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This past December, in the midst of the four-month flurry of eating and parsing and thinking and writing that precedes our annual 99 Essentials issue, I stopped in for a quick bite at Girasol in Studio City. The restaurant has never been on the list, seeming not quite up to the distinction when I reviewed it back in 2013, but I kept hearing great things about the food from other eaters I respect, so I stopped by, sat at the bar and ordered a plate of hamachi crudo.

And, man, that crudo blew my socks off. A wild sorrel broth that pooled around it was touched with white fir and finger lime and tasted like nothing I’d eaten all year. With a schedule that includes three meals out on regular weeks and up to nine per week during 99 Essentials research, that’s saying something. Chef C.J. Jacobsen’s dish was so bright, so new, so refined — and in that moment his restaurant earned its move from the “maybe” to the “definitely” column.

It’s moments like this that make the planning and research for 99 Essentials, which this year I shared with L.A. Weekly food editor Garrett Snyder, such a pleasure. Each year we get to rediscover L.A., return to the places that make this city a joy for food lovers, discover new flavors and chefs and taqueros, and catch up with chefs and restaurants that have new and exciting things to offer. The scenario above happened in some form or another at so many places around town: A quick bite revealed more than I’d been hoping for.

Of course, these discoveries present their own set of issues. In any given year, there are never enough closures among the previous year’s 99 to make room for all the new entries we’d like to include. This year — more than any in the four years since I’ve been overseeing the list — we’ve added new discoveries and places that, like Girasol, have earned their spot years after opening. Of this year’s 99 restaurants, 38 are new. This means we had to say goodbye to some long-standing honorees we love and admire and still consider essential. But the headline says 99, so 99 it is.

There are other firsts on this year’s list. It’s the first time we’ve included a supper club, which I’m sure will be as controversial as the first time a food truck appeared. No, it’s not a traditional restaurant. Is the food incredible? Is it essential to L.A.’s dining scene? We think so. These days, great food arrives in all kinds of formats. For 2016, we’ve broken out purveyors from Grand Central Market rather than having an entry for the market as a whole; we adore the market and all it stands for, but we think certain folks deserve individual recognition.

We’ve left Mozza, however, as a conglomerate, encompassing all three of Nancy Silverton’s restaurants on the corner of Melrose and Highland. Yeah, yeah, we know it’s a copout. Maybe next year we’ll break them out, too.

There were a lot of places and things on this year’s list we couldn’t bear to let go of, especially after experiencing them again. Who could imagine L.A. without a Langer’s pastrami sandwich? How would we live without Ricky’s Fish Tacos? Is Animal any less delicious than it was last year? (It is not.) Some things are just tried and true, and the 99 Essentials celebrates those places as well.

We hope you find the 99 Essentials as inspiring as we did while putting them together. Here’s to all those moments — at tables and at bars and at food stands and in supper clubs across the city — when that plate of food arrives and practically knocks you off your chair. We hope we can help bring more of those moments into your life. —Besha Rodell
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Adana

The dining room at Adana, an Armenian-American-Persian-Turkish-Georgian restaurant in Glendale, is quite often empty, which is cause for great consternation. Unlike some of the more popular Middle Eastern restaurants in this part of town, this place doesn’t feel quite so much like a 1980s banquet hall, and the food is slightly harder to define. But it’s also much, much better than most of its competition. For kebab lovers, the grilled meats over rice are tender, and the side is smoky and flavorful. Many devotees of the place come here for kebabs, and the rice is fluffy and fragrant, the barbecued elements of the place do come here for kebabs, and the rice is fluffy and fragrant, the barbecued

Alimento

We adored Zach Pollack’s small Cali-Italian Silver Lake restaurant when it opened in 2014. It was exactly the type of intimate, quality restaurant the neighborhood needed. But over the last year, something remarkable has happened. Alimento has gotten better. And better. To the point where we now call it one of the best restaurants in the city. Many of the things that were delicious when Alimento opened remain delicious — the mortadella pig in a blanket, the escofar crus, the grilled mushrooms, and roasted mushrooms, and a gloriously funky salsa verde that brings the whole dish into brilliant, umami-rich focus. This is a chef at the very top of his game. -B.R.

Angelini Osteria

There is hardly a restaurant so ingrained in the life of its neighborhood or its customers as Angelini Osteria, a place that seems as if it has been here for all of civilized history despite being only 14 years old. That is such a classic Italian eatery, complete with no-nonsense, charming professional waiters, probably explains much of its timeless feel, as does the dining room full of older customers, many of whom come here every week and sit at the same table. (The people-watching here is outstanding, made all the easier because the tables are so thoroughly crammed together.) The exceptional pastas — even in this age of handmade pasta bounty — are still some of the best in town, whether coated in a simple eggplant and tomato sauce or laden with uni and seafood funk. In Los Angeles, sometimes extreme quality and extreme popularity do not cohabitate. Angelini is one of the happy examples of the two in a long and fruitful marriage. -B.R.

Animal

Now that its owners, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo, are bona fide restaurant czars (they own six eateries, with at least two more in the works), Animal can be looked at from a sociological viewpoint, the organism that spawned an empire but also a way of thinking and cooking and serving and being that barely existed in the restaurant world before its arrival. Pull-no-punches, meat-driven, casual and fun restaurants that are quality-focused above all else are ubiquitous now, and you can thank Animal in large part for that. It has barely changed in its eight years of existence and yet still seems so current, which might help explain why Shook and Dotolo have been able to spin its success into such a huge platform. They were ahead of their time then, and their newer projects continue to push L.A.’s dining culture in unexpected and giddily fun directions. If
you want to understand our city’s dining scene, you still have to eat at Animal, to vie for a table in the perpetually packed room, to dive into the ridiculously rich and stupidly enjoyable oxtail poutine, to eat foie gras on a biscuit with maple sausage gravy and wonder how the minds that came up with those delicious obscurities could also deliver delicacy and balance in a snap pea panzanella, or a hamachi tostada with peanuts and avocado. We don’t know what dining in L.A., or America, would look like had Animal never roared into existence, and we’re happy we’ll never have to find out. —B.R.

435 N. Fairfax Ave., Fairfax; (323) 782-9225, animalrestaurant.com. Sun.-Thu., 6-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 6 p.m.-mid.; brunch Sat.-Sun., 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Plates $6-$36.

A.O.C.

Suzanne Goin and Caroline Styne’s A.O.C. has always been representative of everything great about the mashup of local cuisine and European influence. This was apparent in its original location, which opened in 2002, and it’s even more apparent in the spot to which it moved in 2012, which opened in 2002, and it’s even more apparent was apparent in its original location, which

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is an utter dream of a restaurant: a cozy dining room with circular corner booths and a leafy, brick-in patio anchored by a candle-festooned fireplace. The feeling is of stepping into an enchanted space where everything will be taken care of. What should you eat? You can barely go wrong. Spread the table with meats and cheeses and the farmer’s plate, a jumble of roasted veggies and bitter greens and chickpea puree and burrata and hunks of grilled bread. There are beautiful international influences in many of the small plates, such as the devilishly black arroz negro, the slightly firm rice punctuated with soft squid and lush saffron aioli. Over mid-afternoon drinks at the quiet bar or nibbles at happy hour along the high communal table, over sunny brunches on the patio and wonderful dinners in those booths or under the trees, A.O.C. has become the spot we turn to when we need to be comforted and pampered. —B.R.

8700 W. Third St., Beverly Grove; (310) 859-9859, aocwinebar.com. Mon., 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Plates $10-$54.

Aqui Es Texcoco

Mexican barbacoa, rubbed with spices and roasted in agave leaves until it collapses into large tender chunks, is a wonderful thing, and at Aqui Es Texcoco, hidden among the industrial-park sprawl of Commerce, pit-roasted lamb is the thing. A northern expansion of Francisco Perez’s popular restaurants in Chula Vista and Tijuana, Aqui Es Texcoco has been mastering the art of barbacoa for the better part of three decades. The signature dish arrives on your table swaddled in aluminum foil and paired with habanero-soaked onions, two squeeze bottles of salsa and as many bowlfuls of gamey, concentrated lamb stock as you can handle. There are other delights that might catch your attention: beer-marinated grilled quail, crispy brain tacos, giant crunchy curls of toasted barbacoa, guacamole sprinkled with fried grasshoppers. Yet everyone here seems to be eating the chewy, crisp-edged barbacoa, and you should, too. With a stack of soft corn tortillas in hand, you assemble do-it-yourself tacos until you run out of meat. Depending on how much you order — it’s not uncommon for a large table to order by the kilo, and a whole lamb head will cost you only $20 — that could take a while. —Garrett Snyder

5850 S. Eastern Ave., Commerce; (323) 725-1429, aqueistexcoco.com. Daily, 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $5.75-$13.

Bäco Mercat

One day, the city of Los Angeles may well rename this part of downtown “Centenovolta,” for the delicious influence chef Josef Centeno has had on the couple of blocks where his four restaurants reside. Bar Amá, his ode to Tex Mex, is as fun a place to eat and drink as any in town. Orsa & Winston delivers one of the most interesting, thoughtful tasting-menu experiences around. Ledlow is a model for the modern neighborhood diner turned sleek and gourmet. But Bäco Mercat stands resplendent as Centeno’s original vision for what downtown needed: a place that reinvented the sandwich (or is it a taco? A wrap?) in the form of a bäco, a flatbread/pita arrangement that yoguishes soft bread with tangy sauce and meaty meat, whether it be beer-soused schnitzel or oxtail hash. The rest of the menu darts all over the globe and reveals more about Centeno’s point of view than it adheres to any particular trend or style. Hamachi crudo with Akhazian chili spice is tangy, fresh and perfect; vegetable dishes such as shishito pepper and baby kale panzanella remain utterly original in the face of an onslaught of derivative vegetable arrangements elsewhere. Be it a smoky romesco on a veggie-driven flatbread or a yellowtail collar with yuzu kosho and walnut vinaigrette, something
at Belcampo will get you, and get you good. —B.R.
408 S. Main St., downtown; (213) 687-8808,
baocomercat.com. Mon.-Thu., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. & 5:30 p.m.-mid.; Sun., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5:10 p.m. Plates $12-$64.

Baroo
Baroo is that most wonderful of restaurants, a place that is almost impossible to describe in part because no one would believe it to be true — a modernist, health-focused Korean fantasy inside a sparse room located on a decidedly unglamorous stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard just east of Hollywood Forever Cemetery. There’s no sign, and the room is tiny and simple: white walls, a small table, a counter from which you order, a few stools along another counter against the wall, a blackboard menu and some shelving in back holding jars of things in various stages of fermentation. Owner Kwang Uh, a South Korean native, has had a fascinating career trajectory, filled with stints at impressive restaurants such as Daniel and Nobu. More recently, he’s staged at Noma and other world-famous restaurants in Europe, and you can see the extreme fine-dining training and deep philosophy in his cooking. Handmade pasta ribbons support a kaleidoscope of celery and celeriac thinly pureed celeriac, pickled julienne celery, crispy chips made from celeriac and a dusky powder Kwang calls “celery ash.” The dish takes one flavor profile and layers it over itself with multiple variations in texture and technique. The result is lightly fruity and creamy and utterly beguiling. There are a lot of grains things in various stages of fermentation. Kwang focuses on the most dangerous style porridge, after all. But if there’s a restaurant that you don’t want to be the dude ordering beef skewers at a place specializing in abalone for free, owner Trayel focuses on the most dangerous style porridge, after all. But if there’s a restaurant that you don’t want to be the dude ordering beef skewers at a place specializing in abalone for free, owner Trayel focuses on the most dangerous style porridge, after all. But if there’s a restaurant that you don’t want to be the dude ordering beef skewers at a place specializing in \n
Beijing Pie House
Navigating the restaurant scene in the San Gabriel Valley can be intimidating, especially for those who aren’t Chinese. You don’t want to be the dude ordering beef skewers at a place specializing in abalone porridge, after all. But if there’s a restaurant where your directives are clear from the moment you sit down, it’s Beijing Pie House. The wildly crowded restaurant in Monterey Park focuses on the most dangerous style of dumpling. Here, the unit of consumption is xian bing, puck-sized dumplings that contain a loose patty of meat and vegetable suspended in boiling-hot broth that spurts out when prodded with a chopstick. How do you tackle the xian bing? Do you perch one on your wide soup spoon and gingerly slurp out the innards? Do you bare-hand the thing and risk first-degree burns? These are matters of personal debate, but what’s undeniable is that the pan-fried lamb and green onion “meat pies” are crispy and juicy and utterly addictive. You drizzle it with a bit of black vinegar and a few drops of chili oil, which perfectly cut through the richness of the minced lamb, and tear off bites of the dumpling’s thick skin piece by piece. Just don’t forget what your chemistry teacher taught you about contents under pressure. —B.R.
846 E. Garvey Ave., Monterey Park; (626) 388-3818. Tue.-Sun., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5-9 p.m. Entrees $4.95-$10.99.

Belcampo
Belcampo is notable as much for its revolutionary business model as it is for its food. Its owners operate a meat company of the same name, which means they control every aspect of the supply chain — from the farming of the animals through the slaughtering process, the distribution and the sale to the consumer. Whether you’re buying their cuts from their butcher counter or in one of their restaurants, rest assured these folks really know their meat — which is all very nice, though it would matter less if it weren’t for the fact that their product is also delicious. The burger, best enjoyed while sitting at the counter of Belcampo’s Grand Central Market stall with the sounds of downtown L.A. swirling around you, is a thing of great beauty, simple yet greasily decadent. At the Santa Monica outpost, in a large room located on a decidedly unglamorous bottom of a loft building on the edge of the Arts District, aggressively cheffy Italian cooking and a stellar cocktail menu and wine list. This is a profoundly fun place to eat, the energy in the room matching the gleeful combinations on the plate, the latter of which include slow-roasted lamb neck with hazelnuts and salsa verde, and the perennial favorite of chicken gizzards

Beltsa remains one of L.A.’s few true perennial hot spots. Three years in, the restaurant is still thrilling trend seekers and serious food nerds alike. The winning formula, concocted by Sprout restaurant group and chefs Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis, consists of an industrial-chic space in the bottom of a loft building on the edge of the Arts District, aggressively cheffy Italian cooking and a stellar cocktail menu and wine list. This is a profoundly fun place to eat, the energy in the room matching the gleeful combinations on the plate, the latter of which include slow-roasted lamb neck with hazelnuts and salsa verde, and the perennial favorite of chicken gizzards
The Corona can has arrived.

Another way to find your beach
with roasted beets and Belgian endive. The pastas remain some of the best in town, and if you’re looking for simplicity you can stop by for a pizza and a beer. If you can get in, that is — even on a Tuesday night the bar is four deep by 6:30, and reservations are practically impossible. It’s not hard to see why. —B.R.

2121 E. Seventh Place, downtown; (213) 954-5724, bestiala.com. Sun.-Thu., 5-11 p.m.; Fri. & Sat., 5 p.m.-mid. Entrees $16-$45.

**Beverly Soon Tofu**  
Owner Monica Lee celebrates Beverly Soon Tofu’s 30th birthday this year, and the restaurant’s philosophy could serve as a lesson for aspiring businesspeople everywhere: Focus on one thing and do it very, very well. The specialty of the house is and has always been soon tofu, the volcanic-red, bubbling soft tofu stew, available in a variety of flavors. Whether you choose cod roe or kimchi or the house favorite — a combination of pork or beef with seafood — the effect is basically the same: a warming, comforting glow from the chili and egg and almost puddinglike tofu. The small room is practically enrobed in wood, from the beautiful cross-section of redwood that takes up one wall to the rustic wooden tables and benches and stools where you sit to slurp and gobble your food. The incredibly diverse crowd — which on weekend days piles up at the doorway waiting to be seated — just goes to show that a narrow focus on quality and consistency resonates with all types of Angelenos. —B.R.

2717 W. Olympic Blvd., Koreatown; (213) 380-1113, beverlysoontofu.com. Daily, 10:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Entrees $9.95-$23.95.

**Bill & Hiroko’s Burgers**  
For the past half-century, there has been no burgerman more stubbornly dedicated to his post than Bill Elwell, the 89-year-old curmudgeon who, along with his wife, Hiroko, helms the steel flat-top griddle at Bill & Hiroko’s Burgers. Housed in a gritty roadside shack in industrial Van Nuys, Bill & Hiroko’s has been serving the platonic ideal of the Southern California cheeseburger — think peppery patties, vulcanized American cheese, grilled onions, mayo, tomato, lettuce, squishy bun — since before man landed on the moon. The cramped kitchen’s seasoned griddle is even older, almost a century, and Bill’s devoted regulars postulate it’s the reason the patties have developed their trademark charred crust. In some alternate universe, you could imagine there being a franchise of Bill’s located off every freeway exit instead of In-N-Out, but that’s not Elwell’s style. He’s been telling customers for years that he doesn’t want more business. Yet they keep coming, as often as they can, for a taste of the cheeseburger that time forgot. —G.S.

14742 Oxnard St., Van Nuys; (818) 785-4086. Mon.-Fri., 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Burgers and sandwiches $3.50-$6.

**Bludso’s**  
This is the year that L.A. became barbecue-obsessed. There are new, swanky barbecue places opening all over town, TV personalities hosting barbecue pop-ups on their backlots and famous barbecue critics coming to L.A. to sample our wares. But when the urge strikes for smoky meat and comforting sides, you’ll still find us driving to Compton for Bludso’s. Kevin Bludso, a fourth-generation pitmaster, has taken his Texas heritage and created an L.A. mainstay that was here long before barbecue became a trend in SoCal and will be around long after the chuffed set has moved on to other pursuits. It’s a classic place — you stand in line and order at the counter, get your
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talent and showcases this chef’s considerable modern Mexican that goes great with cock-
tails and heartening dining conversation, front in the upscale-
ning to see Mexican beans, black sesame and creamy requesón sauce with citrus tang and a whisper of the ocean) and accompanied by clams, avocado and soft leeks left in chunks large enough to flaunt their sweet, vegetal flavor. Garcia is playing with the kind of inventiveness that feels natural, and he puts deliciousness fi rst. This menu has a lot of comfort food that’s playing with the kind of inventiveness that feels natural, and he puts deliciousness first. There is pure old-school nostalgia. A lot of thought has gone into this thing, from the way the ingredients are stacked (mustard, meat, American cheese, Boston lettuce, tomato, onion, pickle) to the intense crisp on the patties. It’s really tall and really good in a really base kind of way. If it turns out that this is the new face of Echo Park’s dining scene, maybe that’s a good thing. When your burgers and beer come wrapped in such original, joyful revelry — with tofu balls and Galaga thrown in for good measure — it somehow feels fresher than half the seri-
ous restaurants in town. —B.R. 1391 W. Sunset Blvd., Echo Park; (213) 250-9903. buttonmashla.com. Tue.-Thu., 5 p.m.-mid.; Fri., 5 p.m.-2 a.m.; Sat., 4 p.m.-2 a.m.; Sun., 4 p.m.-mid. 21+ after 9 p.m. Plates $6.50-$21.

Burritos La Palma
If your mental perception of a burrito in-
volves a foil-wrapped behemoth the size of a newborn, then the svelte, almost dainty creations at El Monte’s Burritos La Palma might at fi rst seem shocking. Flour tortillas are patted out by hand daily, fi lled with a spoonful or two of soft braised meats like beef birria or goozy curls of braised chich-
arron, then given a toast on the grill that lends the tortilla a subtle, golden-brown color. Each taco-sized burrito is a precisely calibrated package, a miniature essay on the joys of restraint, stewed chilies and high-quality lard. It’s not uncommon to order them four at a time. Although La Palma is the fi rst American outpost of a chain of tortillerias and burrito stands based in Zacatecas, Mexico, there are little splashes of Mexican-American infl uences here and there, including on the especial plate, which smoothes twin burritos in melted cheese and chili sauce until they resemble enchiladas. Could the burrito be the new taco? Depending on whom you ask, a burrito is just a taco by another name. —G.S.

Cacao Mexicatessen
If you don’t live in Eagle Rock, the fi rst thought you might have upon entering Cacao Mexicatessen is: “Man, I wish this was in my neighborhood.” The deli/restau-
ant/bar/coffee shop has so many things going for it, it’s hard to know where to start. Of course, there’s the menu, full of hearty, comforting Mexican classics as well as the now-legendary carnitas de pato (duck carni-
tas), the mole fries, the lightly fried avocado tacos and the uni tacos. But this place is as much about the feel as it is about the food. Families cram into booths and feast on tacos, and there’s a long bar where you can sit and eat and drink from the rotating selection of draft beers or from the wine list that has a heavy focus on Mexico’s Valle de Guadalupe. You also can stop by and grab a package of the handmade tortillas and a tub of guacamole or salsa to take home — this is, in part, a deli. Whatever it is, we’re envious of Eagle Rock and its residents have this awesome, homey place to meet so many of their eating and drinking needs. —B.R.

5120 Peck Road, El Monte; (626) 350-8286. Sun.-Thu., 11 a.m.-7 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Burritos $2-$7.

Button Mash
There’s something about Button Mash and its dinging, ringing energy that is mas-
sively appealing, even if you’re not here to take advantage of the old-school video and pinball games that line the walls. Button Mash is as much a bar and restaurant as it is an arcade, and as long as the cacophony of games and pinball machines doesn’t bother you, it’s a pretty enjoyable place to eat and drink and people-watch. The in-
volvement of Starry Kitchen, the beloved on-again-off-again pop-up/restaurant, is an obvious draw, though this food isn’t an exact replica of what was served at any of Starry Kitchen’s iterations. The menu is more like a greatest-hits album of Asian and American drunk food. There are crispy tofu balls and appropriately lacquered double-fried chicken wings, which you can get in a number of flavors: tamarind, ginger or a “tangy” version made with gochujang. There’s a cheeseburger that, like the games, is pure old-school nostalgia. A lot of thought has gone into this thing, from the way the ingredients are stacked (mustard, meat, American cheese, Boston lettuce, tomato, onion, pickle) to the intense crisp on the patties. It’s really tall and really good in a really base kind of way. If it turns out that this is the new face of Echo Park’s dining scene, maybe that’s a good thing. When your burgers and beer come wrapped in such original, joyful revelry — with tofu balls and Galaga thrown in for good measure — it somehow feels fresher than half the seri-
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La Casita Mexicana
For fans of Jaime Martín del Campo and Ramiro Arvizu who feared that the soulful Mexican cooking at their flagship Bell restaurant might languish after they opened their new concept, Mexicano, at Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza last year, we have this to say: Don’t worry. The stellar cooking and rustic charm of one of the city’s most iconic and revered Mexican restaurants is as pronounced as ever, even as its chef duo rises to new levels of stardom. The heart of the menu is the lush moles, each as vivid and distinct as a Frida Kahlo portrait. But there’s a great deal of pleasure in less publicized dishes, too: meltingly tender beef shank in tangy guajillo chili sauce, unabashedly gooey queso fundido and smoky sheets of carne asada with grilled cactus. The hardest decision, though, comes at dessert, when you’ll be forced to choose between caramel-filled churros and ultra-rich flan. A trip to Bell without at least one seems unthinkably.

—G.S.
4030 E. Gage Ave., Bell; (323) 773-1898, casitamex.com. Tue.-Sun., 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Entrees $10.95-$15.95.

Cassia
The excellence of Cassia kind of sneaks up on you. The collaboration between Zoe Nathan, Josh Loeb and Bryant and Kim Ng may look and feel like just another trendy restaurant, and certainly there is a sense of taking all that’s fun about big, fashionable places and pouring those elements on thickly. But Cassia delivers so much more in the substance of the cuisine, so much more heart and flavor and ingenuity. Chef Bryant Ng has brought some of the sensibilities that made his now-departed Spice Table such a favorite, but the context is slightly different. Here, he’s riffing on the interplay between French and Vietnamese cuisines, both the influences that are born of the historical French occupation of Vietnam and crossovers born of Ng’s imagination. Cassia is part grand brasserie and part modern Asian eating house. You can order a chilled seafood platter in various sizes, but rather than the tower of chilled crustacean bits that’s customary, you get a sampling of Ng’s cooked and raw cold seafood creations: a bowl of large prawns bathed in an aromatic Vietnamese hot sauce; smoked salmon dip topped with fresh salmon roe and served with grilled country bread; hunks of raw scallop in chile oil with tiny bits of ham and corn and gobs of fresh herbs; long spindly king crab legs cut lengthwise so the sweet meat is easy to access, topped with a lemongrass fish sauce and a flurry of shiso leaves. Other French/Vietnamese mashups, such as the pho-influenced pot-au-feu, are striking in their cleverness but also in just how well they sum up the aim of this restaurant: an elegant ode to what both Europe and Asia have taught us about deliciousness.

—B.R.
1314 Seventh St., Santa Monica; (310) 393-6999, cassiala.com. Sun.-Thu., 5-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5-11 p.m. Entrees $14-$60.

Chengdu Taste
The Chengdu Taste empire just keeps growing, with four restaurants now under the same ownership, all thanks to the public’s hunger for this particular brand of spicy, numbing, complex, alluring Sichuan food. We still prefer the original Valley Boulevard location, for toothpick lamb bristling with cumin, wontons that have an almost floral undertone (if you can taste anything under the extreme chili-oil heat), slick jelly noodles and water-boiled fish with green chilies. You can order a whole pork shank cooked in a deep, sweet braise and slathered with red chilies, or chopped rabbit in Younger Sister’s Secret Sauce. What’s in that secret sauce? Peanuts, and — you guessed it — chili. Yes, this is a pilgrimage spot for spice masochists, but focusing on that alone takes away from the nuance in this cooking, the layering of flavors that make this food so much more complex and satisfying than places where heat is the primary characteristic. Expect to wait a long time for a table, expect to order far too many things, expect to fall into a kind of Sichuan peppercorn–induced stupor for the rest of the afternoon or evening.

—B.R.
828 W. Valley Blvd., Alhambra; (626) 588-2284. Mon.-Fri., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5-10 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Entrees $8-$20.

Guisados’ mole taco
Chichén Itzá
If there’s a greater source of piggy pleasure in L.A. than the glorious pile of cochinita pibil at Chichén Itzá, we’ve yet to come across it. Think of all the descriptions that attach themselves to good meat — tender, juicy, dripping with flavor — and then apply it in your mind to a mound of shredded, slow-cooked pork topped with pickled red onion and nestled against fluffy white rice and hearty frijoles negros. The stand in the back of Mercado la Paloma in Historic South-Central is undoubtedly the most celebrated L.A. establishment serving Yucatecan cuisine, and for good reason. Owner Gilberto Cetina literally wrote the book on the food of the region (Sabores Yucatecos: A Culinary Tour of the Yucatán, which you can buy at the restaurant), and Chichén Itzá serves up some specialties here that are hard to find anywhere else. Get a feel for the mixed heritage of the Yucatán with the Lebanese-tinged kibli, or try the agua de chaya, made from the leafy green chaya plant. Enjoying all this in the bustling, colorful Mercado is a plus, and makes for one of L.A.’s great dining experiences. —B.R.
3655 S. Grand Ave., #C6, Historic South-Central; (213) 741-1075, chichenitza restaurant.com. Daily, 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $4.99-$16.99.

Colonia Publica
Ricardo Diaz — the chef who helped open Guisados and has launched a laundry list of restaurants including Cook’s Totos, Colonia Taco Lounge, Tacoteca and Bizarra Capital — is basically the Nikola Tesla of L.A.’s food scene. He’s less known than he should be, given his major influence on Mexican-American cooking. At Colonia Publica, Diaz’s brooding gastropub in Whittier, the concept revolves around bowls of the spicy Mexican noodle soup known as fideo, customized with handfuls of garlic shrimp, nopales, cotija cheese or whatever else you tick off from a paper order sheet. You’ll find oddball michelada riffs, too, which might include an IPA spiked with chamoy bacon or jalapeño aguaclile. But the most interesting dishes are listed under a section titled especiales: gooey quesadillas on thick tortillas stuffed with pork adobo and roasted pineapple; tostadas topped with smoked salmon and dill crema; and something called a Mexi-Dog, a crispy, tortilla-wrapped hot dog with mustard that recalls after-school snacks in East L.A. If you’re familiar with Diaz’s cooking, you could make the argument that Colonia Publica is neither the most ambitious nor the busiest of his restaurants, but it is without a doubt the most comforting — and when it comes to the warm nostalgia found in a simple bowl of soup, that counts for a lot. —G.S.
6717 Greenleaf Ave., Whittier; (562) 693-2621, coloniagroupinc.com. Tue.-Thu., 3-10 p.m.; Fri., 3 p.m.-mid.; Sat., noon to 12 a.m.; Sun., noon-9 p.m. Entrees $5-$42.

Coni’Seafood
In recent months, Coni’Seafood has garnered national attention as the treat with which in-the-know Angelenos are rewarded in exchange for a ride to nearby LAX. Of course, we’ve been saying this for years — as well as telling any out-of-towner with an afternoon flight that this is by far the best gustatory sendoff L.A. can give you. Coni’Seafood is perhaps best known for its snook, or pescado zarandeado, a dish adored by devotees of chef Sergio Peñuelas. There’s no doubt the whole, split, grilled, tender whitefish is one of the city’s great seafood offerings. But really, it’s only the beginning of what this small, slate-gray restaurant has to offer. There are smoked marinara tacos, which are like the best tuna melt ever, only in taco form. There are all manner of cocteles, such as the ceviche marinero, a jumble of shrimp marinated in lemon, cucumber, cilantro and tomato, topped with hunks of sweet mango and bathed in a wicked, dusky “black sauce.” Then there

operation for years roamed L.A. as a pop-up but now is fixed in a small storefront attached to the Hotel Normandie. The restaurant is nothing more than a counter facing a kitchen. Menes’ farm and its harvest provide the basis for the six-course meal he serves, courses that pair decidedly unsweet butternut squash with the sugary pop of preserved blueberries, or stone-ground polenta with sweet onion, onion jus, apple, almonds and romanesco. Though veggies are Menes’ main infatuation, other obsessions reveal themselves: the stretchy, chewy, crusty bread made from a 20-year-old starter, the single-origin coffee, the optional cheese course with rare cheeses. For any and all of these items, Menes will give you the rundown as he serves you, gushing about the 90-year-old who produced your creamy Roquefort or describing the exact roasting process of his coffee beans. For the right diner, this level of personal ardor will feel superior in every way to the more comfortable but purely transactional experiences available everywhere else. —B.R.
6717 W. Sixth St., Koreatown; no phone, lecomptoirda.com. Tue.-Sat., seatings at 6 & 8:30 p.m. Six-course tasting $69; wine pairing $43; supplements available.

Le Comptoir
In the world of ever-more-stripped-down, ever-less-luxurious “fine” dining, no operation is more spare than Le Comptoir. Gary Menes’ vegetable-centric tasting-menu

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Soul Food
are the camorones, giant, head-on shrimp, that come in many different variations of sauce: diablo for the spice lovers; borrachos (in a broth made from tequila, lime, cilantro and crushed peppers) for the hungover. There’s brightness and complexity and pop to this food that makes all of it worth a trip to Inglewood — even when LAX isn’t on your agenda. —B.R.  
3544 W. Imperial Hwy., Inglewood; (424) 261-0986. Sun.- Thu., 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $12-$25.

Connie & Ted’s  
The great tide of East Coast seafood shacks that washed over Los Angeles in the past couple of years has subsided for the most part, leaving behind a jetsam of lobster rolls and clam chowder. One restaurateur, though, has more than weathered the trend. It’s perhaps unsurprising that it belongs to Michael Cimarusti, the fine-dining beacon in a city that had all but forsaken white tablecloths and tasting menus. Cimarusti’s more casual spot, Connie & Ted’s, is one of the best places in town to hunker down with a pint of beer and a dozen oysters, or whatever other seafood is available from the cold-water tanks flanking the kitchen. There are fantastic renditions of fried clams, crab cakes, fish stew, crab Louis salad — pretty much any dish you’d envision eating on a checkered tablecloth with a salty ocean breeze rolling in. That you can get all this in the heart of West Hollywood, along with assurance that your seafood is sourced with the same strict care as at Providence, is a testament to Cimarusti’s rare melding of lofty ideals and crowd-pleasing comfort food. —G.S. 8171 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood; (323) 848-2722, connieandteds.com. Mon.-Tue., 4-10 p.m.; Wed.-Thu., 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri., 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Entrees $12-$44.

Corazon y Miel  
Since opening in early 2013, Corazon y Miel has morphed from a strange little bar and restaurant in an unlikely location to a true neighborhood hangout. Chef Eduardo Ruiz has grown a lot as a cook since those early days, too, and now is presenting thoroughly modern takes on Mexican street food. You might find chilaquiles here scattered with tender shreds of wild boar, or a vibrant green aguachile made with bigeye tuna. Don’t be surprised, though, if you also encounter a chicken liver and foie gras pâté as rich and smooth as any Frenchman’s — this is a restaurant and menu without rules (except perhaps one: no tacos). The cocktails are almost certainly the best you’ll find within a five-mile radius, and the room is full of groups of friends passing around food and making merry. —B.R. 6626 Atlantic Ave, Bell; (323) 560-1776, corazonymiel.com. Tue.-Sun., 5-10 p.m. Brunch, Sun., 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Share plates $5-$22.

Crossroads  
It’s amazing that it took as long as it did for a truly upscale vegan restaurant to arrive, one with great cocktails, a killer wine list and an atmosphere to match its swanky Melrose Avenue location. In the three years since Crossroads opened, chic vegan restaurants have become a bit of a trend, with even a couple of meat-loving chefs jumping on the bandwagon. But Crossroads remains the standard-bearer, the place you take your meat-free friends on their birthdays and secretly enjoy your meal every bit as much as you would if it were sprinkled with bacon. Chef Tal Ronnen — who recently released a fantastic cookbook inspired by the restaurant — focuses on the vegetables themselves rather than messing around too much with fake meat (aside from a couple of “comforting classics” for the vegan desperate for veal scallopini), and each dish is a fully realized composition, making for a meal that’s far more compelling than the usual grain bowl or collection of sides. Your rapini may come with black garlic and toasted hazelnuts; your “crab cakes” made from hearts of palm might make you swear off the fishy version for good. —B.R. 8284 Melrose Ave., Beverly Grove; (323) 782-0345, crossroadskitchen.com. Sun.-Thu., 5-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5 p.m.-mid. Brunch daily, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Plates $6-$20.

Dai Ho Kitchen  
If you plan to eat at Dai Ho, arrive early. The kitchen is open for less than four hours
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All photos must have Chinatown related subject matter and be geotagged at a Chinatown merchant or a Chinatown location. All photos entered must have #15DaysOfChinatown as a hashtag in the main caption. Daily Prizes to be selected by Chinatown BID and Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles staff. Grand Prize will be determined by popular vote through Facebook likes at: facebook.com/LosAngelesChinatown

Staff of the Chinatown BID, CCCLA, and Delta Air Lines are excluded from the contest.
each day, six days a weeks, and an open table at the cramped Temple City diner is as rare as a parking space along Venice Beach. There’s a glass display case filled with cold sliced pig ears, spicy pickled papaya and crispy peanuts with tiny fried fish, but everyone, including you if you manage to snag a seat, is patiently waiting for the wonderful handmade noodles — long, tensile strands with the elastic properties of a Stretch Armstrong doll. They can be had swimming in murky beef broth with soft hunks of braised shank, doused in rich sesame sauce or smothered in a ground-pork sauce mixed with salty bean paste until it resembles thick Bolognese. The cooking at Dai Ho might be described as Sichuan by way of Taiwan, or vice versa, but it doesn’t seem to matter much. Owners-chefs May and Jim Ku make their own rules, the parameters of which involve no substitutions, long waits, limited availability and boiling hot tea served in styrofoam cups. But when you finally get that bowl of noodles slicked with chili oil, these constraints feel like part of Dai Ho’s charm.

—G.S.

9148 E. Las Tunas Drive, Temple City; (626) 291-2295. Tue.-Sun., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Entrees $6-$16.

Din Tai Fung

To some purists, the proliferation of Din Tai Fung locations — its status as an international chain — makes the dumpling house less thrilling than it was when we knew it as a single restaurant in Arcadia. There are now two locations in Arcadia and one attached to the Americana at Brand mall in Glendale, as well as an Orange County outpost and a couple of branches in Seattle (not to mention the 11 other countries with Din Tai Fungs). But if that means you can eat juicy, thin-skinned xiao long bao before running errands at a fancy mall, then what’s not to love? The truth is that no matter how many outposts of Din Tai Fung there are, the food — those XLB soup dumplings, as well as the other dumplings and the veggie dishes and the noodles and the rice cakes — are still damn good. When the urge strikes to stuff ourselves with seven different kinds of dumplings, this is still the first place we turn. If that leads to world dumpling domination, then so be it. —B.R.

1108 S. Baldwin Ave., Arcadia; (626) 574-7068. Mon.-Fri., 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Sun., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. 1088 S. Baldwin Ave., Arcadia; (626) 446-8588. Mon.-Fri., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5-9:30 p.m.; Sat., 10:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Sun., 10:30 a.m.-9 p.m. 177 Caruso Ave., Glendale; (818) 551-5561. Mon.-Fri., 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sun., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. dintaifungusa.com. Entrees $5-$15.

Dune

The offerings at Dune are simple: falafel, a lamb meatball sandwich and a veggie sandwich. You order at a back counter from a menu scrawled on a mirrored wall, then look for seating along the wall or outside at tables on the sidewalk. There are a few side dishes, such as a plate of house-made pickles. But mainly you’re here for the falafel. Presented on stretchy, slightly charred bread that’s grilled to order, Dune’s falafel balls are large and crispy yet soft on the inside. They sit atop a smear of hummus, a handful of fresh herbs, pickles and a smattering of thin, fried potato spears. The falafel itself is made without flour, which makes it less bready and spongy than some. It’s a glory of a sandwich, tangy and warm to the term “best falafel in town” has been thrown around, and I’m not one to disagree. There’s house-made pickled mango on the counter to add a kick of sweet/sour to any dish, and super-tart, fresh lemonade to go along with your meal. Is there a downside? This is a teeny operation, with people making bread and frying falafel to order, and food can take a long time if you’re there at peak times. The wait is worth it. —B.R.

3143 Glendale Blvd., Atwater Village; (323) 486-7073, dune.kitchen. Daily, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Sandwiches $8.50-$10.50, plates $6.50-$14.50.

Elite

In the increasingly competitive San Gabriel Valley scene, the reputations of top-tier dim sum houses can shuffle as quickly as NBA power rankings. But like the perennial team that seems to never miss the playoffs, Elite has managed to remain at the forefront. At this unassuming banquet hall
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SINE METU
When Girasol opened in 2013, you could see what chef C.J. Jacobson was aiming to do. His food was highly influenced by the time he spent at Copenhagen’s Noma, and the beautiful plating and dishes inspired by nature were refreshingly ambitious for this part of town. (In the intervening years Studio City has had a bit of a dining boom — Girasol was at the forefront of that movement.) But back in those early days, there were issues with execution, and the sense I got was that Jacobson’s kitchen staff was not able to live up to his significant ambition. It seems they’ve caught up. Girasol now is serving some of L.A.’s most forward-thinking food. Flavors are delicate and surprising, such as hamachi served in a dazzlingly bright green sorrel broth made piquant with fennel pollen and punctuated by white fish and sea beans. If you’re sick of seeing the same ingredients everywhere, this is the place to come. Almost every dish has an element you may never have encountered before, and Jacobson has inventive ways to present the more common elements as well. That this restaurant has come so far is a testament to a chef who has a vision and stuck with it. We’re glad to see that vision come to beautiful fruition. —B.R.

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FLAVORS

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Gjelina

There may be no restaurant as emblematic of the breezy, stylish Venice lifestyle as Travis Lett’s Gjelina, no place where the people are more beautiful, the vibe more Cali-chic, the food more true to our gourmet/ carefree aspirations. The pizzas have crispy edges and are topped with ingredients such as burrata and wild nettles; the vegetable dishes might include roasted fennel with white wine, blood orange and fennel pollen; the ribs are from Niman Ranch; the wine list is long and engaging. The magic trick of Gjelina is that food this serious (and it is seriously good) can be served in a room so effortlessly casual, the brick back patio all leafy and twinkly, the crowded dining room looking like a wood cabin met the beach and they fell in love. Walk past this restaurant and see the crowds of people waiting outside, and peek through the windows at diners snacking on charcuterie and bowls of homemade pasta, and you’ll find yourself thinking, “I want to be there.” You’re going to have to wait a long time for a table, but the good news is that you, too, can be part of the fantasy. —B.R.

Gjusta

Gjusta, which comes to us courtesy of Gjelina owners Fran Camaj and Travis Lett, is something between a food hall and a deli, a sprawling concept that assaults all your food-lust receptors at once. A long glass case runs the length of the room, and behind it there’s a world of cooking and baking and activity, along with a small army of service folks who will take your order once your ticket comes up. As you walk down the expanse of the case, you’re first attracted to the cakes and pies and pastries, and then jars of deep pink pâté catch your eye, and then you get absorbed by the glittering hunks of smoked fish. Look up, and on the back counter sit slabs of roasted meats, ready to be shaved and stuffed into sandwiches. Wander a little farther down and you’ll come across puffy personal pies and platters of vibrant salads. You’ve yet to even really consider the lists of options on the menus above the counter — and you already have four or five lunches in mind. How to decide? I can’t help you there. Anything you order will be better than you imagined. —B.R.

320 Sunset Ave., Venice; (310) 314-0320, gjuSta.com. Daily, 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Sandwiches $8-$16; plates $14-$20.

Father’s Office

Despite how much we here in L.A. covet the Father’s Office burger, chef Sang Yoon’s pair of gastropubs still don’t get the press they deserve. Did you know, for instance, that the FO burger was the first truly chef-driven, gourmet burger in the country? (Yes, it came before Daniel Boulud’s DB Burger in New York.) Did you know that before Yoon took over the original Father’s Office in 2000, the word “gastropub” wasn’t really a part of the American vernacular? So many food and drink trends were spawned by this chef and this place that it deserves a plaque, a holiday, a parade. Even without its historical import, either location of Father’s Office is a great place to eat and drink, with fantastic beer selections and a menu of modern bar food that will knock your socks off even if you skip the burger completely. All you have to do is obey the rules: no kids, no table service, no substitutions, no ketchup. Got it? Good, now go pay homage to a piece of American food heritage. —B.R.

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11344 Moorpark St., Studio City; (818) 924-2929, girasolrestaurant.com. Daily, 5-11 p.m.; brunch Sun., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Entrées $16-$38.

Travis Lett’s Gjelina

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320 Sunset Ave., Venice; (310) 314-0320, gjuSta.com. Daily, 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Sandwiches $8-$16; plates $14-$20.

Father’s Office

Despite how much we here in L.A. covet the Father’s Office burger, chef Sang Yoon’s pair of gastropubs still don’t get the press they deserve. Did you know, for instance, that the FO burger was the first truly chef-driven, gourmet burger in the country? (Yes, it came before Daniel Boulud’s DB Burger in New York.) Did you know that before Yoon took over the original Father’s Office in 2000, the word “gastropub” wasn’t really a part of the American vernacular? So many food and drink trends were spawned by this chef and this place that it deserves a plaque, a holiday, a parade. Even without its historical import, either location of Father’s Office is a great place to eat and drink, with fantastic beer selections and a menu of modern bar food that will knock your socks off even if you skip the burger completely. All you have to do is obey the rules: no kids, no table service, no substitutions, no ketchup. Got it? Good, now go pay homage to a piece of American food heritage. —B.R.

1018 Montana Ave., Santa Monica; (310) 736-2224, 3229 Helms Ave., Culver City; (310) 736-2224, fathersoffice.com. Hours vary by location. Entrées $10-$19.

Girasol

When Girasol opened in 2013, you could see what chef C.J. Jacobson was aiming to do. His food was highly influenced by the time he spent at Copenhagen’s Noma, and the beautiful plating and dishes inspired by nature were refreshingly ambitious for this part of town. (In the intervening years Studio City has had a bit of a dining boom — Girasol was at the forefront of that movement.) But back in those early days, there were issues with execution, and the sense I got was that Jacobson’s kitchen staff was not able to live up to his significant ambition. It seems they’ve caught up. Girasol now is serving some of L.A.’s most forward-thinking food. Flavors are delicate and surprising, such as hamachi served in a dazzlingly bright green sorrel broth made piquant with fennel pollen and punctuated by white fish and sea beans. If you’re sick of seeing the same ingredients everywhere, this is the place to come. Almost every dish has an element you may never have encountered before, and Jacobson has inventive ways to present the more common elements as well. That this restaurant has come so far is a testament to a chef who has a vision and stuck with it. We’re glad to see that vision come to beautiful fruition. —B.R.
Core Brews

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Here’s a brew that will “a peel” to you! A tantalizing blend of cocoa nib, vanilla bean and hand-zested California blood orange flavors makes this dude semi-sweet yet silky smooth. Every sip is bursting with creamy, chocolaty, citrusy flavor. And at 6.5 percent alcohol by volume, it’s sure to get your blood pumping.

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CALIFORNIPA™ CALIFORNIA-STYLE
Great. Another West Coast IPA. Nope. This here is 16 ounces of pure CaliforniaIPA. This dude is distinct & diverse, just like the Golden State. We’re talking about a plethora of West Coast hops, malts, & California yeast being handcrafted to create this California-style IPA. So whether you kick it in the SoCal surf or the CenCal turf, the LA smog or the Bay Area fog, this one’s for all the dudes & dudettes in California. ABV is 6.9%.

NEW
DOUBLE TRUNK™ DOUBLE INDIA PALE
They say an elephant never forgets. When it comes to this double IPA, you won’t either. This gentle giant certainly has mad hops, but ferments out dry so it’s not too malty on the finish. Clocking in at 9.4 percent ABV, it’s definitely not for the timid mice amongst you. Put your trunks on and dive in.

NEW
GRANDMA’S PECAN® ENGLISH STYLE BROWN
Well, looks like grandma’s gone nuts. This English-style brown ale hits you upside the head with a nose chock-full of toasted pecan flavors followed by a rich, full-bodied finish. Just like Grandma’s Pecan pie, this baby will have you coming back for more. So, what are you waiting for? Pop the top and give old grandma a kiss! ABV is 6.2%.

NEW
KÖLSCHTAL EDDY® BLONDE ALE
June Gloom got you down? We know, life in SoCal is so hard. Cheer up, buttercup. Kölschtal Eddy is here to make it all better. This brew is an easy going dude, but still has a little “hop” in his step. One sip, and you’ll realize life isn’t so bad. ABV is 5.5%.

GOOD DUDES’ GOOD HUMANS

NEW
SURFRIDER AMERICAN PALE ALE
This is the flagship beer in our Good Dudes’ Good Humans series. The Dudes’ love our oceans, waves & beaches. The Surfrider Foundation shares that love & believes there are so many things we can do together to protect it. A portion of the proceeds from this beer will be donated to the Surfrider Foundation. ABV is 5.2%.

NEW
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Golden Deli

If this list were titled “99 Things to Eat in Los Angeles Before You Die,” the egg rolls at Golden Deli most certainly would be on it. With their shattery golden crust and savory, porky filling, these egg rolls will make you wonder why so many egg rolls in this world are so disappointing when such egg roll glory is possible.

Golden Deli has been humming along in a San Gabriel strip mall for more than 30 years on the strength of those rolls, as well as the reliability of everything else on the long menu, from the pho (mild broth, good flavor) to the bun to the beef stew to the bánh mì. The dining room, overlooked by a giant photo of a waterfall, is perpetually packed. And almost every group of customers that sits down starts their order with these wise words: “We’ll have the egg rolls…” — B.R.

3014 W. Olympic Blvd., Koreatown; (213) 427-0608, illovemole.com. Mon.-Thu., 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri., 9 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sat., 8 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $8.95-$14.95.

Guerrilla Tacos

If you had to show someone what it’s like to live and eat in Los Angeles and you had only an hour to accomplish it, you probably could get the job done with a visit to Guerrilla Tacos. Here’s where you come to eat from a truck, which parks in front of the city’s best coffee (and sometimes wine) shops. It’s a taco truck that started as a cart but likely one day will end up as a restaurant, a place where you might get a waffle with mascarpone and berries to go with your roasted pork belly taco. The tostadas are made with the freshest local seafood, maybe ahi tuna poke with white miso or sesame-crusted salmon with sea urchin. These beautifully made creations from chef Wes Avila defy our expectations of what an incredible meal should be made of and where we should find it, mixing street food with fine dining in a manner that’s totally uncontrived. It’s as L.A. as a dining experience gets, in all the best ways. — B.R.

Check website for times and locations; (323) 388-5340, guerrillatacos.com. Tacos and other items $4-$11.

Guisados

The little Boyle Heights taco shop that could just never seems to lose steam. After expanding in 2013 to Echo Park and setting up shop downtown in 2014, Guisados also recently opened a store in West Hollywood, serving beautiful tacos on handmade tortillas. Some detractors say that all this expansion has somehow made Guisados less legit, but the proof is in the pibil. These tacos are as delicious as ever. The star of the show remains the guisados, and in particular the sampler plate: six smaller tacos, a collection of greatest hits that touches on all the smoky, spicy, saucy goodness this place has to offer. Each vibrant meat (tinga de pollo, cochinita pibil, chicarrón and more) gets its own thoughtful topping — a dab of avo-
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Hirozen Gourmet

Hirozen is rarely listed as one of L.A.’s top sushi restaurants, a fact that might be explained by its slightly confusing nature. Tucked into the corner of a strip mall on Beverly Boulevard, the 26-year-old restaurant at first appears to be a fairly basic neighborhood spot. When people approach it this way, they’re often confused by the pricing (high for a neighborhood joint) or the long list of sushi and sashimi specials and options that venture into fish—you’ve never heard of from Japan. The menu, the quality of the fish and knife work are more in line with the serious sushi bars in town, but Hirozen doesn’t quite look or feel the part. None of this negates the fact that some of the most astonishing sushi meals I’ve had in the past couple of years have been at Hirozen, where an omakase of gorgeous, expertly seasoned and gloriously seasoned nigiri — perhaps black throat perch, or barracuda — will go on and on until you tell them to stop. — B.R.

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Hatchet Hall

What people outside of the South rarely understand is that the best Southern cooking these days is thoroughly modern and ingredient-driven. If there’s any chef in L.A. who knows how to translate that aesthetic outside of its home region, it’s Hatchet Hall’s Brian Dunsmoor. Dunsmoor and his business partners have converted the former Waterloo & City into an incredibly appealing series of dining rooms and bars, with a patio that looks like a garden. It’s an eyebly appealing series of dining rooms and bars, with a patio that looks like a garden. The menu is long and wide-ranging, and cooking these days is thoroughly modern and ingredient-driven.

Huge Tree Pastry

If you’ve never experienced the vast joys of Taiwanese breakfast, there is no better place to dive into sticky rice rolls and warm savory soy milk than Huge Tree Pastry, a small breakfast counter in Monterey Park whose tables are packed with Chinese grandparents reading their morning World Journal. You’ll want an order or two of you tiao, long, fried crullers that are essentially unsweetened doughnuts, and a bowl of sweet peanut milk for dipping, a nourishing elixir that is as delicious as it sounds. Next might be crispy fried turnip cakes embedded inside egg omelets like prehistoric fossils, or a particularly colorful version of fan tuan made with purple-hued jasmine rice wrapped around egg, tangy mustard green pickles, fluffy stands of fried pork floss and another stick of suadero if you so desire. There are saucer-sized, gorditas and thick quesadillas shaped by hand, too, and if you decide to pass on the usual stable of meats, you’ll find stellar vegetarian fillings such as sautéed squash blossoms, potatoes mixed with peppers and the earthy com fungus known as huitlacoche.

El Huarache Azteca

Have you been inside the venerable Highland Park antojitos shack since its recent remodel? The dining room is a bit bigger, the chairs are no longer the folding variety, there’s a sweet new emblem on the wall, and the black-and-white menu looks like something you’d see at a gastropub that serves its burgers with truffle fries. But fear not, preservationists, because the food at El Huarache Azteca is as good as it’s been at any point in its 25 years of history (or at least the ones we can recall). On weekends there is killer barbacoa served with bowls of rich consommé, and every other day there are those famous huaraches, crispy oval masa balls that taste as much of Blake Griffin’s sneaker, layered with velvety beans, Mexican crema, a handful of grated cheese and shredded lettuce, and tender shreds of beef suadero if you so desire. There is no such thing as a sopra-sized sopita or gordita with thick quesadillas shaped by hand, too, and if you decide to pass on the usual stable of meats, you’ll find stellar vegetarian fillings such as sautéed squash blossoms, potatoes mixed with peppers and the earthy com fungus known as huitlacoche.

The Hungry Cat

In recent years, it might have been easy to conclude that the only kind of American seafood restaurant is an East Coast seafood restaurant, given that New England is the most famous. But fear not, preservationists, because the food at El Huarache Azteca is as good as it’s been at any point in its 25 years of history (or at least the ones we can recall). On weekends there is killer barbacoa served with bowls of rich consommé, and every other day there are those famous huaraches, crispy oval masa balls that taste as much of Blake Griffin’s sneaker, layered with velvety beans, Mexican crema, a handful of grated cheese and shredded lettuce, and tender shreds of beef suadero if you so desire. There is no such thing as a sopra-sized sopita or gordita with thick quesadillas shaped by hand, too, and if you decide to pass on the usual stable of meats, you’ll find stellar vegetarian fillings such as sautéed squash blossoms, potatoes mixed with peppers and the earthy com fungus known as huitlacoche.

Never mind the glossier digs; El Huarache Azteca is still the real deal. — G.S.

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history of seafood shacks, but it’s also very far away. The Pacific deserves its own cuisine, and with his Hungry Cat restaurants, chef/owner David Lentz has been a pioneer of exactly that. It’s now been more than a decade since Lentz opened the Hollywood location of the Hungry Cat, serving cold oysters on the half shell and fresh Santa Barbara uni and modern, creative seafood dishes that only sometimes hint at Maine or Massachusetts but more often celebrate the bounty and spirit of the California coast. And so, rather than classic fish-house fare, your mussels are more likely to have apples and almonds in their mild curry broth, your bay scallops served over winter squash risotto with sunchokes and nori vinaigrette. These are bright and airy spaces, perfect for a brunch of johnny cakes with smoked trout salad, or as a place to drop by the bar for a plate of grilled oysters with garlic butter and bacon, and a very good cocktail. —B.R.

1535 N. Vine St., Hollywood; (323) 462-2155. Mon.-Wed., noon-3 p.m. & 5:30-10 p.m.; Thu.-Fri., noon-3 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m.; Sat., 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Plates $10.50-$32, seafood platters $57-$160. thehungrycat.com.

ink.

Michael Voltaggio has a lot going on these days. He has the starring role in a Carl’s Jr. commercial, bucking the trend of that chain’s advertising strategy by appearing with all his clothes on. He’s the co-host of the Travel Channel show Breaking Borders. And he’s reportedly working on a new project in the heart of Hollywood. But ink., his 4-year-old restaurant in Beverly Grove, remains the purest expression of his creative energies, the place to go if you want to taste all the promise that got Voltaggio to this level of fame in the first place. It’s a fun place to eat for the hyper-stylish vibe and customers to match, for the cocktails that manage to turn the main ingredients on their heads (a fruity refresher made from Fernet, for instance) and for food that is one part ego, one part punnery (think potatoes that look like lumps of charcoal and taste the part), two parts style and two parts wild creativity. Dishes you might be used to seeing on other menus here are turned on their head: A Little Gem salad becomes a clever play on a Caesar (and sometimes also a play on the phrase “hidden gem”), and beef tartare comes looking like some sort of winter tundra thanks to scattered plating and frozen powdered horseradish. When Voltaggio is in the kitchen rather than out trotting the globe, his presence in the moody lit window is like a brooding young monarch, back from the wars, overlooking his kingdom. —B.R.

8380 Melrose Ave., Beverly Grove; (323) 661-8865, mvink.com. Sun.-Thurs., 6-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 6-11 p.m. Plates $10-$34.

Jitlada

One of the fun games to play when dining at Jitlada, outside of celebrity-spotting, is to watch as customers around you try to eat the things they’ve ordered after they’ve proclaimed “I love spicy food!” Indeed, it’s become a pilgrimage site for spice seekers, for lovers of Thai food, for those who attach the potency of their manhood to their tolerance of the Scoville scale. The competition for the city’s best Thai food gets fiercer by the day, but Jitlada remains the O.G. of no-holds-barred southern Thai cooking, and its insanely long menu, colorful dining room and Hollywood clientele make it as good a place to start as any when trying to learn the landscape of L.A.’s deep, vast Thai food scene. There are curries here in myriad varieties, complexly spiced salads made with crispy catfish or morning glory, fragrant soups, fish balls stuffed with salted duck eggs, and around 200 other things on this dizzying menu. People come here for the ebullient company of co-owner Sarintip “Jazz” Singsanong as much as for any other reason — once you get in her good graces, there’s hardly a more welcoming place to eat on Earth. —B.R.

5233½ W. Sunset Blvd., East Hollywood; (323) 667-9809, jitladala.com. Tue.-Sun., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5-10:30 p.m. Entrees $10-$25.
no L.A. restaurant currently epitomizes the fun of food and nostalgia and pop culture better than Jon & Vinny’s. At their Italian-American joint across the street from their flagship of awesomeness, Animal, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo have declared their intention to create a restaurant like the ones in which they grew up eating. It’s a place where you can bring the kids and where you might also spot Kanye West and entourage, dining on pizza and pasta and soft-serve ice cream. And, man, what great pizza it is. The L.A. Woman is an instant classic; its crust is firm enough that its burrata topping doesn’t collapse your slice, which can be delivered to your mouth with grace and ease. For the most part, the chefs shy away from the kind of creativity you find across the street. Instead, you get meatballs that are an absolute paragon of the form, a blend of short rib and pork shoulder that’s mild and tangy in all the right ways, served with deep-red marinara. There are touches of L.A. modernism as well, in the marinated Calabrian tuna bruschetta with crunchy mizho-pickled daikon and carrots, and in a few of the non-meaty pastas, which are downright restrained. The thing that shines through is the chefs’ sense of joy, which makes Jon & Vinny’s irresistible.

Kiriko
Kiriko is the place to come if you’re in the mood, say, for kelp-cured barramundi sashimi or Hokkaido “kegani” hairy crab but aren’t up for the formality and austere nature of some of our more precious sushi bars. Indeed, the feel at Kiriko, which has been a stalwart of Sawtelle for 17 years, is that of a small, bustling neighborhood spot, with diners getting to know one another at the sushi bar and owner-chef Ken Namba presiding with warmth and grace. Namba is rightfully best known for his omakase menus, where better-known fish are served alongside special delicacies flown in from Japan. But you can also find good drinking food here, such as grilled fresh bamboo shoots, whose flavor is like a cross between sweet corn and artichoke, or halibut tempura that’s feather-light and burning hot and flecked with shiso. What to drink? A short but smart list of sake by the glass and bottle should suffice, or you could mimic the Japanese businessmen at the sushi bar and round out your night with Champagne.

Kogi BBQ Truck
At this point, Kogi is practically edible academic text, an utterly necessary experience if you want to understand L.A.; our food scene and our most visible culinary troubadour, Roy Choi. The fleet of trucks, which daily appear all over the city, are most famously dispensers of the original Korean taco, a trend that has now swept the globe, for better or worse. At Kogi the existence of the mashup is undoubtedly for the good of us all, the sweet, slightly sour kimchi making beautiful sense nestled against beef short rib or spicy pork and wrapped in a tortilla. The Kogi dog is also a thing of wonder, a snappy hot dog showered in shredded romaine, kimchi and Sriracha. From the burritos to the sliders to the Sriracha candy bar, this is undoubtedly food for the inebriated (booze or weed, pick your poison), but there’s something childishly gleeful about it, too, something that will make you grin and snarf it down even stone cold sober. As a symbol for our city, its diversity, sense of fun and the talent of our people, we couldn’t ask for a better (or more delicious) emblem.

Langer’s Deli
Life is fickle. Things change. There’s not much you can count on. What can you count on? Langer’s Deli. Langer’s will never change, or at least we hope with the sincerest hopes that it will never change. Because as citizens of L.A., we need to be able to stand in that line, we need to be seated in one of those brown vinyl booths, we need to order that pastrami sandwich and get it on that bread served by these people in this room.

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704 S. Alvarado St., Westlake; (213) 483-8050, laangersdeli.com. Mon.-Sat., 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Entrees $7.95-$39.95.

Little Sister
In the two and a half years since it opened, dark and trendy Little Sister has become as much a staple of Manhattan Beach’s main drag as the white wine-and-lobster joints. Chef Tin Vuong, who is in the midst of building a small empire in the South Bay and beyond, pulls no punches with the music (loud hip-hop), the decor or the bold Southeast Asian food. You’ll sit under the back-wall mural of a machine gun spewing vivid butterflies and eat Vietnamese crepes and Myanmar curries and Sichuan noodles and Balinese meatballs. This is not cute American food with Asian accents — there’s a purity of intention that shines through. Dishes are brashly spicy where appropriate, unapologetically funky, busting with flavor. The new downtown location, which is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, is already wildly popular, serving a menu that covers a lot more ground than the original. Downtown office workers are thrilled with the option of congee or cold ma po doufu for lunch, proving yet again that restaurants are often most successful when the chef does whatever the hell he wants. –B.R.

1131 Manhattan Ave., Manhattan Beach; (310) 545-2096, littlesistermb.com. Daily, 5 p.m.-late (last reservation 10 p.m.); Fri.-Sat., 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Sun., three-course prix fixe dinner, 5:30-9 p.m.; lunch: Tue.-Sat., noon-2:30. Entrees $29-$48.

Lukshon
Do people give Lukshon enough credit? Does it come to the tip of their tongue when they think of L.A.’s best restaurants, our true originals, our must-visit places? It should. Sang Yoon’s 5-year-old restaurant blazed a path for the type of exciting, bright, modern Asian cooking at which L.A. excels these days, and Yoon still does that kind of cook-

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Thai cooking, are Noree Pla and Fern Kaewthip, chefs and business partners who decamped from Hoy-Ka Thai Noodle last year to open their own restaurant just east of Thai Town. Pla and Kaewthip were childhood friends in Phuket, eating the same spicy southern Thai food that became the bedrock for their menu at Lu\'v\'Eat. Their trademark dish might be the Phuket crab curry, adapted from Pla’s mother’s recipe and ladled into generous-sized soup bowls. Murky, earthy and stained with turmeric, it hums with the power of a jet turbine, fueled by waves of heat and subtle layers of sweet, salty and sour that creep down the back of the throat. Less spicy but equally fascinating is the shrimp-paste fried rice, which tames the muskiness of its namesake ingredient with steamed vegetables and shreds of palm sugar–candied pork. Even the innocuous-sounding fried chicken, cooked in the style of Hat Yai street vendors, is gloriously unique: brined for 24 hours, fried to a shattering crunch, showered with crispy shallots and served with a dab of sticky-sweet chili sauce. A little more than a year in, Lu\’v\’Eat has already emerged as a true powerhouse in L.A.’s expansive Thai scene. —G.S.

6660 W. Sunset Blvd., Hollywood; (323) 498-5835, luveztwothai.com. Daily, 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. & 4:30-11 p.m. Entrees $8-$18.50.

Mama Joan’s Soul Food
It’s become a bit of a trend in fashionable restaurants to serve chicken skin cracklings: a sheet of brittle, golden skin and schmaltz that you eat like chips and wash down with beer. That’s all well and good, but I’d rather experience that kind of shatter-tiny skin/fat/crisped magic on an actual piece of chicken, which is rare — but not at Mama Joan’s Soul Food. Here, the fried chicken comes with skin so crisp and thin and perfect it will have you swearing off the heavily breaded kind forever. In a city where most soul food is served from steam trays, Mama Joan’s is a welcome change, cooking fried chicken and smothered pork chops and meatloaf to order, along with obviously made-from-scratch classics such as collards, succotash and mac and cheese. The dining room serves as a gathering spot for the neighborhood, and the giant television on the wall distracts only slightly from the friendly, chatty vibe. Popular items tend to run out early, particularly the Friday-served only by a jumble of ceviche, octopus and shrimp aquachile, will have you feeling like a god of the sea yourself. For that, and for the crispy tacos, our loyalty will never waver. —B.R.

3040 E. Olympic Blvd., Boyle Heights; (323) 528-6701. Daily, 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tacos, $1.75-$5.

Maude
To hear its stats, you’d think Maude is a funny guy crashes the rich-person party. In a city where most soul food is served from steam trays, Mama Joan’s is a welcome change, cooking fried chicken and smothered pork chops and meatloaf to order, along with obviously made-from-scratch classics such as collards, succotash and mac and cheese. The dining room serves as a gathering spot for the neighborhood, and the giant television on the wall distracts only slightly from the friendly, chatty vibe. Popular items tend to run out early, particularly the Friday-served only by a jumble of ceviche, octopus and shrimp aquachile, will have you feeling like a god of the sea yourself. For that, and for the crispy tacos, our loyalty will never waver. —B.R.

3040 E. Olympic Blvd., Boyle Heights; (323) 528-6701. Daily, 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tacos, $1.75-$5.

Mariscos El Moreno
At Mariscos El Moreno, a Sinaloan seafood truck that currently parks in a dusty auto-repair yard in Watts, you will encounter something called the botana mixta la morena, an enchanting concoction that even in its smallest portion seems to weigh at least five pounds. The bowl literally brims with raw shrimp, tender octopus and fat, silver dollar–sized scallops known as callo de hacha, each separate texture growing in a murky brown broth zapped with tar-black salsa negra and little floating chiletepin, a tiny red chili that resembles a pink peppercorn but is exponentially hotter and more flavorful. The stuff is like ocean-flavored napalm. Other specialty seafood platters boast flamboyant names and are equally extravagant: pavido navido, guamichilito, el jefe. It’s not uncommon to find El Moreno surrounded by a circle of pickup trucks bumping ranchera music, the passengers lingering on the tailgates clutching BYOB oyster micheladas, like you were invited to someone’s backyard cookout. Even with the untold number of mariscos vendors in Los Angeles, the fresh seafood and outlandishly potent sauces at El Moreno can make the others seem like a folk band playing at a vicious punk concert. —G.S.

10701 S. Central Ave., Watts; (323) 810-1740, instagram.com/mariscos_moren. Thu.-Mon., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Seafood dishes $3-$25.

Mariscos Jalisco
Don’t be fooled by the imitators, the lesser producers, the many other tacos dorado de camarón in L.A. The version at Raul Ortega’s Mariscos Jalisco, the Boyle Heights mariscos truck, is far and away the king of fried tacos, in this city and perhaps in the country. Don’t be confused by the crowds surrounding the other trucks nearby. Go directly to this corner of Olympic Boulevard and wait as they fold the shrimp into a tortilla and fry the whole thing in hot oil, pulling it out at the perfect point of golden crisp, then coat it with creamy slices of avocado and perr red salsa. If you’re in the mood for a feast, the Poseidon tostada, loaded with a jumble of ceviche, octopus and shrimp aquachile, will have you feeling like a god of the sea yourself. For that, and for the crispy tacos, our loyalty will never waver. —B.R.

3040 E. Olympic Blvd., Boyle Heights; (323) 528-6701. Daily, 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tacos, $1.75-$5.

Maude
To hear its stats, you’d think Maude is probably the most upright, upscale restaurant in town. An ultra-famous celebrity chef, a Beverly Hills address, a reservation system that makes it extremely difficult to get into, a tasting-menu format that sometimes revolves entirely around white truffles — all of this would have you believe this is the type of place that could replace Tavern on the Green in one of those ‘80s movies where a funny guy crashes the rich-person party. So it’s kind of wonderful to visit Maude and discover it’s just a very nice family restaurant. Which is appropriate enough, given that it’s named after chef Curtis Stone’s grandmother. But beyond that, Stone is often there chatting to customers at one of the tiny place’s 13 tables, and his brother might be the guy delivering your food, which comes on old flowered plates. That the food is quietly astonishing, that it’s centered every month around a seasonal ingredient, and that on non-truffle months these nine-course tasting menus are a rela-
tive bargain — these things only add to the charm of the place. Maude is an intensely personal, unpretentious restaurant. It’s also one of the loveliest dining experiences in the city.—B.R.

212 S. Beverly Drive, Beverly Hills; (310) 859-3418, mauderestaurant.com. Tue.-Sat., 5:30-10 p.m. Prix fixe menu around $125 including tax and tip (more for special menus).

MB Post
David LeFevre’s large, loud, perpetually packed New American restaurant went a long way toward redefining the center of Manhattan Beach when it opened in 2011. Five years later, with two sister restaurants now open on the same strip, MB Post feels like it is the center of Manhattan Beach, its high ceiling and long, wooden communal tables serving as the new, youthful soul of this neighborhood. The menu is an international hodgepodge, with everything from charcuterie to kimchi fried rice to truffle-laced fried chicken. But whether it’s a cauldron of mussels swimming in a deep green curry with Chinese sausage and sticky coriander rice, or lettuce wraps filled with deeply caramelized pig jowl, or that kimchi fried rice topped with a runny egg and large hunks of Korean pear, everything LeFevre cooks here is done with an eye toward bold, balanced flavor. It’s a great place for a casual dinner with lots of wine, a great place to meet at the bar for a cocktail, a fun way to bookend a weekend beach day (brunch is great, too) and a great symbol of what this neighborhood has become.—B.R.

Mélisse
It’s easy to become jaded about luxury fine dining, to forget the pleasures of eating in an elegant room with formal service (Captains! Sommeliers and assistant sommeliers! Runners who swoop in to drop food or bus your tables as if they’re performing ballet!). If the great things about dining in this manner have slipped your mind, it really is worth a trip to Mélisse, Josiah Citrin’s 1104 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica; (310) 395-0881, melisse.com. Tue.-Thu., 6-9:30 p.m.; Fri., 6-10 p.m.; Sat., 5:45-10 p.m. Tasting menus $135-$275, more with supplements.

Mozza Group
It’s hard to overstate the import and influence of Nancy Silverton in the grand story of L.A. dining, and you needn’t look farther than her three restaurants on the corner of Highland and Melrose to understand why her cooking is so admired and imitated. Co-owned by Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich, Silverton’s Mozza Group includes Pizzeria Mozza, Osteria Mozza and Chi Spacca, and there’s so much to love between these three spots that it’s hard to know where to begin. Perhaps with the pizza at Pizzeria Mozza, which remains one of the best pizzerias in the country, each pie lovingly crafted from Silverton’s now-famous dough and topped with the best Italian and Californian ingredients. Next door at Osteria Mozza, the grandest of the bunch, you can dine on cheese from the mozzarella bar (sometimes flown in from Italy that day), sip on amaro

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from the amaro bar and indulge in gorgeous pastas and deeply flavored meat dishes. And while Chi Spacca’s immensely talented opening chef, Chad Colby, has left to pursue other meaty dreams, the salumi plates and bisteca Fiorentina porterhouses are still being delivered beautifully. Individually, these restaurants are breathtakingly good. As a whole they’re an achievement worthy of awe. — B.R.

Osteria Mozza: 6602 Melrose Ave., Hancock Park; (323) 297-0100, osteriamozza.com. Mon.-Fri., 5:30-11 p.m.; Sat., 5-11 p.m.; Sun., 5-10 p.m. Entrees $19-$38.


Chi Spacca: 6610 Melrose Ave., Hancock Park; (323) 297-1333, chispacca.com. Mon.-Thu., 6-10 p.m.; Fri., 6-11 p.m.; Sat., 5-11 p.m.; Sun., 5-10 p.m. Entrees $18-$220.

Myung In Dumplings

Los Angeles is heaven for dumpling lovers, and while most of our bounty can be found in the San Gabriel Valley, there’s at least one reason to venture to Koreatown on your next dumpling crawl. Myung In, a small and sparse affair in an Olympic Boulevard strip mall, is one of those places that epitomizes the beauty that can be achieved when an establishment dedicates itself primarily to one foodstuff. Even when you take all the Chinese and Japanese dumplings in L.A. into account, Myung In’s various fried, steamed and soup-immersed dumplings rank among the city’s best. There’s spicy soup and fried rice to fill out the offerings, but take your cues from Anthony Bourdain, who is smiling down at you from a huge photograph on the wall — a memento of when he ate here for the second episode of his CNN show, Parts Unknown — and order the large, steamed mandu. The experience is much like eating a doughy, pork-filled softball. — B.R.

3109 W. Olympic Blvd., Koreatown; (213) 381-3588, myungin.site.mobi. Daily, 9 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Entrees $8-$12.

n/naka

When you’re in the realm of ultra-expensive meals — the ones that hit well over three figures before you’ve even considered a glass of wine, let alone tax and tip — it can be hard to discern true value. Of course, it depends what’s important to you. Luxurious surroundings? Obsequious service? If your main interest is in food, in particular gorgeously plated, highly fussed over, brightly seasonal, modern Japanese cuisine, we recommend n/naka, the quiet Palms kaiseki restaurant run by Niki Nakayama. Nakayama says she may be the only female kaiseki chef in the world — kaiseki being the formal, multicourse, seasonal style of Japanese dining. Regardless of whether she is unique in that regard, her restaurant and food (much of it grown in the restaurant’s garden) certainly are singular in Los Angeles. The 13 courses will take you through different aspects of the season, be it a “modern interpretation of sashimi” composed of kanpachi with bell pepper gelee, jalapeño gelee and avocado sauce, or her “chef’s choice dish,” which is usually a stunning spaghetti with shaved black abalone, pickled cod roe and Burgundian truffles. The quiet room and humble service have a calming effect, allowing you to fully concentrate on the meal before you. As a way to blow a couple hundred bucks, you could do a lot worse. — B.R.

3455 S. Overland Ave., Palms; (310) 836-6828, n-naka.com. Wed.-Thu., seatings begin at 6:30 p.m.; Fri., seatings begin at 6 p.m.; Sat., seatings begin at 5:30 p.m.; reservations required. $185 per person.

Night + Market

Thai food in Los Angeles is evolving in ways other cities could only dream about, and the most exciting evolution is the rise of Kris Yenbamroong and his Night + Market projects. What started as an experiment of sorts, a food and art space attached to the Yenbamroong family’s long-standing Talesai in West Hollywood, has morphed into two full-fledged powerhouse restaurants. Night + Market Song, which opened in 2014, brought Yenbamroong’s funky, deeply personal northern Thai cooking to Silver Lake, where the neighborhood rejoiced in the colorful room with its plastic beads and topless Cindy Crawford poster and its list of affordable, mainly natural wines. Here, along with the spicy larb and khaosoi and pad khee mao he was known for, Yenbamroong debuted a fantastic fried chicken sandwich topped with pickled and jalapeño, as well as “Bangkok mall pasta” spicy spaghetti, showcasing the direction he’s going in as a cook — Thai-based but increasingly borderless. You’ll hear this food is blisteringly spicy; you’ll hear all about the (currently unavailable) blood and MSG soup and the (always delicious) smashed water bugs. Don’t be fooled into believing this is gimmickry — what makes the food here so exceptional is the extreme care taken, the roasting of chilies, the layering of flavors. In the past year, Night + Market quietly took over the Talesai space from which it sprouted, cementing of a new age, one that’s thrilling over the Talesai space from which it sprouted, cementing of a new age, one that’s thrilling — B.R.

Night + Market: 9043 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood; (310) 275-9724, nightmarketla.com. Mon.-Thu., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Mon.-Fri., 5:30-10:30 p.m. Dishes $9-$20.


Papilles

Step through the door of the woefully undersung Papilles Bistro, in the corner of a strip mall tucked into the armpit of Franklin Avenue and the 101 freeway, and you find yourself in a homey space that’s reminiscent of a neighborhood restaurant in New York or Paris, the type of place untouched by time or trends. Chef Tim Carey serves an affordable daily prix fixe menu that nods to France’s bistro movement, combining serious gastronomy with the more casual feel of a bistro. For dinner, you might start with a velouté, perhaps buttermilk squash or cauliflower. It’s here that you’ll begin...
to taste Carey’s training, in particular his time spent at Patina. In the impossibly silky cauliflower velouté, garnishes of pepitas, pomegranate and tiny pickled cauliflower florets all burst in different ways, the pickled cauliflower in particular releasing just enough fruity, puckery vinegar to make your palate tingle. Proteins, such as fish or flat-iron steak, are cooked so perfectly that it’s like eating in another era, one in which technique was king and creativity came a distant second. Papilles really is that mythical beast: the underrated and mainly undiscovered restaurant. –B.R.

6221 Franklin Ave., Hollywood Hills; (323) 871-1928, papillesla.com. Tue.-Fri., 6-9:30 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 5:30-9:30 p.m. Prix fixe menu $37.

Park’s BBQ

To say there’s a lot of barbecue in Koreatown would be a grand understatement. Enthusiasts will debate the merits of different Korean barbecue establishments with a fervor similar to the way Texas barbecue partisans duel with St. Louis–style lovers. That’s part of what makes Park’s BBQ so remarkable — for the most part, the consensus is that Park’s is the king of Koreatown barbecue. The difference is in the meat, which is meticulously sourced. That upgrade in quality shows even if you don’t opt for the pricy American Wagyu but even more so if you do. Like the meat, everything here is extremely high-grade, from the banh-chon to the savory pancakes to the fantastic steak tartare, which comes with juicy slivers of Asian pear. For K-pop fans, there’s probably no place in town you’re more likely to run across a beloved pop star, and even if you don’t, the walls are crammed with enough celebrity photos to make up for it. If you have time for only one Korean barbecue outing this year, well, we feel bad for you. But you probably should make it Park’s. –B.R.

955 S. Vermont Ave., Koreatown; (213) 380-1717, parkebq.com. Sun.-Thu., 11 a.m.-mid.; Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-1 a.m. Entrees $25-$35.

Petit Trois

Yes, there’s the omelet: the egg itself presented as pure texture, a lightly frothy yellow solid with absolutely no visual or tactile clue that it has ever touched a pan, its interior gloriously creamy. And there’s the burger: a mashup of cultures, taking inspiration from the classic American cheeseburger as well as from chef Ludo Lefebvre’s homeland in the form of Bordelaise sauce with a smidge of foie gras and piles of caramelized onions. There’s the escargot, drenched in butter. The croque-monsieur, like everything here, is better than the actual Parisian food it aims to parrot. In this tiny slot of a space, Lefebvre has created a slice of Paris in a former Thai restaurant in a strip mall, a casual, bustling room that feels like an everyday celebration. It is simultaneously one of the most modest and most ambitious restaurants L.A. can claim. It’s a love letter to another city, written in food, by one of our greatest culinary poets. –B.R.


Philippine the Original

Philippine the Original is mainly billed as the birthplace of the French dip sandwich, and there’s no doubt that’s quite an achievement (though if you ask the folks over at Cole’s, they’ll claim the honor for themselves). But what we find so endearing about Philippe’s, so wonderful, so essential is the sensation of wandering through some kind of time warp. Philippe’s opened in 1908 and has added some modern amenities in its 108 years: There are a few neon signs behind the counter along with the wooden ones, and in late 2014 the restaurant even started accepting credit cards. But the experience of standing in line, ordering your sandwich and having the meat carved in front of you (go for lamb, double-dipped, and add a magenta pickled egg on the side for fun), then finding a place in the massive dining room, is unchanged. Early in the morning, this is a great place to find a kind of club for old-timers and municipal workers, and the breakfast is unbelievably cheap. The whole place oozes a down-and-dirty charm, the true vintage soul of Los Angeles. –B.R.

1001 N. Alameda St., downtown; (213) 628-3781, philipes.com. Daily, 6 a.m.-10 p.m. French-dipped sandwiches $6.50-$8.

Pine & Crane

Pine & Crane has become the go-to restaurant for diners who want the pleasures of great Taiwanese cooking without a trek to the San Gabriel Valley. At least that’s the dominant narrative; people who love Pine & Crane know that it’s much more than simple convenience that brings them to this sunny Silver Lake dining room. Yes, there’s the option to get your scallion pancakes, mapo tofu and dan dan noodles without battling the 10 freeway, and the beef noodle soup is as warming and comforting as any version in town. But the real draw here is the super-fresh veggies sourced from owner Vivian Ku’s family farm. Take a look in the cold case next to the counter, where you’ll find dishes such as wood ear mushroom salad flecked with sweet red pepper, or grassy, fresh pea shoots scented with garlic. There’s a lovely selection of loose leaf teas for those who care about such things, and delicious passion fruit iced tea for those who don’t. –B.R.


POT

The menu at Roy Choi’s POT has gotten a little smaller and more manageable in the past year. The hours have changed, too; what started as an all-day, every-day affair is now open only four days per week. But the soul of the restaurant off the lobby of the Line hotel remains the same. There’s the pothead theme, complete with tons of drug references and menu puns more suited to middle school (the poke is called Poke Me). The hot pots still make up a large part of the offerings, and favorite dishes — such as the Beef Bep Bep, which offers yuzu-rich rice slathered with uni and “dynamite” sauce —
haven't gone anywhere. But the restaurant now offers more traditional main courses, which use Korean flavors but aren't as tied to tradition. A hickory-smoked duck breast comes with Korean maple barbecue sauce, and there's a pork chop that's more American in its origins than anything else, despite a soy ginger glaze. POT, which started out as a love letter to Korean-American youth culture, may be settling in to its less glamorous role, that of a hotel restaurant. That we should have such weird, cool, enjoyable hotel restaurants in L.A. is a reason for pride in and of itself. —B.R.

351 W. Seventh St., Koreatown; (213) 688-3030. eatatpot.com. Wed.-Thurs., 5-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5-11 p.m. Entrees and hot pots $16-$48.

Providence

There are only a handful of restaurants in Los Angeles that aim for the same heights Providence does, and perhaps none that achieve those lofty aims quite so well. Michael Cimarusti’s seafood-focused fine-dining standard bearer excels at the formal service that much of the restaurant world has abandoned. There’s a lot of joy to be found on the plate as well. No kitchen does the flurry of amuse-bouches as well as Cimarusti and crew, from a darling taco within a nasturtium leaf to cigars made of black truffle. You could come here for all the eggs (or risotto, or pasta — we prefer soft eggs) showered in an obscene amount of black truffle. You could come here for all kinds of reasons — for the cheese cart, for the wine list, for the opulence of the room. The pleasures of this type of beauty and professionalism will have you wishing it wasn’t so very rare. —B.R.

5955 Melrose Ave., Hollywood; (323) 460-4710. providencela.com. Mon.-Fri., 10:30-11 p.m.; Sat., 5-10 p.m.; Sun., 5-9 p.m.; lunch, Fri., noon-2 p.m. Three-course prix-fixe menu starts at $110.

Ración

Ración is the Spanish word for a larger dish, which purposefully distinguishes the restaurant from the vast proliferation of tapas spots, but this charming Pasadena eatery doesn’t offer any simple boquerones, nor will you be able to get a platter of paella. Instead, brilliant orange, citrus-cured prawns might lay draped across your plate, nestled against a creamy, thick sauce based on ajo blanco, the white Spanish soup made of crushed almonds and garlic. Loretta Peng and Teresa Montaño’s ode to the Basque is as personal as a restaurant gets. It’s a passion project, radiating the warmth that comes only from a business powered by heart and soul. Ración’s modest but elegant dining room is as unassuming as it is comfortable, but it’s the cooking that truly sets this place apart. Milk-poached asparagus comes smothered in a coating of black garlic goop, looking both beautiful and menacing (but tasting only beautiful). This is food more touched by the best of international fine dining than it is by the jumble of small plates seen everywhere these days. Unlike so many of the kale salads and bowls of blackened Brussels sprouts, which taste good but could be made by any of a thousand cooks, the food at Ración could only be here, in this place, from these people. —B.R.

119 W. Green St., Pasadena; (626) 396-3030. racionrestaurant.com. Dinner: Mon.-Thu., 5-10 p.m.; Fri., 6-11 p.m.; Sat., 5:30-11 p.m.; Sun., 5:30-10 p.m.; lunch: Tue.-Sat., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Plates $8-$46.

Redbird

When Redbird opened in December 2014, it felt like a necessary addition to downtown L.A., which needed a major, shiny new restaurant to anchor its burgeoning dining scene. It needed a place where the well-heeled would be happy to flock pre-theater, a restaurant for business or pleasure, a one-stop-pleases-all kind of place that nonetheless feels special. Redbird is a restaurant for when the mood strikes to live high on the hog, a place for eating in a decadent and turnips, the pig fat crisped just so at the edges, the interior juicy and piggy. The $110, 36-ounce porterhouse could feed a table of four and provides some deeply gratifying bites of beef, tender and charred and bloody. Built in the former rectory and courtyard of the now-deconsecrated cathedral of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles known as Vibiana, the space has a glorious ode to the past and present of downtown Los Angeles. —B.R.

144 E. Second St., downtown; (213) 788-1191. Redbird la. Dinner: Sun.-Thur., 5-11 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5 p.m.-mid. Lunch: Tue.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Entrees $25-$118.

République

If you were to ask about our favorite restaurant in Los Angeles, République might not be the first place that comes to mind. Yet it’s amazing how many smaller “favorites” are wrapped up in the layers of this place. Favorite room? Absolutely — carved from the courtyard and façade of the cast-iron pot, which started out as it is a lovely venue for a casual cocktail and a platter of oysters at the bar. You can do whatever you want with this restaurant, as long as you can get a reservation — it turns
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Ricky’s Fish Tacos
Ricky Piña’s Baja-style tacos are the stuff of legend, the delicate white fish cooked to an ideal golden brown, topped with chopped cabbage and pico de gallo and folded into a warm flour tortilla. Ricky’s started as a makeshift parking lot taco party and then morphed into a truck (thanks to pesky laws about how and where you can sell food), and it provides the part of town where East Hollywood and Los Feliz and Silver Lake meet with the best lunch that $3 can buy. There’s creamy white sauce and spicy red salsa to drizzle at your discretion, there are shrimp tacos if you want to mix it up, and there’s Piña himself, one of the friendliest taqueros around. Follow his jubilant Twitter feed for info about what he’s serving and when — and also the occasional buy-three-get-one-free deal. —B.R.

Roció’s Mexican Kitchen
Roció’s Mexican Kitchen is a modest affair. The small wedge of a restaurant from renowned mole queen Roció Camacho operates mainly as a takeout place where you order at a counter, and it’s possible to pick up a burrito and never get wind of the more exciting possibilities of eating here. But there’s way more to this place than meets the eye. It wouldn’t be a Camacho restaurant without a focus on moles, and the Oaxaqueño, in particular, is fantastically silky and has a depth of flavor that’s downright profound — this is mole that might be cast in the starring role of some magical-realism novel, the dark sorcery used to seduce a young lover. Camacho’s touch with more standard menu items makes them utterly memorable. The empanadas are so light and crispy they’re almost ethereal in their shatter crunch. The aguaclíche has fat shrimp bathed in a scarlet sauce spicy enough to alter your consciousness but also so tangy and balanced that it will have you coming back for bite after excruciating bite. If this food were served in some fancy room somewhere, the salmon would be cooked a little more genteely; the ribs under a sticky, spicy, aromatic glaze would perhaps be more tender. There would be wine as delicate as the flavor of the musky huitlacoche sauce you get ladled over mahi mahi. But the wonderful thing about Roció’s Mexican Kitchen is right there in the name. This is Camacho’s kitchen, and it’s not built on any premise other than the cooking of an incredibly talented chef. —B.R.

Rustic Canyon
Jeremy Fox is one of those chefs about whom other chefs gush, and Rustic Canyon is the restaurant where you’ll find many of those other chefs when there’s cause for celebration or need of inspiration. Since Fox teamed with Rustic Canyon’s owners, Zoe Nathan and Josh Loeb, in 2013, the restaurant has gotten better and better, and Fox’s ideas seem to be more distilled than ever. There are longtime favorite dishes, such as the bright shellfish pozole verde, which is both soothing and exciting. But with each new visit, you’re bound to find something that will send you back for bite after excruciating bite. If this were a restaurant with a wine list, the salmon would be cooked a little more genteely; the ribs under a sticky, spicy, aromatic glaze would perhaps be more tender. There would be wine as delicate as the flavor of the musky huitlacoche sauce you get ladled over mahi mahi. But the wonderful thing about Rustic Canyon is right there in the name. This is Camacho’s kitchen, and it’s not built on any premise other than the cooking of an incredibly talented chef. —B.R.
Shunji

Once you’ve found your way inside the odd, round building on Pico Boulevard and made your way to your seat inside the sparse circular room, turn your attention to the blackboard on the wall. You’ll need some time to ponder — the daily specials list at Shunji can be a tad overwhelming. A waiter will bring you a menu board and prop it on a chair so you can peruse the tiny handwriting that crams every corner of the board’s surface. Your mind will swim, trying to take in all the sushi and sashimi options, as well as numerous creative Japanese small plates. Don’t sweat it — instead, go ahead and order the omakase, which is the clearest expression of chef Shunji Nakao’s vision and will include much of the best of what’s on the board anyway. In the winter, that means soft persimmon in tofu paste; in summer the chef’s famed agedashi tomato tofu, which is not tofu at all but compressed tomato turned to a tofu-like texture, lightly fried and set in a dashi broth. And always, it means luxuries such as monkfish liver topped with caviar, and pristine, glistening raw fish, draped across barely warm rice. —B.R.

Sotto

Is it possible that Sotto has been open for five years? That’s usually the age at which a heavily decorated restaurant begins to advance from the realm of really, really good to damn-near-legendary status, a restaurant where trends and upstart chefs can be traced back to and mapped out like a sprawling family-tree diagram. Even in its earliest days, Sotto was much more than a Neapolitan pizza restaurant, though it was and is making some of the finest pies in the city. You could find interesting wines from overlooked regions of Italy, cocktails that captivated even the geekiest of amaro nerds and beautiful renditions of both hearty handmade pastas and wood-grilled meats before both of those became de facto requirements in L.A.’s rustic-Italian scene. Steve Samson and his team of chefs offer both classic standbys, such as grilled pork meatballs, and seasonal dishes, like risotto stewed with squash and roasted chestnuts. It’s not easy for restaurants to balance consistency with creativity year after year. Sotto pulls off that feat with ease. —G.S.

Spicy BBQ

Spicy BBQ has come to feel like a kind of second home, complete with a warm, no-nonsense maternal figure, a small cluttered dining room and the gratification of soulful home cooking. That this particular home cooking is the often burningly spicy curries, soups and dips of northern Thailand makes no difference to its emotional content. It’s intensely comforting food. The khao soi is sweet and funky, its coconut-rich broth topped with house-made pickles and crunchy fried noodles. The nam prik ong pork dip is like a salty, spicy sludge of ragu with cooling cabbage and cucumber on the side. The pork patties are meaty pucks garnished with fried garlic and mint. Chef/owner Kanlaya “Nong” Sriyana is known to bring back ingredients from her homeland in order to create dishes you can’t easily get in the United States — turn directly to the back of the menu for the good stuff. Oh, and

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Squirl

Judging by the amount of press Sqirl chef/owner Jessica Koslow has received in the past couple of years, you’d think she ran some sort of upscale restaurant, the kind that usually gets all the accolades and attention. Instead, on an out-of-the-way corner in East Hollywood, she’s been busy revolutionizing breakfast. Sqirl has expanded since it opened, but at its heart it’s still a fairly simple coffee shop and café, one that just happens to serve some of the most delicious food around. It’s hard to resist ordering the sorrel pesto rice bowl every time you eat there, for its utterly perfect combination of Kokuho Rose brown rice, French sheep feta, preserved Meyer lemon, sorrel pesto and a poached egg. But if you can tear yourself away from the rice and venture into the daily specials, you’ll be handsomely rewarded. There are breakfast hash dishes served in mini cast-iron skillets made with the season’s best veggies. There are delicate daily pastas after 11 a.m., along with creative lunch dishes such as sweet-breads with blood orange and wild greens. The avocado toast actually makes the avocado-toast craze seem sane. The lines to order at the counter are long (particularly on weekends), the parking is difficult, the seating scarce. The hassle is worth it, always. –B.R.

720 N. Virgil Ave., #4, East Hollywood; (323) 284-8147, sqirla.com. Mon.-Fri., 6:30 a.m.-4 p.m., Sat.-Sun., 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Entrees $7.50-$14.

Summer Rolls

Summer Rolls, which used to be called Nem Nuong Ninh Hoa, is mainly known, unsurprisingly, for its summer rolls. How you do them is up to you: You can get them pre-rolled or order the nem nuong ninh hoa plate, which will give you a large tray of charcoal-grilled sausage, meatballs and super-thin and crispy fried shrimp egg rolls. Rice paper, herbs and cold lettuce come alongside so you can wrap all this goodness up yourself, to your own liking. If you have kids who like to play with their food, there’s hardly a more enjoyable lunch outing. But Summer Rolls is also a place to come for central Vietnamese specialties such as bánh bò, tiny steamed rice cakes with ground shrimp, scallions and croutons, which are almost as fun to scoop out of their individual saucers as the namesake dish is to roll. –B.R.

9016 Mission Drive, Rosemead; (626) 280-3370. Thu.-Tue., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $6.99-$8.50.

Sushi Gen

There are many reasons to stand outside Sushi Gen in Little Tokyo and wait your turn for a table or a spot at the sushi bar. In a city full of sushi — rarefied sushi, expensive sushi, crappy sushi — Sushi Gen bridges the gap between quality and affordability. And it’s a pretty cool experience, to boot. Request a seat at the sushi bar and marvel as the sushi chefs dole out some of the highest-quality, lowest-cost raw fish in America. Rumor has it that it’s the restaurant’s buying power and 36-year longevity that affords them this miracle, a long-standing relationship with purveyors that gives Sushi Gen first choice of the fish coming into L.A. The lunch specials and dinner plates (not available at the sushi bar) deliver the best bang for your buck, but we prefer to sit and talk to the chefs, seek out the best of the day and order à la carte. It’s no wonder half the chefs in town name Sushi Gen as a favorite hangout, a place where you can revel in L.A.’s sushi wealth without needing to have a ton of wealth yourself. –B.R.

422 E. Second St., downtown; (213) 617-0552, sushigen.com. Mon.-Fri., 11:15 a.m.-2 p.m. & 5:30-9:45 p.m.; Sat., 5-9:45 p.m. Dinners $20-$39; sushi market price.

Szechuan Impression

There are times when browsing the menu at Szechuan Impression — the acclaimed Alhambra restaurant most often compared to the San Gabriel Valley’s other temple of Sichuan cooking, Chengdu Taste — that the non-Chinese diner can feel like he’s reading a list of inside jokes rather than dishes: “Poto- toa Strips on Street Corner,” “Big Mouth Ginger Frog.” “Fiery Temper Goose Intestine” and, perhaps most famously, “Cinderella’s Pumpkin Rides.” What these signify, though, is Szechuan Impression’s homestyle cooking, which invokes serious nostalgia for those well-versed in the food of Sichuan. No translation is need for soft-skinned wontons bobbing in a pool of lip-numbing chili oil, thin sheets of garlic-brained pork belly or cumin-blasted bits of lamb impaled on individual toothpicks. In proper Sichuan fashion, many dishes here will leave your mouth smoldering, but there are plenty of others that showcase the more subtle, aromatic side of China’s famously fiery province. –G.S.

1900 W. Valley Blvd., Alhambra; (626) 289-6222, szechuanimpressionalhambra.com. Mon.-Thu., 5-11:30 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5-10:30 p.m.; Sun., 11 a.m.-3:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m. Entrees $19.99-$28.99.

Tacos Leo

It’s 2 a.m. You’re hungry. You might not be totally sober. You crave tacos. In these situations, many people would settle for whatever floppy tortillas and dry meat happen their way. But in Los Angeles, there is Tacos Leo, the shining beacon of al pastor. There are few taco trucks in existence that offer such consistent and reliable comfort. And it would be worthwhile to break down all the admirable components of Leo’s $1 tacos: the warm and pliable tortillas, the char-kissed adobo are long (particularly on weekends), the parking is difficult, the seating scarce. The hassle is worth it, always. –B.R.

1900 W. Valley Blvd., Alhambra; (626) 289-6222, szechuanimpressionalhambra.com. Mon.-Thu., 5-11:30 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5-10:30 p.m.; Sun., 11 a.m.-3:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m. Entrees $19.99-$28.99.
Tacos los Poblanos Estilo Tijuana
One of L.A.’s most visceral food pleasures involves driving a few miles southeast of USC, where two of the city’s best taco vendors set up shop nightly a mere two miles apart. Both offer Tijuana-style tacos made with superlative carne asada — proper carne asada, taco aficionados will insist — which is unfurled on a charcoal grill in long meaty sheets, then hacked into manageable morsels on a large wooden chopping block. Both vendors pat out tortillas by hand and cook them to order on a large griddle, and both load their tacos with a scoop of thick, buttery guacamole, a sprinkle of chopped onion, deep-fried eggplant, a splash of cilantro-heavy hot sauce and a hit of cabbage slaw, deep-fried onion, yam and green onion. The caveat, of course, is that lines have increased as well.

Tel Aviv Grill
When assembling your sandwich at Tel Aviv Grill, a perpetually crowded Israeli shawarma shop inside an Encino strip mall, try not to be indecisive. Sure, the process begins innocently enough: A counterman pulls a fresh sheet of pillowy pita bread from a small domed oven in the corner, then shaves off an ample portion of chicken shawarma — juicy bits of meat, crispy on the edges and saturated with spices — from a rotating spit that’s as tall as Ryan Seacrest (most days there are two spits standing next to each other, sizzling and spinning in unison). Then the hard part comes: You are presented with about a dozen bowls of sauces, toppings and other accoutrements — a build-your-own wrap situation. The counterman flicks his tongs with staggering speed, loading up your sandwich with a slug of velvety hummus, tart cabbage slaw, deep-fried eggplant, a splash of cilantro-heavy hot sauce and a hit of amba, the addictive pickled-mango condiment that’s pretty much indispensable. You’ll start to feel the impatient stares of those waiting in line behind you. Shawarma this good has a following, and they don’t like to keep waiting. —G.S.

Terrine
Chefs have long been playing in the fun space between California cooking and the grand French brasserie, but with Terrine it feels as though Kris Morningstar has finally hit on something solid, something more than playtime. His take on the French classics is stunning: The French onion soup is as deep and rich and laden with cheese as any you could find in Paris, and his grand charcuterie plate is a thing of wonder. But he’s also inventing classics of his own. The crispy pig ears served in strips with aioli on the side are like frites from piggy heaven. The garbure, a stew of duck confit and white beans, expresses the very quintessence of duck, its deep brawny soul, its particular gamy perfume. The room, with its burnished mirrors and heavy silverware, feels exactly classy enough (without ever veering toward stuffy), and the back patio, with its glorious Javanese bishkowood tree, is one of L.A.’s loveliest outdoor dining options. The cocktails are great, the wine list is fantastic, and the service has just the hint of formality you’d expect from the charming Frenchmen, Stephane Bombet and Francois Renaud, who oversee it. —B.R.

Torigoya
Before it moved from its corner spot on Second Street in Little Tokyo to the second floor of Weller Court early last year, Japanese yakitori specialist Kokekokko — recently renamed Torigoya — was known as one of the most nepotistic restaurants in town. Unless you were familiar with the chef — or held one of the coveted black ceramic plates handed out to regulars — you weren’t getting your mitts on those grilled chicken hearts glazed with thick taré sauce. Maybe it’s the new general manager, or perhaps master chef Tomohiro Sakata softened a bit with age, but things changed at the new location. The plump Jidori chicken, butchered daily, is as pristine as ever, and you can work your way through what seems like almost every part of the bird in a single meal: wing, thigh, breast, liver, gizzard, tail, etc. — each skewer glistening and beautifully charred, dripping with juice and liquid fat, served with a dollop of sharp hot mustard or a paste made from pulverized ginger and green onion. The caveat, of course, is that the lines have increased as well. But once you’re perched atop one of the yakitori bar’s wooden stools with a tall frosty Kirin and an egg yolk–topped bowl of braised chicken over rice, you understand why diners were willing to put up with the elitism in the first place. —G.S.

(Next to the Trader Joe’s on Culver Blvd.) facebook.com/kzoroculvercity  @kzororestaurant
Trois Mec
Have we tired of Trois Mec? Has the novelty of eating in a tiny room behind the guise of a Raffalo’s Pizza sign worn off? Does the food seem less thrilling, the concept less fresh? Not a bit. If anything, recent meals have been more exciting and more innovative than when Ludo Lefebvre, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo first won our hearts three years ago with their weird experiment of a restaurant. Over five glorious courses, you’re likely to find delicious oddities such as brightly acidic beet tartare with horseradish crème fraîche and a wedge of latke-like potato pancake, or tender chunks of bay scallop and foie gras swimming in a matsutake mushroom and miso broth that’s flecked with pickled sunchoke and hazelnut oil. With almost every dish, a discovery is made; taste itself feels new and vibrant again. The experience will cost you around $100 per person, including tax and tip (bought ahead of time as a non-refundable ticket), the music will be loud, there are no menu choices. Which still feels as vital and riveting as it did from the get-go. —B.R.
716 N. Highland Ave., Hancock Park; no phone, troismec.com. Mon.-Fri., 6-10 p.m. Prix fixe dinner $85 + 18 percent service charge.

Tsujita
What is the best ramen in America’s best ramen city? It depends, I suppose, on your mood, on your stylistic preference, on many things. But the consensus among the throngs of diners lining up outside Tsujita is that this is the best ramen in L.A., and we tend to agree. Once inside (the wait is long — it’s worth it), you’ll feast on Hakata-style tonkotsu ramen or perhaps get your dip on with the fantastic tsukemen, its dipping broth thick and silky and rich. With a ramen annex across the street and a sushi restaurant down the block, the Tokyo-based company is slowly taking over this stretch of Sawtelle, and Tsujita Sushi’s lunchtime offerings are outstanding in terms of raw-fish value. Perhaps once in a while we’ll make that detour, but for the most part you can find us up the street waiting in line and then slurping on ramen, intensely thankful for our noodle riches. —B.R.

Union
There are few restaurants as tiny, bustling and convivial as Union, Bruce Kalman’s 2-year-old Cali-Italian restaurant in Pasadena. Large family groups commute at long tables, the babies among them happily gobbling meatballs as their parents drink interesting Italian red wines. It’s the type of place where people stop in for a quick plate of pasta and a glass of wine at the bar, a perfect first-date spot, a perfect 100th-date spot. Starters, such as a beautifully spiced cotechino sausage served with braised collard greens and a soft poached egg, are inventive but comforting above all else. The handmade pastas are the star of the show, however, from the simplest tomato sauce-dressed spaghetti chitarrata to heavier ragus. This is the type of restaurant we all wish we had within walking distance of our homes: laid-back, friendly, relatively affordable and with food you could eat happily over and over again. —B.R.
37 E. Union St., Pasadena; (626) 795-5841, unionpasadena.com. Mon.-Fri., 5-11 p.m.; Sat., 4-11 p.m.; Sun., 4-10 p.m. Entrees $14-$36.

Wexler’s Deli
From just about the day Wexler’s opened, L.A.’s food obsessives started asking the question: Is this now the best pastrami sandwich in town? In light of our city’s devotion to Langer’s, the question seemed to be here yet it isn’t unreasonable. At its best, the pastrami at Wexler’s rivals any in this city or any other: deeply rich, slightly smoky, sweet at its edges with a prickle of pepper and clove. Located in a stand in Grand Central Market, Wexler’s is highly traditional, an old-school Jewish deli, pure and simple. Chef Micah Wexler smokes his own fish and cures his own pastrami, makes his own pickles and generally obsesses over the quality of every last detail. There may be no better outcome of all that obsessing than Wexler’s lox: Slick, supple and delicate, the cured salmon tastes like a rushing mountain river in the same way an ultra-fresh oyster tastes like the soul of the ocean. —B.R.
317 S. Broadway, downtown; no phone, wexlersdeli.com. Mon.-Fri., 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Sandwiches and bagels $4-$13.

Wolvesmouth
Wolvesmouth isn’t quite a restaurant. You can’t walk in, you can’t make a reservation, there are no prices (you pay what you want). But it’s also more, now, than just a supper club. Chef Craig Thornton, who for years ran Wolvesmouth out of an Arts District loft, has recently moved into an East Hollywood house that he bought, gutted and retrofitted especially for the purpose of feeding people his extended, symphonic tasting menus. If you can get a seat at the long table that runs down the center of the house — alongside a giant open kitchen — you’ll have access to some of the most exciting, inventive food being served anywhere. A nine-course meal might start where most would end — with rib-eye, because, Thornton reasons, “This is the time in the meal when you’re most hungry, so I want to give you the heartiest thing now.” It won’t look like any rib-eye cap you’ve had before, though, and the flurry of ingredients the chef mentions as he drops plates in front of guests aren’t detectable, either: “Creamed kimchi, Asian pear, sabayon, squid ink dumpling, shallots…” It barely matters that it looks more like modern art than food. It’s delicious; it makes you think and it makes you feel. To get a seat, you sign up to receive invites, then respond to those invites, then cross your fingers. The competition is fierce. The rewards are huge. —B.R.
East Hollywood (no exact address given); wolvesmouth.com. Pay what you want.
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