 North in West Hollywood (and later at the LA branch of Roy's); Nobu Matsuhisa melded Latin American ingredients with traditional sushi at his namesake restaurant in Beverly Hills; and at the Melrose Avenue eatery Border Grill, which opened in 1985, Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken freely interwove strains of regional Mexican cuisines in homage to LA's countless great *taquerias*. In a way, this sort of eclecticism was right at home in a city where fantasy and invention, rather than history and tradition, had formed the foundation of high-end dining.

By the end of the 1980s, LA was home to innovative restaurants that boasted an equally novel asset: homegrown talent. When Campanile opened, a few blocks north of Wilshire Boulevard, in 1989, its planked salmon and its grilled prime rib with black olive tapenade—served in a rustic but elegant dining room in a faux-Tuscan complex with a verdigris cupola—caused a sensation. Its owners were Nancy Silverton and Mark Peel, chefs who had come up through the ranks of LA dining and not from New York, France, or Austria.

I've eaten at Campanile too many times to count, and every time I do, I feel grounded in this city. Los Angeles is a hard place to know—its fantasyland roots, its ethnic patchwork, and its almost too perfect sense of glamour all defy easy explanation. But sitting in a crowded dining room like Campanile's, I feel the disparate streams of LA's history coming together, and I can gaze around me, and at the plates of beautiful food, and say to myself, This is it. This is LA. 🍴

here, and Ava Gardner works behind the soda fountain before finding fame. Schwab's closes in 1983.

1936 Chili goes on the menu at **Chasen's**, the Beverly Hills restaurant. The dish (facing page) is a hit. In 1963, Elizabeth Taylor has a shipment of Chasen's chili delivered to the set of her



movie *Cleopatra*, in Rome.

1966 The country's first sushi bar opens, in the Little Tokyo restaurant **Kawafuku**.

Late 1960s Chef Ichiro Mashita invents the California roll (above) at the restaurant **Tokyo Kaikan**. The avocado in the roll is

meant to evoke the creamy texture of more expensive tuna belly.

1982 California-cuisine pioneer Wolfgang Puck opens **Spago**, his first restaurant; his then wife, Barbara Lazaroff (pictured with Puck at right) designs the space.

1985 Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger open the

influential **Border Grill** in Hollywood; they find wider



fame in 1995 on the Food Network show *Two Hot Tamales*.

2006 Celebrity chef Mario Batali makes his Los Angeles debut in conjunction with the pastry chef and restaurateur Nancy Silverton, with Hollywood's **Pizzeria Mozza**; its sister restaurant, Osteria Mozza, opens next door the following year.