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MILAGRO MEANS MIRACLE
Someplace along the line during my college career, I got sidetracked from my writing and literature major and wound up taking a lot of religion and philosophy classes. They had little to do with the writing career to which I aspired, but nonetheless I allowed myself the pleasure of spending a few hours each week deeply immersed in existential questions and word games (if you've never studied philosophy, you should know that it's about 50 percent deep thoughts and 50 percent convoluted arguments about semantics).

Little did I know that those philosophy classes would prime me, better than most of my writing classes, for one of my most important professional duties. Because I spend a lot of time each year pondering this highly philosophical question: What does the word “essential” mean? I've written about this conundrum in past introductions to our annual 99 Essential Restaurants issue, about how “essential” differs from “best,” about the balance between fashion and history. And I've thought a lot about how the list itself reinforces the very idea of a place being essential — some restaurants are essential in part because they've spent so much time on this very list. There's a conundrum worthy of Descartes.

Generally, though, the way we have defined the word “essential” has remained fairly unchanged, from a philosophical standpoint. Until now. Because this year, during my annual “what does essential mean?” rumination, I began to question the idea that something brand-new could be considered essential. Exciting? Delicious? Wonderful? Of course. But essential? That's a stretch. In fact, it could be argued that standing the test of time is one of the most important factors in something becoming essential. I adore newness as much as the next restaurant obsessive, but again, “adored” does not necessarily equal “essential.”

And so, we've made a change. In order for a restaurant to be considered for the 99 Essentials list, it must have been open for a full year prior to the list's publication. When thinking this over, there was one major downside that arose, and that was the loss of our ability to showcase what is great about eating in L.A. right now, in 2017 specifically. In order to hold onto that of-the-moment factor, we've added a second list: The Freshmen 15. These are restaurants that have opened (or, in one case, changed dramatically) in the past year that are especially exciting, the ones that have the potential to become essential.

There are some major upsides to this change, the most important of which is that it freed up some space to celebrate more of L.A.'s classic eateries, places that act as the heart of their neighborhoods. Eagle Rock has a number of newer, trendier restaurants, but there's nowhere you can learn more about the soul of this part of town than at 63-year-old Colombo's Italian Steakhouse & Jazz Club. How could anyone deny the essential nature of Pico Rivera's Dal Rae? One of our city's greatest cultural gifts is the quantity and vitality of our vintage restaurants, and it's a pleasure and honor to recognize more of them this year. I'm sure there are food snobs who will quibble with some of these choices, but I've decided that snobbery isn't nearly as fun as inclusiveness.

At its core, the 99 Essentials list is about providing a guide to the city, to the places that we think you simply must go in order to understand and appreciate our edible riches. This year I was helped by our Food Editor Katherine Spiers, our Managing Editor Drew Tewksbury, our contributor Garrett Snyder and our Editor-in-Chief Mara Shalhoup. As always, our food photographer Anne Fishbein has provided beautiful art to illustrate the issue. I'd like to offer my immense gratitude to everyone who helped to put this year's 99 Essentials together. And also to the owners and chefs of the restaurant listed here, for making Los Angeles such a thrilling, delicious, wonderful place to live, eat and philosophize. —Besha Rodell
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71Above
Located on the 71st floor of the US Bank Tower, 71Above is attempting to be a landmark restaurant for Los Angeles. Its name is rendered in marble and metal on the floor at the entrance, the ceiling is decorated with hexagonal sculptural forms, the waiters have the suave formality of first-class airline stewards. The dining room circles the inner perimeter of the building, so no matter where you're sitting you're in range of the floor-to-ceiling windows, beyond which Los Angeles spreads out in all its twinkling glory. In the kitchen is Vartan Abgaryan, who came to 71Above from a stint at Cliff’s Edge in Silver Lake, where he raised the quality of the food considerably. Abgaryan’s cooking never seemed quite right at the neighborhood-centric Cliff’s Edge — it was too pretty, too formal for that sprawling space. At 71Above, his penchant for high-end drama on the plate is much more at home. You can have oysters poached in Champagne and topped with uni and caviar, or a standard but luxurious steak tartare. An old-school foie gras terrine shares menu space with a decidedly modern parsnip dish, the vegetable roasted in duck fat and served whole on the plate surrounded by dollops of strained yogurt and date puree. 71Above excels at presenting a menu that might appeal to old-school and new-school luxury tastes alike. In this era of “casual” $200 meals, there’s a lot to be said for a place that manages to feel truly special. —Besha Rodell
633 W. Fifth St., downtown; (213) 712-2683, 71above.com. Mon.-Wed., 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Thu.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-mid.; Sun., 5-11 p.m. Three-course prix fixe $70.

Baran’s 2239
On most nights at Baran’s 2239 in Hermosa Beach, you’ll find first-time restaurateurs and brothers Jonathan and Jason Baran pouring drinks or greeting diners while their collaborator, chef Tyler Gugliotta, runs the kitchen. Though the waitstaff at Baran’s 2239 is quick to point out that much of the menu’s produce hails from the chef’s family farm, it soon becomes apparent that Gugliotta’s inventive global cooking doesn’t need to hang its hat on the farm-to-fork ethos alone. For a local hangout, the food at Baran’s 2239 is progressive, delicious and unexpected. The compact, one-page menu pulls you in immediately. Gugliotta’s version of focaccia is soft and supple, with a dense strata of Parmesan cheese and a side of whipped “umami butter,” an indulgent spread supercharged with sun-dried tomato, capers and olives. A hamachi crudo, tricked out with a colorful aji amarillo and passion fruit, nods toward both Nobu and Peru, while Caribbean-leaning jerk chicken wings come with a sweet mango dipping sauce to tame their habanero-powdered heat. The brothers Baran were shrewd enough to realize they’d wrangled a chef brimming with creativity and the skills to back it up, then had the prescience to let him cook whatever he wanted. —Garrett Snyder
502 Pacific Coast Highway, Hermosa Beach; (424) 247-8468, barans2239.com. Sun.-Thu., 5-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5-11 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Plates $11-$95.

Destroyer
Jordan Kahn’s new restaurant is a far cry from his most recent project — the much-missed Red Medicine — in almost every way. Where that was a big, flashy, trendy restaurant, this is a sparse place with most of its seating outdoors, where you order from a counter and take a number to your table. What hasn’t changed is Kahn’s modern-artist’s eye for presentation, his sense of drama on the plate and on the tongue, and his penchant for making incredibly delicious food. In fact, if anything his food has become more delicious at the same time as it’s become more casual. Much of it is built on the premise of layers of flavors, and of-
The restaurant serves creative pastries and textures that you didn’t know they had. An order of the three-piece dark meat plate, you could just sit here and eat this chicken until it turns a dish associated with luxuriousness into something that feels downright healthful. Whitener shows a keen understanding of textures, especially when it comes to his gorgeously complex salads. A plate of Little Gem hearts dressed with a sort of five-spice ranch is pure crunch, speckled with crumbled blue cheese and flecks of dehydrated egg cream, comes under a blanket of perfectly arranged radishes, with sprigs of dill at the edge placed in such a way as to make the perfect Instagram photo. It tastes pretty swell, too. —B.R.

Erven
Omnivorous chefs making plant-based cuisine is perhaps the year’s biggest trend (Erven’s website calls it “coincidentally vegan”), but at Erven, former Saint Martha chef Nick Erven pulls from ingredients flavors and textures that you didn’t know they had. The restaurant serves creative pastries and juices and a bunch of salads during the day, but the nighttime menu is where the real thrills lie. Kale cavatelli comes in a stunningly bright “tomb yum gravy,” along with squash, hen of the woods mushrooms and fresh peas, Job’s tears, gooseberries, frozen cream. You will see easily 20 or more dishes that spread across your table like puzzle pieces. You could just sit here and eat this chicken until it turns a dish associated with luxuriousness into something that feels downright healthful. Whitener shows a keen understanding of textures, especially when it comes to his gorgeously complex salads. A plate of Little Gem hearts dressed with a sort of five-spice ranch is pure crunch, speckled with crumbled blue cheese and flecks of dehydrated egg cream, comes under a blanket of perfectly arranged radishes, with sprigs of dill at the edge placed in such a way as to make the perfect Instagram photo. It tastes pretty swell, too. —B.R.

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Citrus, nasturtium and kumquat on snapper crudo storm. It’s tempting to find a label that applies to Meehan and Langley’s very personal project — the laid-back neighborhood gem, the freewheeling chef’s counter, or maybe the ambitious temple of haute cuisine — but it’s probably more accurate to simply call it a well-polished restaurant. —G.S.
5722 Melrose Ave., Hollywood; (323) 971-4160, kalirestaurant.com. Lunch: Mon-Fri., noon-2 p.m.; dinner: daily, 6-9 p.m. Entrées $26-$36; five-course tasting menu $65.

Kato
What makes Kato — named after the Green Hornet’s masked sidekick — so improbable? Put it this way: If this restaurant were a superhero, its power would be invisibility. Shoehorned between two Mexican restaurants in a two-story mini mall, Kato’s blank storefront is no more than 10 feet wide. A scrawl of pale pink cursive on the glass front door is the sole signifier that you’ve arrived. The extent of Kato chef-owner Jonathan Yao’s experience amounts to two stages (the industry-speak equivalent of an internship). Yet Yao exhibits an almost preternatural knack for weaving together subtle Talijanese and Japanese flavors in ways that are at once elegant and unpretentious. Perhaps the most surprising thing about Kato is the chef’s choice tasting menu. A five-course dinner here will cost you around $49 and a dessert). It’s probably worth twice the price. —G.S.
11925 Santa Monica Blvd., Savetelle; (424) 535-3041, katerestaurant.com. Tue.-Sat., 5:30-10 p.m. Prix fixe menu $49.

Lalibela
If you have spent any amount of time eating in L.A.’s small but robust Little Ethiopia neighborhood, you might be familiar with the cooking of Tensage Beletehew, a matronly grandmother from a small town in northern Ethiopia. She’s cooked in the community for more than a decade, at Little Ethiopia stalwarts Rahel and Marathon. Over the years, Beletehew has attracted something akin to a cult following among local diners, and when she arrives at your table at Lalibela, brandishing a sizzling platter of dorek tibs — butter-sauteed cubes of beef flecked with herbs — you’ll understand why her new restaurant already has amassed a roomful of dinner regulars. There are crispy, house-made sambusas, triangle-shaped pastries filled with lentils and onions and paired with a swipe of bright green jalapeño sauce. Lalibela serves many of the Ethiopian staples common everywhere, but its delicate, subtly spiced details set it apart. It’s the type of family-run jewel you might dream about encountering, a place where recipes are passed down through several generations, and the grandmother in the kitchen tends to pots that have been simmering for days. —G.S.
1025 S. Fairfax Ave., Carthay; (323) 965-1025, lalibela.com. Daily, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Entrées $12.95-$29.95.

Michael’s
It’s a little silly to pretend that 38-year-old Michael’s is a new restaurant. But the reinvention of Michael’s is so radical that we decided it belongs in the freshmen class. That reinvention rests mainly on the hiring of Miles Thompson, the young chef who used to run Allumette in Echo Park and then left town for a couple of years. Thompson’s cooking was always assertively modern, but in the time he’s been gone from L.A. it’s also become more refined, more clever and more umami-driven. This food is cool to look at (in some cases for reasons that are almost subversive), but it isn’t so cerebral that it becomes a killjoy. Pure pleasure appears contrast to the milky cheese. Thompson’s arrival at Michael’s offers hope that, rather than shut down our venerated institutions, we might honor them by moving steadily forward, keeping the components that are worthy of preservation (in this case, the iconic, irreplaceable glamour of the restaurant’s leafy patio) and installing youth and vitality where it’s needed. —B.R.
5:30-10:30 p.m. Mon.-Thu., 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat. 5:30-10:30 p.m. Shared plates $15-$45.

Salazar
Above all, Salazar is a triumph of atmosphere. Walking through the gates into the garden dining area from the somewhat grotty intersection of Fletcher Drive and Ripple Drive is like stepping through a portal into a desert fantasy. It’s not too slick — the muted pastel chairs look as though they were pulled from a 1980s high school cafeteria, the sandy dirt underfoot gives everything a slightly dusty vibe — but it is beautifully laid out and designed. Chef Esdras Ochoa takes his inspiration from Sonora, Mexico: The tacos come on freshly grilled, slightly stretchy flour tortillas, and you can taste the smoke of the grill on the meats; dribble the very good house-made hot sauce over them, and they make for an exceedingly satisfying few bites of food. The carne asada has a garlic char, the al pastor a hint of pineapple sweetness. Every now and then, a restaurant can rise above the sum of its parts and be perfectly suited for its exact moment in time. Right now, in Los Angeles, Salazar is that restaurant. —B.R.
2490 Fletcher Drive, Frogtown; salazarla.com. Tue.-Thu. & Sun., 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri., 10 a.m.-mid. Tacos $3.75, plates $12-$35.

Shibumi
Chef David Schlosser is presenting a singular vision at Shibumi, and if you get on his wavelength, this place can seem like stepping through a portal into a different world. His food is built upon a base of savory egg custard, its delicate floral flavor shimmering at the edge of your consciousness. Grilled pork and beef are presented so simply but are of such high quality and have been cooked so well that you’re forced to ponder the elemental wonder of deeply flavored flesh and fat, its animal funk and tang. Shibumi is the result of one chef’s years-long quest come to fruition, a focus on bringing something precious carefully across an ocean and laying it in front of us on polished vintage cypress. —B.R.
815 S. Hill St., downtown. (213) 285-7923, shibumidtla.com. Tue.-Sun., 6-10:30 p.m. Plates $6-$52.

Winsome
Winsome would make a great set for a fashion shoot, especially in the daytime, when light streams in and illuminates the blond wood ceilings and booths, and the long counter that curves around the bar and open kitchen. The hanging plants are draped just so; the wallpaper against the back wall is printed with a scene of fat-bottomed figures picnicking in a lush, green park. Winsome is put together by Marc Rose and Med Abrus, the guys behind the Roosevelt Hotel’s laud-
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Adana
Sitting almost in the shadow of the Bur-bank Ikea, just across the Glendale city line, sits one of Greater L.A.'s best Middle Eastern restaurants, though the type of Middle Eastern food served at Adana is a little hard to define. The Armenian-American-Persian-Turkish-Georgian menu is broad and beautiful. For kebab lovers, the grilled meats over rice are tender, and the rice is fluffy and fragrant. The barbecued tomato you can — and should — order on the side is smoky and flavorful. Many devotees of the place come here for kebabs, and the kebabs alone would be reason enough to visit (hint: get the Cornish hen). But chef and owner Edward Khechemyan has more to offer than just the standards here. Order the pasus dolma, an Armenian version of the ubiquitous rice-and–grape leaves dish, and be rewarded with a delicious jumble of lentils, kidney beans, garbanzos and tomatoes, wrapped in tender cabbage leaves with a hint of pickle and spice. Try the kashke-bademjan, an Iranian dish that usually comes as a pasty eggplant spread topped with whey and fried shallots but is served here as thin slices of fried eggplant cooked to their sweet, sticky essence. If you stick to the appetizers (and it is a wholly fulfilling way to eat if you do), your meal will almost certainly be vegetarian and you’re unlikely to even notice. What you will notice is that this is perhaps the most interesting, soulful Middle Eastern food around. —Besha Rodell
6918 San Fernando Road, Glendale; (818) 843-6237, adanakabob.com. Daily, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Appetizers $5-$11; kebab plates $14-$19.

Alimento
We adored Zach Pollack’s small, Cali-Italian Silver Lake restaurant when it opened in 2014. Despite being a little too loud, it was exactly the type of intimate, quality restaurant the neighborhood needed. But over the last two years, something remarkable has happened. Alimento has gotten better. And better. To the point where, now, we’d 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 escolar crudo with eggplant and fennel pollen — but Pollack seems to have ramped up his cooking, refined his flavors and taken more unexpected turns, and newer menu additions live up to those early successes’ precedent of greatness. There’s a bracing, Italian-leaning Caesar salad that makes glorious use of white radicchio’s natural bitterness and its compatibility with sharp cheese. Pastas remain flawless. The braised-lettuce bruschetta utilizes the creamy smash of burrata in a way you’ve never experienced, and that’s saying something in a town overrun with burrata-on-toast variations. Is it still too loud? Possibly, though Pollack has made an effort to implement sound-absorbing solutions. Either way, you’ll be too busy swooning over the food to notice. —B.R.
1710 Silver Lake Blvd., Silver Lake; (323) 928-2888, alimentola.com. Sun. & Tue.-Thu., 5:30-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-11 p.m. Plates and pastas $8-$19; entrees $29-$78.

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. (In today’s restaurant market, 15 years practically is all of civilized history.) That it is such a classic Italian eatery, complete with no-nonsense, charming professional waiters, probably explains much of its timeless feel, as does the room full of older customers, many of whom come here every week and sit at the exact same table. (The people-watching at Angelini is outstanding, made all the easier because the tables are so thoroughly crammed together.) The exceptional pastas, still — even in this age of handmade pasta bounty — are 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 enjoying a long and fruitful marriage. —B.R.
7313 Beverly Blvd., Fairfax; (323) 297-0070, angeliniosteria.com. Tue.-Thu., noon-2:30 p.m. & 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Fri., noon-2:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m.; Sat., 5-11 p.m.; Sun., 5-10:30 p.m. Pastas $18-$30; entrees $26-$45.

Animal
Now that its owners, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo, are bona fide restaurant czars, Animal can be examined from a sociological viewpoint. It is 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 — which are nonetheless quality-focused above all else — are ubiquitous now, and you can thank Animal in large part for that fact. That it has barely changed in its nine years of existence and yet still seems so current may 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. You need 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 obsessions could also deliver delicacy and balance in a snap pea panzanella, or a hamachi tostada with yellowtail collar with yuzu kosho and walnut pomegranate on a spiced beef flatbread or a tiaan Rollich continues to turn out some of L.A.’s most exciting cocktails), 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 but also pampered. –B.R. 8700 W. Third St., Beverly Grove; (310) 859-9859, aocwinebar.com. Mon., 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Tue.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sat, 10 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Entrees $13-$72.

Apple Pan
Some restaurant experiences are simply a right of passage for L.A. food lovers, and the tense wait for a stool at Apple Pan’s U-shaped counter is one of those experiences. Opened in 1947, the burger joint has barely changed in its 70-year history. Once you swoop in and grab your seat, your choice is simple: hickory burger or steak burger? If you’re looking for a touch of smoky barbecue flavor, go for the former; if you’re more of a purist, the latter. There are some non-burger sandwiches on the menu, including simple egg salad or tuna salad, but it’s unlikely that’s why you’re here. The no-nonsense waiters will ask you gruffly if you want anything else when you finish your classic, immensely satisfying burger. The correct answer is, “Apple pie please, à la mode.” Gobble it up, pay your bill (they accept cash only), and get out of the way so one of the people waiting along the back wall can get their taste of edible American history. –B.R. 10801 W. Pico Blvd., West Los Angeles; (310) 475-3585, Sun.-Thu., 11 a.m.-1 a.m. Burgers and sandwiches $5.50-$8.

Báco Mercat
One day the city of Los Angeles may well rename this part of downtown “Centeno-ville” for the delicious influence chef Josef Centeno has brought to the couple of blocks where his five 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 cafe, and PYT, his newer ode to vegetables, will show you how to appreciate a turnip as you’ve never appreciated a turnip before. But Báco 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 báco, a flatbread/pita arrangement that smothers soft bread with tangy sauce with meaty meat, whether it be beef tongue 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 Abkhazian chilli sauce is tangy, fresh and perry; vegetable dishes such as roasted romanesco with trisvio and pea tendrils remain utterly original in the face of an onslaught of derivative vegetable arrangements elsewhere. Be it yam, pea and pomegranate on a spiced beef flatbread or a yellowtail collar with yuzu kosho and walnut vinaigrette, something at Báco Mercat will get you, and get you good. –B.R. 408 S. Main St., downtown; (213) 687-8808, bacomercat.com. Mon.-Thu., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m.; Sun., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Plates $7-$64.

Bar Amá
Los Angeles has a lot of pride when it comes to our Mexican food, so whenever our friends return from SXSW extolling the virtues of Tex-Mex, it’s not uncommon to
We are excited to announce one of the most awaited branch Kang Ho Dong Baekjeong - IRVINE. It’s going to be open on early April 2017. Our Irvine location will have a Full Bar ready for the public to enjoy while waiting for their turn to savor and experience another level of Korean BBQ food.

2016 LA Weekly’s 99 Essential Restaurants

As far as we know (at press time, the restaurant was briefly closed for renovation), the walls of Kang Ho-dong Baekjeong are still adorned with comic book–style illustrations of Kang-Ho Dong, the chain’s charismatic Korean wrestler/owner/mascot, sweatily grappling pigs into submission, as if your dinner is here because he personally defeated it. However it got here, it’s delicious, especially when washed down with beer or with ice-cold soju that turns to jelly when it hits your glass.

When you arrive at your table in the cavernous, bare-bones room, your meal will already be partially set up. Around your circular table, which has in its center a charcoal-burning grill, will be various sauces and salads, a slice of pumpkin and other banchan. Around the grill will be a trough of egg and another of corn and cheese, which will cook slowly once the meat you’re about to order hits the grill. Choices here are fairly easy — various cuts of beef or pork, or perhaps a set meal of one or the other (or both). The set meals offer a variety of cuts; we suggest the beef meal over the pork for quality, but go piggy if you desire. Either way, it’s a bargain — the smaller meal (there are two sizes) will easily feed three people, and it comes with a bubbling vat of kimchi stew to whet your appetite. At its heart, Kang Ho-dong Baekjeong is a beer and meat hall, plain and simple. If you like your beer and meat with charcoal smoke, cheesy corn and a soundtrack of loud K-pop, this is the place for you.

- Besha Rodell, LA Weekly
deliver a skeptical side-eye. In recent years we’ve seen some expats from the Lone Star state mosey up to our coast, like Home-State’s decent breakfast tacos to Los Feliz, but Josef Centeno’s ode to Tejano cuisine is more our vibe. While Bar Amá looks to Texas for influence, it has a style all its own. From the savory short rib chalupa with tangy cabbage slaw to the Tex-Mex fried chicken, which is actually a deep-fried Cornish game hen dusted with cumin, the menu is heavy but incredibly delicious. Slow-roasted carnitas tacos and enchiladas are great, as is to be expected, but the real gem of the menu is the hearty cauliflower with cilantro pesto, cashews and cotija. Wash it all down with craft beer or the signature cocktails, which often pair citrus and tequila, and you’ll feel ready to ride any bull the day puts in your way. If you’re feeling brave, there’s the big bowl of molten queso and crisp chips, which, if Friday Night Lights is to be believed, is sacrosanct in homes from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande. You don’t mess with Texas, but we’re glad Centeno did anyway.

—Drew Tewksbury

118 W. Fourth St., downtown; (213) 687-8002, bar-ama.com. Mon.-Thu., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. & 5:30-11 p.m.; Fri., 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5:30 p.m.-mid.; Sat., 11:30 a.m.-mid.; Sun., 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Entrees $9-$44.

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 communal 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 is currently on a sabbatical, spending time at a Buddhist temple in the southern part of South Korea, but he’s left the cooking in the capable hands of his business partner and co-chef, Matthew Kim. And the cooking is still incredible: Handmade pasta ribbons support a kaleidoscope of celery and celeriac: thinly pureed celeriac, pickled julienned celery, crispy chips made from celeriac and a dusky powder they call “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 being put to use, including a few dishes with Job’s tears, which you may have seen sold as Chinese pearl barley. They’re best here in the dish called noorook, which also has farro and kamut, and is mixed with roasted koji beet cream, concentrated kombu dashi, seeds, nuts, finger lime and rose onion pickle. Baroo is a weird, exceptionally personal, only-in-L.A. kind of treat. Is there any better kind?

—B.R.

5706 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; (323) 929-9288, baroola.strikingly.com. Tue.-Sat., noon-3 p.m. & 5-9 p.m. Plates $9-$15.

Beijing Pie House

Los Angeles County has an abundance of Chinese restaurants, representing perhaps every region of mainland China, and Taiwan too. Beijing Pie House is a great place to learn about food traditionally made and eaten in Northern China. It’s heavy on lamb, pastry and noodles, and the vegetables are mostly served cold and sometimes lightly pickled. The cabbage is a great mystery. Served chopped and tossed with oil and Sichuan peppercorn, it is perhaps the best presentation of cabbage I’ve ever come across, even this year, when the cruciferous vegetable is having a moment at restaurants further west. It’s also a great introduction to Sichuan peppercorn, which strikes fear in many hearts (mine included) but in truth offers a complex flavor, not just searing heat. It does make your water taste a little funny for a bit. It’s totally worth it. But the must-get dish is the meat pie. Get the lamb and green onion version. It’s about the shape of a hockey puck, and served outrageously hot. Turn it up vertically on your spoon and take a little nibble off the top to let out the steam. Wait a beat, and then get into this dish that was created for cold-weather living but is so good that it’s a hit even in L.A.

—Katherine Spiers

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The Bellwether

The Bellwether is the brainchild of Ted Hopson, a journeyman L.A. chef who most recently worked under Sang Yoon at Father’s Office and Lukshon. The Studio City restaurant might seem to have the DNA of half the gastropubs in town, but it nails the small details most places overlook. Hopson is what you might call a chef’s chef, and he and executive chef John Cho weave solid and inventive cooking techniques into even the most commonplace dishes. The French fries here are brined, steamed, frozen and fried, part of a three-day process that yields long, crispy batons as fluffy as a baked potato inside yet shatteringly crunchy outside. Ruby-red squares of bigeye tuna sashimi arrive crowned with a raw caper-and-olive relish and confit fennel with Calabrian chilies, a small meditation on puttanesca. Humble potato salad is glitzed up with fat coins of Yukon potato, smoked salmon roe and truffle vinaigrette. It’s not always useful to read too much into the meaning of a restaurant’s name, but in the case of “bellwether” — “one that leads or indicates trends” — the definition seems an apt description of what Hopson has accomplished. The Bellwether takes what we’ve come to expect from a neighborhood restaurant and adds another layer of delicious polish. —Garrett Snyder


Bestia

Four years after opening its industrial-chic doors in the Arts District, Bestia remains one of L.A.’s few true perennial hot spots, and it still manages to thrill trend seekers and serious food nerds alike. The winning formula, concocted by Sprout restaurant group and chefs Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis, consists of a buzzing warehouse space in the bottom of a loft building down one of the Arts District’s darkest streets, aggressively cheffy Italian cooking, and stellar drinks both at the bar and on the wine list. This is a profoundly fun place to eat, the energy in the room matching the gleeful combinations on the plate, such as slow-roasted lamb neck with baby fennel, pickled sunchokes and black sesame, or the perennial favorite of chicken gizzards with roasted beets and Belgian endive. The pastas remain some of the best in town, or 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 a practical impossibility. It’s not hard to see why. —B.R.


Gourmet Fiery Foods

Gourmet Fiery Foods www.AllSpiceCafe.com

Golden Chile Award
Best Hot Wings

Beijing-Pie-House/1581255432710. Tue.-Sun., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. & 5-9 p.m. Dishes $4-$11.

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 and 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 how much a narrow focus on quality and consistency resonates with all types of Angelenos. —B.R.

2717 W. Olympic Blvd., #108, Koreatown; (213) 380-1113, beverlysoontofu.com. Daily, 10:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Entrees $9.95-$23.95.

Bigmista’s Barbecue

They say that L.A. doesn’t have good American barbecue. They say it’s because we don’t understand the traditional barbecue regions. But what if L.A. is its own barbecue region? One unobehinden to rules and territorialism. We invent religions in Southern California all the time — why can’t we invent new barbecue? Neil Strawder and his wife, Phyllis, have done just that. Though they have some family in Texas, they make the barbecue they and their customers want to eat. The ribs tips here are sticky with caramelization, and the brisket is perhaps the best in L.A.: not too smoky, never gratuitously fatty. The Strawders are all-American success stories, too: They started with a smoker on the balcony, moved on to farmers markets and now have two brick-and-mortars. It’s downright inspiring. —K.S.

2121 E. Seventh Place, downtown; (213) 514-5724, bestiala.com. Sun.-Thu., 5-11 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5 p.m.-mid. Entrees $16-$65.

Beverly Soon Tofu

Beverly Soon Tofu’s 31-year legacy 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 and 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 how much a narrow focus on quality and consistency resonates with all types of Angelenos. —B.R.

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Bigmista’s Barbecue

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still pretty grubby, with seats at the outside counter or behind the restaurant, at a long table in a shack. It’s part of its charm. —K.S.

14742 Oxnard St., Van Nuys; (818) 785-4086. Mon.-Fri., 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Dishes under $10.

**Broken Spanish**

There are many Mexican restaurants in Los Angeles that will deliver traditional tastes of the culinary treasures of Latin America. Broken Spanish is not one of them. Instead, Broken Spanish provides a sampling of the thrilling approach to contemporary Mexican cooking, and it wouldn’t be out of place in Mexico City in the high-roller neighborhood of Polanco or in Mexico’s remote table outposts of Baja’s Valle de Guadalupe wine region. But why travel when Broken Spanish brings together Latin America’s up-to-the-millisecond food scene, filtered through an Angeleno palate. It was Mayor Eric Garcetti who once suggested that L.A. was the northern capital of Latin America (sorry Miami!), and Broken Spanish makes his theory truer than ever. Chef Ray Garcia is a lifelong Angeleno and Eastsider trained in fine kitchens around the city, including a long stint running Santa Monica’s Fig. At Broken Spanish, Garcia’s intensely flavorful dishes push the limits of the food’s Mexican lineage. There are tamales with umami flavors of lamb neck and king oyster mushroom; yellow beef pibil, dusted with ocho achiote spices; and chile relleno coated with a creamy soubise sauce (perhaps a subtle reminder of France’s escapades in Mexico long ago). Then there’s the unmistakable red snapper, fried and encrusted with salt — an almost paleolithic specimen barring its teeth — laid upon leeks and green clamato. Pair your dinner with a wide array of Mexican wines, including selections from Baja’s earthship-shaped winery Akchia and Las Nubes’ hillside vineyards, or maybe a mezcal cocktail, and experience the full breadth of the modern Mexican movement. —D.T.

1050 S. Flower St., downtown; (213) 749-1460, brokenspanish.com. Sun.-Thu., 5:30-11 p.m. Entrees $31-$60.

**Burritos La Palma**

What differentiates a burrito and a taco? It’s a question that has launched a thousand food-nerd fights, but the unsatisfying answer is: It depends. The burritos at El Monte’s Burritos La Palma have won taco awards, and they are about the same size as Texas breakfast tacos. Maybe the reason these particular burritos are so beloved in L.A. is because of their size — after all, this is a taco town. The signature burrito here is stuffed with birria — the beef version, not goat, even though the restaurant originated in the state of Zacatecas, where they do use the more traditional goat meat. Order two or three at a time, either all filled with birria or with a combo of chicken tinga, carne deshebrada with potatoes, or gelatinous chicharrones. They can be ordered topped with sauce and melted cheese, too, at which point we have to circle back and ask: what’s the difference between a burrito and an enchilada? —K.S.

5120 N. Peck Road, El Monte; (828) 350-8286, burritoslapalma.net. Mon.-Thu., 11 a.m.-7 p.m., Fri-Sat., 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sun., 10:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Dishes under $10.

**Cacao Mexicatessen**

If you don’t live in Eagle Rock, the first thought you might have upon entering Cacao Mexicatessen is, “Man, I wish this was in my neighborhood.” The deli/restaurant/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 carnitas), mole fries, the lightly fried avocado or unti tacos. But this place is as much about the feel as it is about the food. Families cram into booths and feast on tacos. There’s a long bar where you can sit and eat and drink from the rotating selection of craft beers on tap, or the wine list, which has a heavy focus on Mexico’s Valle de Guadalupe. You 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 that they have this awesome, homey place to come by since New York Times critic Pete Wells stopped by to give the place a full starred review. It was a bold choice for the Times’ first West Coast review, but we un-
understand exactly why Wells picked Cassia: The restaurant is representative of much of what’s exciting about dining in Los Angeles right this minute. 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, loud, 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 sensibility that made his now-departed Spice Table 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 cross-overs born of Ng’s imagination and training. 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 chili 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. Chef Bryant Ng has brought some of the sensibility that made his now-departed Spice Table 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 cross-overs born of Ng’s imagination and training. 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 chili 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. Chef Bryant Ng has brought some of the sensibility that made his now-departed Spice Table 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 cross-overs born of Ng’s imagination and training. 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 chili 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.

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Chi Spacca

For meat lovers, there is hardly a restaurant in L.A. more geared toward delivering maximum carnivorous joy than Chi Spacca, the charcuterie and butchery-focused wing of the Mozza compound in Hancock Park. Originally the passion project of chef Chad Colby (who has since moved on), Chi Spacca is now in the able hands of Ryan DeNicola, with the help — of course — of Mozza queen Nancy Silverton. Chi Spacca still delivers what is probably the best charcuterie in town, offering daily selections of salumi, pâté and aged whole-muscle cured meats that just might deliver the most fragrant, ethereal form of fat you’ve ever tasted. There’s the insanely decadent beef and bone marrow pie, and the serious (and seriously expensive) Fiorentina steaks. These steaks are some of L.A.’s great special-occasion dishes, the char and blood and tang of them so memorable that the sense memory of eating them lasts decades. Let’s pray it’s here for decades to come. —B.R.

1833 Colorado Blvd., Eagle Rock; (323) 297-1133, chispacca.com. Mon.-Thu., 6-10 p.m.; Fri., 6-11 p.m.; Sat., 5-11 p.m.; Sun., 5-10 p.m. Entrees $28-$120.

Colombo’s Italian Steakhouse & Jazz Club

Like many of its surrounding neighborhoods, Eagle Rock has had a slew of trendy eateries open in recent years, with varying degrees of success. But if you want a glimpse into the real heart and soul of the neighborhood, there’s no better place to find it than at Colombo’s Italian Steakhouse & Jazz Club, a restaurant that has been serving this community since 1954. People of all ages and all walks of life gather in the big circular booths and dine on old-school, upscale Italian cooking while listening to live jazz, which begins at 4:30 or 5:30 p.m. nightly. The bar is always packed with regulars, and the atmosphere is always joyful. The music’s pretty damn good, too. What should you eat? The steaks are the best bet, though if you’re in the mood for sauce-slathered pasta, or chicken piccata, there’s plenty of that type of thing to be had. But this isn’t a place for serious food snobs. It’s a place for reveling in the type of community — and the type of fun — that hasn’t been commonplace in L.A. restaurants for decades. Let’s pray it’s here for decades to come. —B.R.


Colonia Publica

For some families, sopas de fideo is a hot cauldron of comfort, dished out as a cure for everything from the common cold to the harshest of hangovers. At Colonia Publica, Whittier’s hip Mexican gastropub, this sumptuous noodle soup is the focal point of its contemporary cantina fare, offering a fully customizable bowl. Helmed by chef Ricardo Díaz — founder of the taco mecca Guisados — the restaurant is a distinctly Angeleno affair marrying casual Mexican eats with ingredient-forward California cuisine. Expect small plates such as a crispy chicharrón quesadilla with snappy pickled onion; smoked salmon tostada topped with a sunny-side-up egg; or choriqueso tacos cradling homemade chorizo on a handcrafted tortilla. Dodge a decorative cactus or two and belly up to the bar for a selection of micheladas, pairing amber craft brews with mixes ranging from the classic clamato to the spicy jalapeno aguachile, which is like a swift zonkey kick to the face. But it’s the celestial soup that brought you here. After all, fideo is a universe in a soup bowl. It’s the realm where you can play God, imagining the ingredients of the ecosystem you’re about to devour: perhaps a groove of cilantro, an earthy crumble of chorizo or a hard-boiled egg bobbing in the beef broth like a wayward iceberg. Behold your creation. Then, like the deity you are, deliver ravenous wrath with each spoonful and scoop of...
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the noodly goodness. It assuages even the most existential pangs of hunger; you can’t
control fate, but a *fideo* is a world all your
own. And in the remnants left behind, maybe
you can read your future in the bottom of
the bowl. —D.T.

6717 Greenleaf Ave., Whittier; (562) 693-
2621. Tue.-Thu., 3-10 p.m.; Fri., 3-11:30 p.m.;
Sat., noon-11:30 p.m.; Sun., noon-9 p.m. En-
trees $5-$12.

**Le Comptoir**

In the world of ever-more-stripped-down,
ever-less-luxurious “fine” dining, no opera-
tion is more spare than Le Comptoir. Gary
Menes’ vegetable-centric tasting menu
operation for years roamed L.A. as a pop-
up but for two-plus years has been fixed
in a small storefront attached to the Hotel
Normandin in Koreatown. The restaurant is
nothing more than a counter facing a kitch-
en. Menes’ Long Beach farm and its harvest
provide the basis for the eight-course meal
he serves, courses that pair a lush purple
aristotle veloute with buttery fried bread
creumbs and creamy sheep’s yogurt, or lima
beans with sweet and sour pear in a pool
of red wine reduction. Though veggies are
Menes’ main infatuation, optional meat
supplements are available for many of the
courses. And other obsessions reveal them-
selves, too: the stretchy, chewy, crusty bread
made from a 20-year-old sourdough starter;
the single-origin coffee; the optional cheese
course with rare cheeses. For all of these
items, Menes will give you the rundown
during the monologue he delivers ahead
of the meal, gushing about the 90-year-old
who produced your creamy Roquefort or
of the meal, gushing about the 90-year-old
“black sauce.” Then there are the camarones,
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 pep-
ners — for the hungover. And yes, you can
still get the *pescado zarandeado*, the whole
split, grilled, tender white fish that came to
be Coni’S Seafood’s signature dish. And yes,
it’s still as thrillingly delicious as ever. —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 $13-$22.

**Connie & Ted’s**

If you grew up, as Michael Cimarusti did,
fishing in the Atlantic and dining on the
bounty of the great Northeast, you’ll un-
derstand the chef’s nostalgia for the brine
and comfort of that type of seafood. Connie
& Ted’s is Cimarusti’s ode to New England,
and he’s created a restaurant that would
be utterly at home on Boston Harbor but

also feels exactly right for West Hollywood.
The large dining room is an immensely
convivial place to scarf down chowder and
lobster rolls and fried clams, and the bar is
one of the best places in town to watch the
Dodgers while slurping on oysters from
the massive raw bar. On top of all this is
*diablo* for the
spice lovers; *borrachos* — in a broth made
from tequila, lime, cilantro and crushed pep-
ners — for the hungover. And yes, you can
still get the *pescado zarandeado*, the whole
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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 $13-$22.

**El Coraloense**

There’s been some debate and consterna-
tion over the fate of Coni’S Seafood since chef
Sergio Peñuelas left, but we’re here to tell
you there’s nothing to fear. Left in the hands
of owners Vicente Cossio and his daughter
Connie Cossio, the restaurant is still turning
out some of the best Mexican seafood in
town. It’s not surprising — Vicente Cossio
was the originator of almost all of the dishes
that garnered Coni’S Seafood so much atten-
tion in the first place. There are all manner of
cocinales, such as the ceviche marinera, a jum-
ble 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 are the camarones,
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 pep-
ners — for the hungover. And yes, you can
still get the *pescado zarandeado*, the whole
split, grilled, tender white fish that came to
be Coni’S Seafood’s signature dish. And yes,
it’s still as thrillingly delicious as ever. —B.R.
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10 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $13-$22.

**Connie & Ted’s**

If you grew up, as Michael Cimarusti did,
fishing in the Atlantic and dining on the
bounty of the great Northeast, you’ll un-
derstand the chef’s nostalgia for the brine
and comfort of that type of seafood. Connie
& Ted’s is Cimarusti’s ode to New England,
and he’s created a restaurant that would
be utterly at home on Boston Harbor but

also feels exactly right for West Hollywood.
The large dining room is an immensely
convivial place to scarf down chowder and
lobster rolls and fried clams, and the bar is
one of the best places in town to watch the
Dodgers while slurping on oysters from
the massive raw bar. On top of all this is
*diablo* for the
spice lovers; *borrachos* — in a broth made
from tequila, lime, cilantro and crushed pep-
ners — for the hungover. And yes, you can
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SANTA BARBARA VINTNERS

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Enjoy wine and food pairing demonstrations &
wine seminars with live music.

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dinners, wine seminars, winery & tasting room open houses,
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sbvintnersweekend.com or call 805-688-0881
dio or the cheers of football fans watching the flatscreen TV. This small but cheerful restaurant specializes in Mexican seafood whose style originates in the coastal states of Nayarit and Sinaloa. And here everyone is ordering the Orgasmo, a savory siete mares soup featuring a melange of sea creatures including shrimp, octopus, and an entire crab. From the murky depths, the crab’s spacey face peeks up from the broth, while one claw droops over the side of the bowl’s edge, like the poster for Roger Corman’s midnight movie Attack of the Crab Monsters. El Corolaense balances kitsch with guilty pleasures, such as the decadent coconut-milk blended horchata or the highly addictive “fish wings,” fried swordfish blanketed with tangy Buffalo wing sauce. But behind its wide spectrum of incredibly fresh ceviches and seaside eats, El Corolaense holds high-end culinary philosophies. The Bell Gardens restaurant was launched by Maria Curie and her husband, Nayarit native Leonardo — who dreamed up the funny dish titles such as viagra.com, which includes shrimp and avocado spooning an oyster in its shell. After studying at Le Cordon Bleu, their children Natalie and Leo Jr. took over the operation in 2008, adding new approaches to their parents’ more traditional fare. The results are transportive. Each bite evokes Mexican beach shacks and pushcarts along the Pacific, where merchants shill mariscos straight from the ocean. —B.T.

Dan Sung Sa

Some might argue that the greatest thing about Los Angeles is Koreatown, and specifically the Korean restaurants therein, those that visitors from South Korea will admit, in hushed tones, might even be better than what’s found back home. Dan Sung Sa is one of the greats, even though it’s not the KBBQ the whole city is so obsessed with. The late-night establishment (yes, we all know that in L.A. anything after midnight counts as late-night) serves a lot of items on skewers, from rice cakes to ginko nuts to intestines to frog legs, as well as big plates of grilled items such as chicken feet and eel. They’re the perfect starter to a hangover-preventing meal that must include the legendary sweet-and-spicy chicken wings and the famous “corn cheese,” which is corn niblets blanketed under melted cheese and sweet mayonnaise. Maybe the place has no windows so that no one outside can see our shame, but they can’t see our joy, either. —K.S.

3317 W. Sixth St., Koreatown; (213) 487-9100. Daily, 4 p.m.-2 a.m. Dishes $2-$15.

Din Tai Fung

To some purists, the proliferation of Din Tai Fung locations — its very real status as an international chain — makes the dumpling house less thrilling than when we knew it as one restaurant in Arcadia. That original location has given way to a proliferation of upscale mall versions, including the newly expanded outpost at the Americana at Brand in Glendale. (There’s also one in Orange County, one in Torrance and a couple in Seattle, not to mention the 13 other countries with locations.) The truth is that no matter how many outposts of Din Tai Fung there are, the food — the famous juicy thin-skinned xiao long bao, but also the other dumplings and the veggie dishes and the noodles and the rice cakes — is 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.

177 Caruso Ave., Glendale; (818) 551-5561, dntafungusa.com. Mon.-Fri., 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sun., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $5-$15. Various additional locations.

Dune

The menu at Dune, the tiny counter-service Mediterranean operation from the owners of Elf Cafe, has expanded over the past year. Along with the falafel and the lamb meatball sandwich, you now can get chicken shawarma, or a mezze plate, or even avocado toast. 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 but 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 any flour, which makes it less bready and spongy than some falafel. It’s a glory of a sandwich, soft and tangy and warm and satisfying on multiple levels. The term “best falafel in town” has been thrown around, and I’m not one to disagree. There’s
Eggslut

It was an idea so elementary, it’s hard to believe it was revolutionary. Maybe someone ought to make breakfast with the same care and creativity that chefs dedicate to dinner. Sqirl may get much of the credit in L.A. for “reinventing breakfast,” but it certainly wasn’t the only place in town to be thinking along these lines, and Eggslut — which began as a food truck in 2011 — deserves much of the credit for our breakfast awakening.

Chef and owner Alvin Cailan began with what he calls “a genuine love of eggs” and has wound up with a phenomenon: a stall in Grand Central Market with lines that stretch into infinity; a slew of new locations in Venice, Glendale and Las Vegas; a following that is global in its reach (I recently saw an ode to the “slut,” the coddled egg and potato puree served in a glass jar, on a menu in Melbourne, Australia). All this, and for what? Really, really good egg sandwiches, served on warm brioche buns, made with carefully sourced ingredients. Sometimes the most revelatory ideas are also the simplest.

—B.R.

Grand Central Market, 317 S. Broadway, Stall D-1, downtown; (213) 625-0292, eggslut.com. Daily, 8 a.m.—4 p.m. Sandwiches $6—$11. Various other locations; hours and prices may vary.

Elf Cafe

When the illiputian Elf Cafe opened in 2006, Echo Park was not yet home to million-dollar homes and organic grocery stores. Instead it shared a stretch of Sunset Boulevard with Burrito King’s adorable donkey marquee and American Apparel’s first U.S. store, which opened in 2003. The area was transitioning, but you could still witness an American diner vibe when neighborhood haunts weren’t just places to be seen on Instagram. —D.T.

1936 E. Seventh St., downtown; (213) 335-6166, elfcafe.com. Daily, 5 p.m.—2 a.m. Dishes $5—$13.

Father’s Office

Despite how much we here in L.A. covet the Father’s Office burger, chef Sang Yoon’s pair of gastropubs probably don’t get the props 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? In fact, so many food and drink trends were spawned by this chef and this place, it deserves a plaque, a holiday, a parade. Even without its historical import, either location offers a great place to eat and drink right now, with fantastic beer selections and a menu of modern bar food that will knock your socks off even if you avoid the burger completely. All you have to do is
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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) 393-BEER, fathersoffice.com. Mon.-Wed., 5-10 p.m.; Thu., 5-11 p.m.; Fri., 4-11 p.m.; Sat., noon-11 p.m.; Sun., noon-10 p.m. (bar open later nightly). Entrees $10-$19. Also: 3229 Helms Ave, Culver City; (310) 738-2224, Mon.-Thu., 5-11 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., noon-mid.; Sun., noon-10 p.m. (bar open later nightly).

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 rib-eye is from Niman Ranch; the wine list is long and engrossing. 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 seriously good (can be served in a room so effortlessly casual, the brick back patio all)

The windows at the people snacking on charcuterie and bowls of house-made 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.

320 Sunset Ave., Venice; (310) 695-1748, gjelina.com. Daily, 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Sandwiches $7.50-$16; plates $15-$32.

Guelaguetza

There’s so much to love about Guelaguetza, the long-standing Oaxacan restaurant in Koreatown, that it’s hard to know where to begin. The restaurant was honored by the James Beard committee in 2015 as part of its America’s Classics awards, which should give you some idea of how important this place is to its neighborhood, its community, our city and the country.

The thing we love most, though, is the feel of the place on weekend evenings, when the sprawling restaurant fills with families, mainly sharing the giant platters of memelas, chorizo, tasojo and cecina, fried pork ribs and more. An ancient-looking man may be playing the xylophone onstage with his band, with kids and grandparents bouncing appreciatively in their seats to the music. There’s a lot of bang for the buck in those platters, but you’d be remiss to leave without trying the mole. You’ll want the negro, and you’ll be rewarded with a dark, bitter, gloriously slick mole — get it with chicken or chorizo. The estofado, made with tomatillos, chilies, raisins and olives, is a worthy alternative — it’s utterly seductive in its sweet and funky depth. You can get goat barbacoa on weekends, swimming in a deeply rich chili sauce and served with giant, homemade tortillas, and there are fruity, smoky mezcal cocktails to toast the restaurant and the celebration happening around you. —B.R.

3014 W. Olympic Blvd., Mid-City; (213) 427-0608, ilovemole.com. Mon.-Thu., 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri., 9 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sat., 8 a.m.-11 p.m.;
Guerrilla Tacos

If you had to show someone what it’s like to live and eat in Los Angeles and 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 that parks in front of the city’s best coffee (and sometimes wine) shops, a taco truck that started as a cart but soon will become a restaurant, where you might find gooseberries on your wild boar taco. The tostadas are made with the freshest local seafood, maybe yellowtail tuna poké with cashew chile de valle, 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 way that’s totally uncontrived. It’s as L.A. as a dining experience gets, in all the best possible ways. —B.R.

Check website for times and locations; (818) 640-3033, guerrillatacos.com. Tacos and other items $4-$12.

Guisados

The little Boyle Heights taco shop that could just never seems to lose steam: After expanding in 2013 to Echo Park, and downtown in 2014, Guisados now qualifies as a bona fide mini chain, with five locations throughout the city. Some detractors say that all this expansion has made Guisados less legit somehow, but the proof is in the pibil and 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, chicharrón and more) gets its own thoughtful topping—a dab of avocado here, a draping of pickled onion there. It’s a thing of true beauty, and perhaps the world’s cheapest tasting menu. We’d take it over the soignée kind most days of the week. —B.R.

2100 E. Cesar Chavez Ave., Boyle Heights; (323) 284-7201, guisados.co. Mon.-Sat., 10:30 a.m.-8 p.m.; Fri., 10:30 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sat., 9 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sun., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tacos $2.50-$3. Various additional locations.

Gwang Yang BBQ

Koreatown is L.A.’s most overwhelming neighborhood, foodwise or otherwise. It’s overwhelming in the number of solid Korean barbecue options (Kang Ho Dong Baekejeong or Park’s BBQ or Ham Ji Park or... oh my God, just pick something); overwhelming in the amount of people (must everyone travel in herds?); and overwhelming to navigate (you quickly get to know every street because you circle each block 100 times looking for parking). Gwang Yang BBQ slices through all of this, minimizing your K-town anxiety and making everything, well, easy. There’s a dedicated valet for the restaurant in the next-door deck. Gwang Yang accepts reservations, and even without one you won’t have to wait for hours like at some other Korean barbecue spots. The space is modern and sleek to the point of justifying the somewhat pricey menu, but not so modern and sleek that you feel underdressed. And ordering is a cinch: You are here for the Gangnam-style bulgogi. The thin, marinated, much misunderstood slices of beef rarely take center stage elsewhere, but at Gwang Yang BBQ they hog the spotlight. The meat, cooked and cut by your server, is soft and lacy and singular and perfect; place a mouthful in a lettuce leaf, top it with slivers of garlic and raw jalapeño, and you’ve got the perfect bite. Pro tip: Don’t make the mistake of ordering the L.A.-style bulgogi, or of ordering bulgogi and another protein (in my case, the pork belly) for the sake of variety. You’ll quickly tire of that pork belly and yearn for more bulgogi. —Mara Shaloup


Ham Ji Park

Many of L.A.’s Korean barbecue joints are large, boisterous places that specialize in grill-your-own dishes, usually of the beef variety. Ham Ji Park, on the other hand, is on its own porky path. The two must-order dishes here are prepared in the kitchen: One is a stew made mostly of pork neck and whole russet potatoes. It is pure comfort, though you will have to wrangle with the bones in this this tender cut of pig. The stew’s cost—on the menu is the pork ribs, sweet and spicy and sure to cause a mess. It is a generous portion, but it’s not unheard of to order a double. These are served with the full array of banchan, mostly pickled items that pair perfectly with the rich ribs. The down-home atmosphere matches the food. It’s the perfect place to linger over the bones with a pitcher of beer. —K.S.

3407 W. Sixth St., Ste. 101-C, Koreatown; (213) 385-2773. Mon.-Sat., 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 4-10 p.m. Dishes $9-$27.

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. Hatchet Hall’s menu is long and wide-ranging, and sometimes its Southern-ness is unmistakable: Dunsmoor’s collard greens are funky, his grits creamy. Other dishes are slightly more subtle in their Southern-ness: Spoonbread comes heaped with a cornucopia of mushrooms; hunks of yellowtail are sandwiched with thin-sliced habanero and juicy peach, all wrapped up in a sliver of translucent fat shaved from a Johnston Mangalitsa country ham; wood-grilled octopus is kissed with lemon aioli and salsa verde. This is a long, diverse, ambitious menu, and it is being executed incredibly well. The sprawling building encompasses an appealing series of dining rooms and bars, with a patio that looks like a garden

408 N LA CIENEGA BLVD, WEST HOLLYWOOD, CA 90048 | (424) 335-0698
party that’s spilled out of the restaurant. And hidden in back is the Old Man Bar, which opens at 8 p.m. nightly and is one of the city’s best places to sip bourbon in a dark corner. –B.R.
12517 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City; (310) 391-4222, hatchethallla.com. Mon.-Thur., 4-6 p.m.; Fri., 4-11 p.m.; Sat., 5-10 p.m.; Sun., 5-10 p.m.; oyster happy hour daily, 5:30-6:30 p.m.; Old Man Bar, nightly, 8 p.m.-2 a.m. Entrees $23-$38.

El Huarache Azteca
The huarache doesn’t get a lot of play in Los Angeles. It’s one of Mexico’s dishes that didn’t fully infiltrate our city, perhaps due to migration patterns, or maybe because store-bought tortillas are cheaper and easier to come by. Named for its shape — huarache is a sandal — its made of masa, much thicker than a tortilla and patted into an oval. Sometimes beans are mixed right in, rather than used as a topping. It tends to be covered in much more sauce than a taco — a huarache can stand up to all that liquid, after all. Created in either Mexico City or the agricultural area just north of there, huaraches have found a L.A. home at El Huarache Azteca in Highland Park. It’s a little counter-service place with high-quality food: The aguas frescas are homemade and the guacamole is fresh, herby and tart with lime. But don’t leave without trying the signature dish, a method that makes for an animal-forward, a lot of fermentation and a lot of meat. Try the sausages or the beef and pork jerky, which are extremely funky in flavor. They’ve been air-dried and then thrown in the fryer, a method that makes for an animal-forward, bold flavor. The kai yang, chicken that’s been marinated in a turmeric-heavy spice mix and then grilled over charcoal, is a revelation. Most of us simply didn’t know that grilled chicken could be so complex and delicious. You won’t eat just one piece. And as it happens, Isaan Station might also have the best papaya salad in L.A. –K.S.
5225 York Blvd., Highland Park; (323) 478-9572, elhuaracheazteca.com. Daily, 8 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Dishes $6-$9.

The Hungry Cat
Southern California is now down to just one location of the Hungry Cat, and as sad as we are to see the Santa Monica and Santa Barbara outposts close, we’re glad it was the Hollywood Hungry Cat — the original Hungry Cat — that survived. Why? Because it’s still our favorite place to eat in Hollywood proper, the place we most heartily recommend to folks looking for a pre-Pantages birthday dinner, the most welcome escape from the tourist mayhem of the neighborhood. Chef/owner David Lentz has been a pioneer of Pacific-focused seafood (as opposed to the odes to New England that have proliferated in recent years) for more than a decade, serving cold oysters on the half-shell, fresh Santa Barbara uni and modern, creative seafood dishes that sometimes hint at Maine or Massachusetts but more often celebrate the bounty and spirit of the California coast. Rather than classic fish-house fare, your Manila clams are more likely to come with merguez, sofrito and garbanzo beans; your barramundi over freekeh, kabocha squash, pea tendrils, yogurt and pumpkin seed pesto. The bright and airy restaurant tucked away in the center of the block is perfect for a brunch of johnny cakes with smoked trout salad, or as a place to drop by the bar for a lobster roll and a very good cocktail. –B.R.
1535 N. Vine St., Hollywood; (323) 838-2155, thehungrycat.com. Mon.-Thu., 4-6 p.m.; Sat., 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; lunch: Wed.-Fri., noon-3 p.m.; happy hour: Mon.-Tue., 4-6 p.m.; Wed.-Fri., 3-6 p.m. Plates $13.50-$38; seafood platters $57-$160.

Isaan Station
Angelenos are discerning when it comes to Thai food. We can tell when pad Thai has been dyed with ketchup. We know that sticky rice goes with crying tiger, the signature grilled beef dish. We acknowledge that Thai salads are bonkers spicy. But a dinner at Isaan Station — located in Koreatown, which has an international array of restaurants but no real Thai presence — will make any diner realize there is still so much to learn. The strip-mall spot specializes in Northeastern Thai dishes, which means a lot of grilled food, a lot of fermentation and a lot of meat. Try the sausages or the beef and pork jerky, which are extremely funky in flavor. They’ve been air-dried and then thrown in the fryer, a method that makes for an animal-forward, bold flavor. The kai yang, chicken that’s been marinated in a turmeric-heavy spice mix and then grilled over charcoal, is a revelation. Most of us simply didn’t know that grilled chicken could be so complex and delicious. You won’t eat just one piece. And as it happens, Isaan Station might also have the best papaya salad in L.A. –K.S.
125 N. Western Ave., Unit 111-112, Koreatown; (323) 380-5126, isaanstationthaila.com. Tue.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-11:30 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 11:30 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Entrees $7-$15.

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 competi-


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 perhaps a bit of a stretch to think these two grew up dining in slick blond-wood booths, at places where you could get a $350 bottle of wine to go with your pizza, but who’s quibbling? Jon & Vinny’s is 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. Our favorite is the barbecued shish taouk, with crunchy mirepoix, in the farmers market–driven salads and in a few of the non-meaty pastas, which are downright delicious at our people, we couldn’t ask for a better (or more delicious) emblem. —B.R.

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 tacos, a trend that has now swept the globe, for better or worse. At Kogi the existence of the mashup is assuredly for the good of us all, the sweet slightly sour kimchi making beautiful sense nestled between an auto repair shop and a liquor market, with only a few tables and a counter. But its sparse layout is imbued with the warmth of the family who runs the restaurant, and your table may be cleared by a tiny boy, not yet old enough to go to school, wearing an apron and chattering happily to customers. We’re so grateful that he, and Kogi Factory, are here. —B.R.

Kobe Factory
There were a few days in early February when it seemed as if everyone we knew was stopping by Kobe Factory, the unassuming Syrian restaurant in Van Nuys. That Angelenos express their solidarity with the immigrant communities of the city by frequenting their restaurants may seem like a self-serving form of activism, but only if you look at it with a particularly cynical eye. The truth is, we form community around tables, and food can be a path to understanding. That understanding is particularly delicious at Kobe Factory, where you can get the namesake meaty pastrami/pie hybrids in a number of ways. Our favorite is the barbecued version, when the mixture of bulgur and chopped meat gets a grill-marked crust on the outside, yielding to a juicy interior. While not nearly as exciting, the shish taouk is certainly a fantastic deal, delivering two meals’ worth of tender chicken over a heap of rice with hummus and salad on the side. This is a tiny operation, hiding in plain sight between an auto repair shop and a liquor market, with only a few tables and a counter. But its sparse layout is imbued with the warmth of the family who runs the restaurant, and your table may be cleared by a tiny boy, not yet old enough to go to school, wearing an apron and chattering happily to customers. We’re so grateful that he, and Kobe Factory, are here. —B.R.

Langer’s
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 fiercest of 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. Since 1947, Langer’s has been delivering what many believe to be the best pastrami sandwich on Earth. Whether you go for plain pastrami on rye or the famous No. 19 with Swiss cheese, coleslaw and Russian dressing is between you and your god, but either way, Langer’s gives us all something solid to hold on to in this cruel, unpredictable world. —B.R.
Leo’s Tacos
It’s not every car-wash taco truck that can expand to four locations across town. Some people prefer the newer locations in Koreatown, Echo Park or the Valley, some people insist on the original Mid-City location or no tacos at all. While the name of these taco trucks is up for debate — sometimes it’s called Tacos Leo, sometimes it’s Leo’s Tacos — one thing is certain: This taco truck chain offers some of the best nighttime grub in the city, and maybe even the best al pastor, no matter the time of day. Leo’s has mastered the art of the pineapple-topped trompo, that slow-cooked spit that cooks the marinated pork that will fill your tortillas, along with some flecks of the pineapple itself, and probably more than one salsa, plus cilantro and onions, from the extensive salsa bar. There’s plenty more on the menu to order, but watching the tromperos flick the pork and pineapple from the trompo into tortillas is pretty fun — the ingredients are through the air, but they catch everything every time. It’s dinner and a show, for a great price. —K.S.
1515 S. La Brea Ave., Mid-City; (323) 346-2001, leostacostruck.com. Daily, 9:30 a.m.-3 a.m. Dishes under $10.

Locol
Roy Choi and Daniel Patterson’s attempt to bring socially conscious practices to the fast food industry has certainly gotten folks talking — about food and justice and value and values. The original location in Watts certainly seems to be achieving many of the chefs’ stated goals: to bring healthy (or healthier) cooking to a neighborhood that lacks food choices, to create jobs in the community, and to provide a welcoming place to gather and eat. It’s a bright room full of energy, where you can grab a burrito or burger or salad for less than $10, and where the feeling of goodwill permeates everything about the place. When Locol gets really busy, it feels more like a neighborhood party than a fast food restaurant. Who knew the food revolution would be so much fun? —B.R.
1950 E. 103rd St., Watts; welocol.com. Daily, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Entrees and burgers $5-$8.

Love & Salt
In the two years since Love & Salt opened in the old Cafe Pierre space in Manhattan Beach, chef Michael Fiorelli’s modern Italian restaurant has become a beacon for the neighborhood, serving truly exciting food in a beautiful room that feels fun in a way that’s utterly appropriate to its upscale beachy location. It’s true that you can order a whole pig’s head here (with 48 hours’ advance notice), which comes with condiments and toast, but to me, the value lies in the menu’s slightly less confronting pleasures. Rigatoni — served in Parmesan brodo with wilted escarole, whipped ricotta and chicken meatballs — presents a perfect combination of comfort and intrigue, the bitter edge of the escarole softened by the generous, creamy ricotta. The rabbit porchetta is disturbingly delicious, the buoyant rabbit meat rolled up with prosciutto and Swiss chard, splayed out over a stewy combination of black rice, farro, pine nuts and currants. Fiorelli used to serve many of his best dishes only as large-format sharable plates, but now most things come in more manageable serving sizes, making it easier to explore more of the menu. Extra kudos to the staff, who provide the kind of friendly, breezy capable service that’s weirdly (and infuriatingly) rare this close to the ocean. —B.R.
317 Manhattan Beach Blvd., Manhattan Beach; (310) 545-5252, loveandsaltla.com. Mon.-Thu., 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Fri., 5:30-11 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; Sun., 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Pizza and pasta $16-$20; large plates $29-$75.

Lucques
From the comforting fireplace that greets you upon arrival, to the back patio with its vine-covered walls, everything about Lucques oozes calm and refinement. Suzanne Goin and Caroline Styne’s original restaurant hasn’t changed much in the 19 years since opening, and it’s a good place to come if you miss civilized dining the kind that includes proper wine service, tablecloths, and appetizers and entrees rather than small plates. Here dishes are classics spun on their heads to become something that seems even more classic than the original. Most of the food sticks to the lightly Mediterranean and decidedly Californian style that Goin helped invent: Portuguese stuffed chicken with linguica, tomato rice and pickled golden raisins; hanger steak with grilled chicharron, garlic toast and lemon-anchovy butter. Here is a restaurant for special occasions and romance, for quiet conversation and a fine bottle of wine — it’s a dying breed, but none the less thrilling for being so. —B.R.
4744 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood; (323) 655-6277, lucques.com. Lunch: Tue.-Sat., noon-2:30 p.m.; dinner: Mon.-Tue., 6-9:30 p.m.; Wed.-Thu., 6-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 6-10:30 p.m.; Sun., three-course prix fixe dinner, 5-9:30 p.m. 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 6-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 cooking far better than most who came after him. Whether it’s his supremely savory and nutty tea leaf salad with blue prawns; his tiny, perfect lobster roll “bánh mì” with papaya slaw and pig ear terrine; his sticky Chinese eggplant with sambal and fennel raita; his Hawaiian butterfish with lime, herbs and coconut; or his Sichuan dumplings with delicate wrappers holding ginger-imbued kurobuta pork, Yoon’s food is so carefully prepared, so thoughtfully executed, that you get to let go of your analytical side and just relax into pleasure. This process is helped along by one of the best wine lists around (particularly if you’re a riesling fan); if wine

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ain’t your thing. Lukashon could be the place where you become a single-origin tea geek. It’s a thing, and as usual Yoon is on the forefront. —B.R.

3239 Helms Ave., Culver City; (310) 202-6808, lukashon.com. Tue.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; dinner: Tue.-Thu., 5:30-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-10:30 p.m. Plates $10-$34.

MB Post

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. Six years later, with two sister restaurants now open on the same strip, MB Post feels as if 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 barbecued Moroccan lamb belly to tuna tataki with leche de tigre. But whether it’s a cauldron of mussels swimming in a deep green curry with Chinese sausage and sticky coriander rice, or classic chicken pot pie, 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 friends, a sushi guy in L.A. The version at Raul Ortega’s Mariscos Jalisco, the Boyle Heights truck, is far and away the king of fried tacos, in this city and perhaps in the country. But finding a compat-

3040 E. Olympic Blvd., Boyle Heights; (323) 628-6701. Daily, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Tacos $7-$18; rolls $5-$12; chef’s choice sashimi $25.

Maud

To hear its stats, you’d think Maude is the most uptight upscale restaurant in town. An ultra-famous celebrity chef, a Beverly Hills address, a reservation system that makes it extremely hard 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 that it’s just a very nice family restaurant. Which is appropriate, 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, beyond that, Stone is often there chatting to customers at one of the tiny place’s 13 tables, or delivering the 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 relative bargain (at around $130 per person, service included) — 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.
**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 what’s so great about dining in this manner has slipped your mind, it really is worth a trip to Mélisse, Josiah Citrin’s modern French restaurant in Santa Monica, to refresh your memory. Revel in extravagances such as caviar service, or a tableside filleting of Dover sole or carving of truffle-stuffed chicken, or Citrin’s “10” menu, which spans 10 courses and will cost you a cool $185 per person. It’s an investment, but it’s worth using the excuse of a special occasion to see what Citrin is capable of — his soups so much silkier than anyone else’s, his sauces so much more refined. For being one of the most expensive restaurants in the city, Mélisse has an exceedingly reasonable wine list — don’t get me wrong, you can easily spend a month’s salary on booze here if you want, but there’s a treasure to be found on the lower end if you’re looking for a good value. The quiet Palm’s 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) are certainly 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) 836-6252, n-naka.com. Wed.-Sat., seatings at 5:30, 5:45 & 6 p.m.; late seatings 8:45 & 9:15 p.m.; reservations required. $185 per person.

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**Misky Misky**

While Los Angeles is a coastal city, it’s not particularly known for seafood, and really excellent ceviche can be hard to find. To discover the best, one must travel to Misky Misky in West Covina, deep in the inland regions of L.A. County (“misky” is the Quechua word for “delicious”). The Peruvian restaurant has a full menu of cooked dishes, such as Andean anticuchos (skewered beef hearts), saltados (beef, chicken or shrimp stir-fried with french fries) and pastas, but the soul of the restaurant is in its ceviches. The menu honors the country’s culinary traditions by serving all ceviches with boiled potatoes and huge kernels of Peruvian corn. A good starter dish is the ceviche crocante, which pairs marinated fish with fried calamari. Another classic is a mix of seafood in a cilantro-flecked spicy marinade. Try the tiradito, which bathes sashimi in a yellow pepper sauce; it may inspire you to become an expert in the complicated, delicious history of Peru-Japan relations. — K.S.

125 N. Fairway Lane, West Covina; (626) 966-0600, miskymisky.com. Sun.-Thu., 6-10 p.m.; Fri., 6-10 p.m.; Sat., 5:45-10 p.m. Tasting menus $120-$185, more with supplements.

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**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 experimentation of sorts, a food and art space attached to the Yenbamroong family’s long-standing Talesai in West Hollywood, has now morphed into two full-fledged powerhouse restaurants, places it’s hard to imagine Los Angeles without. 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 list of affordable, mainly natural wines. Here, along with the spicy larb and kao soi and pad kee mao he was known for, Yenbamroong debuted a fantastic fried chicken sandwich topped with papaya and jalapeño, and “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 (currently delicious) smashed water bugs. Don’t be fooled into believing this is gimmicky — what makes the food here so exceptional is the extreme care taken, the roasting of chilies, the layering of flavors. In 2015, Night + Market quietly took over the Talesai space from which it originally sprouted, signaling the end of an era and also the cementing of a new age, one that’s thrilling in its delicious unpredictability. — B.R.

Night + Market: 9043 Sunset Blvd., West

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Parks BBQ

Enthusiasts will debate the merits of the vast array of L.A.'s Koreatown Korean barbecue establishments with fingers of bread soaked in butter, and topped with various syrups, ice cream, honey, whipped cream, fruit, or seaweetened beans. There's no end to what you can do with brick toast. Bring a crowd, just like all the rowdy, ravenous teenagers who come here for an Asian-inspired, Instagram-friendly after-school meal. -K.S.

Oh My Pan

Los Angeles has a sweet tooth. Everywhere you turn, there are ice cream shops, self-serve fro-yo spots and brightly colored macarons. Then there's Oh My Pan, a youthful, contemporary interpretation of the tea shop, offering highly sweetened boba teas as the main liquid refreshment, with the menu delivering sugar bombs of varying sizes. There are little bags of cookies and pastries available, as well as morning buns, tarts and slices of colorful cake topped with piles of glazed fruit. It also offers a couple of savory buns filled with things like corn and sausage or shredded pork and green onion. The main thing to order is brick toast, which is a hallowed-out half loaf of bread that's filled back up again with fingers of bread soaked in butter, and topped with various syrups, ice cream, honey, whipped cream, fruit or seaweedened beans. There's no end to what you can do with brick toast. Bring a crowd, just like all the rowdy, ravenous teenagers who come here for an Asian-inspired, Instagram-friendly after-school meal. -K.S.


The 99 Essential Restaurants


Philippe the Original

Philippe the Original is 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, into L.A. circa 1910. Philippe's opened in 1908 and has added some modern amenities in its 109 years: There are a few neon signs behind the counter along with the wooden ones, and in late 2014 it 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 to sit 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.


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 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 getting on the I-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


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Pizzeria Mozza

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. Pizzeria Mozza, which was the first of the three, 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. This is a great restaurant to bring a large group, and a great place for a first date, and a can’t-miss destination for out-of-town eaters. You come here for the pizza, but there’s so much more to love: the boisterous, convivial room, the fantastic antipasti and pastry chef Dahlia Narvaez’s now-iconic butterscotch budino — the budino that launched a thousand budinos. — B.R.


Providence

There are only a handful of restaurants in Los Angeles that aim for the same heights as 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 made with — at Q, nothing is quite as humble as it appears. — G.S.

521 W. Seventh St., downtown; (213) 225-6285, quishila.com. Lunch: Tue.-Fri., noon-1:30 p.m.; dinner, Tue.-Sat., seatings at 6 & 8 p.m. Omakase, $75-$125 at lunch, $165-$250 at dinner.

Quesadilla Lady

There’s a woman working in Echo Park who is creating some of the most soulful food in Los Angeles. Some may know her by her first name, Alejandra, but to weekend warriors, farmers market visitors and local residents out for a stroll, she’s known as “the quesadilla lady.” She’s a true L.A. story, a woman who has created a name for herself based on the strength of her one specialty. She’s the quesadilla lady, because there can be no other. Fridays through Mondays, her rolling grill is usually perched on the southwest corner of Sunset Boulevard and Echo Park Avenue, where she offers her small menu. The blue corn tortillas are semi-homemade — she uses a store-bought base — and they are perfectly grilled while you wait. Don’t miss the huitlacoche filling, the fungus that grows on corn and is sought after by gourmands around the world. Here, it’s been sautéed with onions and spices to create a queso that’s rich and a little spicy. If you’re nervous about diving wholesale into corn smut, cut it with one of the meat options. You’ll eat standing up. — K.S.

Southwest corner of Sunset Boulevard and Echo Park Avenue, Echo Park, Fri.-Mon., 11 a.m.-5 p.m., give or take. Dishes $4-$5.

Ración

In the last year, Ración has changed chefs, changed formats and, in many ways, changed objectives — where it used to be a celebration of Basque and Spanish cooking beyond tapas, it now adheres more closely to the tapas format, and the modernist twists that had been the foundation of the enterprise are hidden a little deeper. Original chef Teresa Montaño stepped down in mid-2016, and Shane Alvord, who has worked at the restaurant since its opening, stepped into the role. But founder Loretta Peng is still very much involved, and the hidden-gem soul of the place remains intact. The elegant but friendly room that faces leafy Green Street in Pasadena should be used as a model for upscale neighborhood eateries everywhere. The wine list has all kinds of Spanish gems you’re unlikely to find elsewhere. And, yes, there are now tapas on the menu, such as creamy chicken croquettes with membrillo honey, and salt cod fritters with lemon cream. But there’s still a selection of larger
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**Revolutionario**

Revolutionario is further proof that you can put anything in a taco — in this case smoked lamb, chickpea tajine or the Middle Eastern egg dish shakshouka — and it will taste even better. The tiny, low-on-frills-but-high-on-charm Northern Africa taco joint (from classically trained French-Algerian chef Farid Zadi) also deserves bonus points for its location: Situated just west of USC, Revolutionario is a harissa-slicked oasis in something of a restaurant desert. You can’t go wrong with any of the 10 taco options (though I’d suggest you start with the beef brisket barbacoa, or the chickpea-spaghettisweet potato tajine if you’re vegetarian). In case North African tacos don’t provide enough culture collision, Revolutionario serves three varieties of Japanese-Peruvian ceviche as well. And whatever you do, don’t walk out of there without ordering the fried cauliflower, which can stand up to any of the fried cauli that has proliferated on menus across the city. Here it’s dressed with spiced salt, smoked pepper, aleppo pepper, sumac, toasted wheat, sesame seeds and dried lime. At $375, go ahead and order three.


**RiceBar**

We use the term “hole-in-the-wall” as a folksy cliché, but RiceBar truly is a hole-in-the-wall, a teeny kitchen with a door on downtown’s Seventh Street. The entire space — kitchen, storage, fridges, dining area — is 275 square feet. The master of those 275 square feet is chef Charles Olalia, an exceedingly friendly dude who often looks kind of bored. His 275 square feet is chef Charles Olalia, an exceedingly friendly dude who often looks kind of bored. His

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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 Fish Tacos started as a makeshift parking-lot taco party and then morphed into a truck (thanks to pecky laws about how and where you can sell food); these days he's usually parked on Riverside Drive near the entrance to Griffith Park, serving up the best lunch 53 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, as well as the occasional buy-three-get-one-free deal. –B.R.

3201 Riverside Drive, Los Feliz; (323) 906-7290, twitter.com/RickysFishTacos. Wed.-Sun. (usually), 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tacos, $3.

Rose Cafe

The Rose Cafe, which had been a Venice staple since 1979, reopened its doors in November 2015 after a revamp by Jason Neroni as chef. The new Rose is a breezy fantasy of California living: a bakery and café and bar and restaurant with multiple seating areas and patios. It all feels effortless and beautiful and so very, very Venice. (New Venice, that is.)

As for Neroni, the Rose is more evidence of his talent as a chef, which we already knew about thanks to his time at Superba Snack Bar and Superba Food & Wine. There’s a level of ambition in the pure scale of this place that’s new for Neroni, but what’s not new is the way in which he continues to shine. Neroni’s pastas are up there with the best in the city, and many diners who ate at Superba will recognize his decadent smoked bucatini carbonara, as well as his particularly deft hand with the more pungent ocean creatures and their rightful relationship to noodles. Neroni has gotten better at charcuterie (and he was pretty good at it to begin with), and there are some dishes on the dinner menu that are stunning in their creativity and execution. –B.R.

220 Rose Ave., Venice; (310) 399-0711, rosecafevenice.com. Tue.-Thu., 7 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 7 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun., 8 a.m.-1 p.m. Entrees $19-$52.

Ruen Pair

Ruen Pair has long enjoyed a certain status among the food literati of L.A. The Thai restaurant is open until 3 a.m., and it’s known as the place where chefs go to eat after their own shifts are over. Remarkably, Ruen Pair doesn’t rest on its insider accolades. The cooks are still taking care with the food, from the fried noodle dishes to the truly excellent soups, especially the coconut-based tom kha gai. Try the salty turnip omelette. It is unusual for a multipage menu to do everything so consistently well, but this menu is full of hits, and it is big enough to keep eating there interesting, even if you’re a regular Thai Town denizen. The restaurant is packed at any given time, and the post-midnight crowd tends to be tattooed and foul-mouthed. During dinner, this is a truly family-friendly place. Just don’t let your kids knock over the soup pots. –K.S.

5257 Hollywood Blvd., Los Feliz; (323) 466-0153, ruenpairthai.com. Daily, 11 a.m.-3 a.m. Dishes $7-$11.

Rustic Canyon

Jeremy Fox is one of those chefs whom other chefs gush about, and Rustic Canyon is the restaurant where you’ll find many of those other chefs when there’s cause for celebration or need for inspiration. Since Fox teamed with Rustic Canyon’s owners Zoe Nathan and Josh Loeb in 2013, the restaurant has just 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 spends only a few days on the menu and is as delightful as it is fleeting. A recent porcetta with kumquats and bitter greens had us clutching our pearls in delight. If you don’t believe us, check Fox’s gorgeous Instagram account for visual proof. –B.R.

1119 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica; (310) 393-7050, rusticcanyonwinebar.com. Sun.-Thu., 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-11 p.m. Entrees $30-$39.
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Sapp Coffee Shop

In the competition for best hangover cure, or most comforting bowl of steaming goodness, or best dish for a rainy day, Los Angeles has a lot of contenders, and many of them exist in the strip malls of Thai Town. But during this past abnormally cold and rainy winter, the thing we craved most often was Sapp Coffee Shop’s boat noodles, the bowl’s broth a deep brown, sweet and rich and a little sour, flecked with the chewy crunch of fried pork skin. We’re not alone in this craving, of course — Sapp has been satisfying people’s boat noodle needs since the 1980s — and the sparse restaurant is beloved in part because there’s so much comfort in its consistency. In warmer weather, the cold jade noodles present a lovely jumble of green noodles, roasted pork, crab meat, peanuts and chili, and honestly anytime you can try to try the many fantastic dishes that aren’t quite so iconic as the noodles here. But when food becomes an emotional need rather than a cerebral pursuit, other options can’t compete with the warmth and pleasure of those boat noodles. — B.R.

Sea Harbour

Los Angeles has long enjoyed some of the world’s best Chinese food, but in the last decade, many restaurants have mastered the ins and outs of China’s varied regional cuisines. So it’s easy to overlook Cantonese food, that saucy, sweet, pork- and fish-heavy Southeastern Chinese specialty that the first Chinese immigrants brought with them to the West Coast. But though it might seem old-school, it shouldn’t be forgotten. After all, dim sum is Chinese. And it’s an American to not love dim sum. Sea Harbour in particular is still innovating, moving the menu items around to make room for things like the shrimp paste-stuffed eggplant, the salty egg buns and the shu mai with truffles. The restaurant does not offer cart service, which is a disappointment to some diners. But think of it this way: The food is fresher if it’s made to order. But think of it this way: The food is fresher if it’s made to order. — K.S.

Spago

There are other places in town you could go for Old Hollywood glamour — Spago has never dealt in nostalgia, really, and if it started to do so, a menu revamp and sleek renovation a few years back nixed any fantasies that the restaurant would slip into Grand Old Dame territory. But Spago is a place to go if you want to be treated as a movie star might have been back in the good old days when service and pomp still mattered. Everyone here is treated like a VIP, whether you booked the table months ago to celebrate a special occasion, or because you felt like stopping by on a Tuesday night to perch at a cocktail table and snack on veal filet mignon tartare tucked into a narrow bone and topped with a layer of smoked mascarpone. Chef Lee Hefter and chef de cuisine Tetsu Yahagi present an elegant, sometimes extravagant menu...
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with touches of Italy, Japan and China (one of the best dinner items is a whole roasted Cantonese duck for two), as well as classic California cooking of the sort chef/owner Wolfgang Puck helped to invent when he opened Spago. Yes, this is a great place for spotting celebrities, but with its gracious service and wonderful wine list and deca-dent dining, Spago is also a great place to feel like a celebrity yourself. -B.R.

176 N. Canon Drive, Beverly Hills; (310) 385-0880, wolfgangpuck.com/dining/spago. Lunch, Mon.-Sat., noon-2:30 p.m.; dinner, Mon.-Fri., 6-10 p.m.; Sat., 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Sun., 5:30-10 p.m. Entrees $19-$145.

Sqirl

The story of Sqirl has been told so many times over, its little-toast-shop-that-could narrative is practically a fable these days. Articles have been written that make Jessi-ca Koslow’s East Hollywood cafe a symbol for the entire L.A. lifestyle, a place where beautiful people eat beautiful things out of bowls in the white sunlight. In fact, if you focus on what Sqirl has come to rep-rese nt rather than what Sqirl actually is, you might forget the fact that Koslow and crew are still cooking some of the city’s most delicious food. It’s hard to resist just 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 your-self away from the rice and ven- ture into the daily specials, you’ll be heartily rewarded.

There are breakfast hash dishes made with the season’s best veggies, served in mini cast-iron skillets. There are delicate daily pastas after 11 a.m., along with creative lunch dishes such as Passmore Ranch sturgeon au poivre with nasturtium capers and poached cardoon. The avocado toast is actually a version that makes the current 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, sqirlla.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 platter, 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 cooling lettuce comes alongside so you can wrap up all this goodness yourself, to your own liking. If you have kids who like to play with their food, there’s hardly a more enjoyable lunch outing around. But Summer Rolls is also a place to come for Central Vietnamese specialties such as bánh béo, 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) 286-3370. Mon.-Tue. & Thu.-Sun., 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Entrees $6.99-$8.50.

Surati Farsan Mart

Stepping into an unfamiliar restaurant can be a little intimidating. The experience is even more so if the restaurant is counter service and packed to the rafters. Surati Farsan is just such a venue, but it comes with the bonus of extremely kind and patient employees. It’s located in Artesia, a town known for its Indian food. The ostensible focus of Surati Farsan is the dessert selection, which features bite-sized treats such as sesame brittle, rose-flavored coconut balls covered in chocolate, barfi — a milk and sugar combo with various top-pings — and different sweetened bars made of pistachio and cashew flours. But as long as you’re there, get a full thali lunch, a vegetar-ian sampler platter with pickles, lentil soup, spiced vegetable curries, savoy yo-gurt, popadoms, rice and more. And try a dosa here, even though they’re comically large — whether stuffed with masala or cheese and onions, or nothing at all, this huge flatbread made of ground rice and lentils is the tiniest, most delicious way to ponder the wonder of fermentation. Grab some chickpea snacks on the way out. -K.S.

11814 186th St., Artesia; (562) 860-2310, suratifarsan.com. Tue.-Thu., 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Fri.-Sun., 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Dishes $3-$12.

Sushi Gen

There are many reasons to stand outside Sushi Gen in Little Tokyo to 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 at the line of sushi chefs doles out some of the highest-quality, lowest-cost raw fish in America. Rumor has it that it’s the restaur-ant’s buying power and 37-year longevity that affords it this miracle, a long-standing relationship with purveyors that gives Su-shi 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 their favorite hangout, a place where you can revel in L.A.’s sushi wealth without need-ing to have a ton of wealth yourself. -B.R.

422 E. Second St., downtown; (213) 617-0552, sushigen.org. Mon.-Fri., 11:15 a.m.-2 p.m. & 5:30-9:45 p.m.; Sat., 5:30-9:45 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
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Sichuan cooking. Chengdu Taste — that the non-Chinese diner can feel as if he’s reading a list of inside jokes rather than dishes: “Potato 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 home-style 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-braised 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.


**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 in the slightest. If anything, recent meals have been more exciting, more innovative than when Ludo Levebvre, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo first won our hearts four years ago with their weird experiment of a restaurant. After a flurry of “snacks” that might include foie gras beignets and a tiny, tangy mustard crème brûlée, you’ll be served five courses of delicious oddities such as plump vegetable-root dumplings bobbing in a Parmesan broth, or pineapple sushi with burrata. Supplemental courses often are available — a recent Parisian gnocchi over Tahitian vanilla mousseline with black truffles was worth every one of its extra 29 dollars. With no supplements, the experience will cost you not much more than $100 per person including tax and tip (bought ahead of time as a nonrefundable ticket). The music will be loud, and the wine pairings, should you choose to go that route, will be wonderful. It all feels as vital and riveting as it did from the get-go. ~B.R.

716 N. Highland Ave., Hancock Park; troismec.com. Mon.-Fri., 6-10 p.m. Prix fixe dinner $95 + 18 percent service charge.

**Tsujita**

There are now Tsujita locations in New Jersey and Hawaii, and also at a mall in Glendale. The Tokyo-based company deserves its success, and we’re just happy to have more options for that stellar Hakata-style tonkotsu ramen, as well as the fantastical tsukemen, its dipping broth thick and silky. With a ramen annex across the street from the original Sawtelle location and a sushi restaurant down the block, there’s a whole lot of ways to give these folks your money, 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 outside for a prized spot at that original bar, where we’ll slurp on ramen while being intensely thankful for our ever-expanding noodle riches. ~B.R.

2057 Sawtelle Blvd., Sawtelle; (310) 231-7373, tsujita-la.com. Daily, 11 a.m.-2 a.m. Entrees $8-$14.95. Also: 769 American Way, Glendale; (818) 553-3822. Daily, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.

**Union**

There are few restaurants as tiny, bustling and convivial as Union, Bruce Kalman’s 3-year-old Cali-Italian restaurant in Pasadena. Large family groups commune at long tables, the babies among them happily gorging pasta as their parents drink in the interest of Italian red wines. It’s the type of place where people stop in for a quick plate of pasta and a drink at the bar, a perfect first-date spot, a perfect 100th-date spot. Starters, such as beautifully executed pork meatballs with a bracing kick of chili, are inventive but comforting above all else. The handmade pastas are the star of the show, however, from the simplest, tomato sauce-dressed spaghetti chitarra 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. With Kalman having opened a stall at Grand Central Market, and planning a restaurant in the former Bucato space in Culver City, it’s a wish that will be coming true for more and more of us. ~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 Deli opened in Grand Central Market, L.A.’s food obsessives started asking, “Is this now the best pastrami sandwich in town?” In light of our city’s devotion to Langer’s, the question seemed to be heresy, 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. The deli, which has expanded to include a second location in Santa Monica, 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; (213) 620-0633, wexlersdeli.com. Mon.-Fri., 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Sandwiches and bagels $3-$18. Also: 616 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica; (424) 744-8671.
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