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Visiting the vintage wonderland that is L.A.’s retro restaurants and bars

Regardless of whether you care about vintage culture, it’s a fact that what passes for glamour today is but a faint outline of the glamour of decades past. Nowhere is that more evident than in Los Angeles — and nowhere in L.A. is that more obvious than at its classic bars and restaurants. It is a daunting task to preserve these establishments, though, and L.A. — despite being home to a wealth of such retro spots — isn’t always up to it. Our restaurant critic Besha Rodell explores that conundrum in these pages, particularly as it applies to the Formosa Cafe. The hallowed Hollywood restaurant became a victim of L.A.’s apathy last year, when it closed its doors.

But there is hope for the Formosa. And there is a lesson there, too: We need to stop taking our retro riches for granted. Elsewhere in this issue you’ll find an exploration of the lost art of tableside service, which lives on at that beacon of retro chic, Dal Rae. You’ll find a visual tour of some of the most memorable vintage bars and restaurants immortalized on the big screen. And you’ll find our recommendations for some of L.A.’s finest old-school dining rooms and watering holes.

Basically, you’ll find a celebration of all things vintage and a reminder that it’s in the city’s best interest for you to patronize these places. But really, you should need no convincing to visit the Dresden or Chez Jay, Musso & Frank or Tiki Ti, Dan Tana’s or the Frolic Room. Preserving history is seldom more glamorous — or more delicious — than this. —Mara Shalhoup
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LA WEEKLY
On a patch of wall in the Formosa Cafe’s secret back room, there’s a spot where you can see three distinct layers of wallpaper, the remnants of multiple redecorations. The oldest is a beautiful botanical print, a black background with lemon yellow fruit on a green vine and bursts of white flowers. It’s probably from the ’20s or ’30s. Layered over that is a small gold and brown checkered pattern that looks to be from the ’50s, and on top of that is a vibrant red with a muted, spindly floral pattern that could be from the ’60s. Each layer represents a different era in the Formosa’s 92-year history, and they’ve only survived because the space, behind a fake wall in the rear of the restaurant’s famous train car dining room, has been neglected for so long. It’s perhaps the best-preserved physical history in a building that once embodied true vintage Hollywood.

By Besha Rodell

The city has staked much of its identity on the golden age of Hollywood, but it’s been less than stellar at maintaining its own incredible wealth of classic spots thrown its way. Opened in 1925, the venue became a hangout for many of Hollywood’s most legendary stars due to its proximity to the studios, and the lore surrounding the place includes stories of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall canoodling in the booths, Elvis giving a Cadillac as a tip to a waitress, and John Wayne sleeping off his bender in the train car–turned–dining room and then getting up in the morning and making breakfast for the staff.

The Formosa later became a shrine to those stories and that golden era, festooned with signed pictures of the stars who drank there. Over the years, the bar and train car dining room and red booths and low-hanging lanterns barely changed, other than to get progressively grimmer as age took its toll.

And then the Formosa was afflicted by something even more damaging than age: apathy. The new Hollywood set wanted flash, not nostalgia, and the tourists and wannabe screenwriters who frequented the Formosa were too few...
“THERE’S NO WAY WE’RE GOING TO BE ABLE TO PLEASE EVERYONE, BUT WE’RE TRYING TO BE TRUE TO THE SOUL OF THE PLACE.”

— Bobby Green of the 1933 Group, which is restoring the Formosa Cafe

Dmitry Liberman, left, and Dimitri Komarov of 1933 Group, which is restoring the Formosa

to keep it vital. I loved the place; I never went there. By the time the Formosa was shuttered last year, the hallowed restaurant had not only lost its luster, it had lost its relevance.

The story of the rise and decline and near obliteration of the Formosa, as well as its imminent rehabilitation, is the story of L.A.’s passionate but neglectful relationship with its vintage legacy. The city has staked much of its identity on the Golden Age of Hollywood, but it’s been less than stellar at maintaining — or even recognizing — its own incredible wealth of classic bars and restaurants. From Fair Oaks Pharmacy in Pasadena (1908) to the Scottish lodge wonderland of the Tam O’Shanter in Los Feliz (1925) to the old world European–themed Steak’n Stein in Pico Rivera (1946), the region offers an accurate representation of practically every decade of dining over the last 100 years.

Yet guides to L.A. rarely play up this fact. Despite the fact that many tourists arrive here and are baffled by the lack of Hollywood glamour, few resources point them to these magically transporting eateries. You have to do a deep dive on L.A. tourism website discoverlosangeles.com before you find anything about the places where Hollywood’s golden era are so well preserved — one page a few clicks in offers some suggestions for how to discover Frank Sinatra’s Los Angeles, and that’s about it.

Richard Foss, culinary historian and curator of the Pacific Food and Beverage Museum, says that our disregard for these places hinges on the city’s self-image. “Los Angeles has been for a long time self-consciously about the restaurant experience as theater, and also about the restaurant as something that is novel and innovative,” he says.

That sensibility, he adds, comes at a high cost.

“In Los Angeles, our attitude toward food causes us to destroy a lot of history — or worse, destroy it and then try to bring it back in a warped hipster version of what it once was. If you look at the Formosa, if you look at the old House of Irish Coffee on Fairfax, if you look at what was done with Clifton’s, all three of these were basically gutted and then redone in almost a parody of what they once were.”

Such is the conundrum of the historic restaurant. We never want them to change, but we don’t give them enough of our attention — or our money — to make change avoidable.

The Formosa is a cautionary tale about what happens when the luck of preservation through neglect runs out — and how that luck might somehow get restored.

Food has been the second great obsessive romance of my life; the first was with all things vintage. I began scouring thrift stores and junk stores as a teenager, and by the time I was in my early 20s I’d amassed a collection of old flowered china, antique furniture and vintage clothing that threatened to overwhelm my life. (I’m doing better with that now … kinda.) So perhaps it’s predictable that one of the things I have come to love most about Los Angeles is our abundance of vintage restaurants and bars. The surprising thing is how long it took me to discover them.

When I arrived in 2012 to be the restaurant critic for L.A. Weekly, I sought out the edible things the city is known for: the modern Californian food and the vast wealth of immigrant cooking. No one mentioned L.A.’s historic restaurants to me, and I found little mention of them in the research I did about the city. Early on, I got the sense that many Angelenos viewed places such as the Dresden and Musso & Frank and the Formosa as played out, destinations where tourists and newbies went to experience some kind of clichéd Hollywood fantasy. I never heard about the older neighborhood spots at all.

And when I learned about L.A.’s oldest restaurants from lists and guides and suggestions from friends, the time-travel aspect of them was rarely touted. I had heard, for instance, that Philippe’s the Original was a good place to get a French Dip, due in part to the probability that it was the birthplace of that sandwich. But it wasn’t until I went (during the research for my first 99 Essential Restaurants issue) that I realized how little the place has changed in its century-long history, how eating there is a lesson in what Los Angeles was like in 1908. Places like Philippe’s and Langer’s get plenty of attention thanks to the food they serve, but there are so many places in Los Angeles that exude history — restaurants you can step into and find yourself in a perfectly preserved approximation of another era — but that we mainly ignore.

Why is that?

The food conversation is mainly led by people (myself included) who have decided that the quality of a restaurant is almost entirely measurable through the taste of what’s on the plate; everything else is trivial. Not only that but the food must adhere to modern standards of deliciousness: It’s fine if something is retro, but it had better be retro/modern — cleaner, fresher, a winking nod to rather than an accurate representation of the past. (Unless it’s a burger — our old-school burger joints remain beloved while family restaurants are forgotten.)

That narrow focus ignores so many other desirable attributes. What about design? What about community? Rarity? Almost every mid-sized city in America has delicious farm-to-table small plates these days — how many of them have a world of restaurants and bars that reveal our edible history through the last century?

Taste is only one sense. There are so many other things about a restaurant that can deliver pleasure. Recently I’ve found just as much joy in other things, in other senses and in other kinds of taste.

Last year, I began to explore the history of Lawry’s the Prime Rib and realized that the restaurant is responsible for many of the things we take for granted in American dining. Did you know Lawry’s invented the doggie bag? That it was the first restaurant to offer valet parking? That it’s likely responsible for the American custom of
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Dal Rae opened in 1951 and moved to its current Pico Rivera location in 1958. It still looks the part, with some of the best midcentury light fixtures in town, and its menu has barely changed over the decades. You can order lobster thermidor or have cherries jubilee flambéed tableside for dessert. Even though you might find hunks of lobster baked in cream sauce with hollandaise and cheese a little overwhelming, you’re much more likely to understand the appeal of this type of food here as opposed to at L.A.’s many other vintage restaurants. Because at Dal Rae, they’re not just serving throwback food, they’re cooking it with the type of care you’d expect of any upscale restaurant.

When you eat Dal Rae’s oysters Rockefeller, you can sense that the creamed spinach was made properly, that the oysters are fresh. There’s a wonderful appetizer of artichoke bottoms stuffed with crab, and it’s obvious the kitchen staff trimmed the artichokes in-house, made the sauce from scratch, used high-quality crab. It’s a place where you really can eat almost exactly the way a glamorous couple might have eaten in 1950 when they had something to celebrate.

What makes any of these things less thrilling than food that adheres to modern standards of good taste?

Standing in the Formosa’s main bar, Dimitri Komarov and Bobby Green consider the faux-baroque, red-patterned walls. “The wallpaper was a last-ditch attempt to give the place some of its character back,” Green says of yet another, more recent layer of the restaurant’s past.

The two men are part of a team that’s taking on a daunting task: Bring the Formosa back from extinction. Despite its glamorous history, the Formosa struggled financially. Vince Jung, whose father and grandfather operated the Formosa before him, had made several attempts to try to lure in new customers. In 2014, he partnered with the management of the cutting-edge (and now closed) Red Medicine, who installed a young chef in Formosa’s kitchen and introduced a menu of modern Asian food. The development was heartening — a strategy for making something old relevant again without tinkering with its physical history. The food was good — exciting even — and the place retained its character. But the business relationship didn’t work out, and Red Med at Formosa lasted only a few months.

Jung then turned over operations to a third party. Those operators decided the Formosa needed a whole new look, and — according to Jung, without his knowledge — they gave the place a complete overhaul: new seating, new lighting, new everything. They took out all the memorabilia, the signed photos and vintage decor, and painted the walls a flat slate gray.

The disapproval was immediate and universal. The Formosa’s Facebook page was flooded with angry comments. One Eater L.A. headline read: “Everyone hates the new Formosa Cafe remodel.”

Realizing their mistake, the new operators tried to inject some of the vintage feel back into the room. Hence the baroque red wallpaper. But it was too late; the damage was done. And after almost a century, the Formosa closed its doors late last year.

“Either you live and breathe vintage, or you don’t,” says Green, who along with Komarov and their partner Dmitry Liberman leased the space from Jung this spring. “That’s always been my aesthetic.”

The three men operate the bar and restaurant collective 1933 Group, whose initial projects were bars that doubled...
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as over-the-top vintage fantasies. For instance, Sassafras, their Southern-themed bar that opened in 2012, was created by moving an entire historic townhouse from Savannah, Georgia, and installing it inside a building in Hollywood, along with burnished mirrors and various antebellum antiques.

But over the last couple of years, the group has moved from conjuring manufactured history to something closer to true historic preservation. The transformation began with the Idle Hour, a 1940s “programmatic” building (built to look like a barrel) in North Hollywood, and the Highland Park Bowl, a 1920s bowling alley in Highland Park that had been converted to a live-music venue in the early ’70s. On the latter, the 1933 Group spent more than a year painstakingly removing walls and ceilings and uncovering the gorgeous wooden bowling alley underneath.

They have similar plans for the Formosa. Jung has kept all of the original memorabilia and fixtures in a warehouse and is working closely with the 1933 Group to put much of it back in place. A lot of time is being spent poring over old photos to see where things went and what the Formosa looked like in its heyday. There are grand plans for the rooftop bar and back bar areas, which were never part of the original vintage design, but 1933 hopes to bring them more in line with that aesthetic. The layers of wallpaper in the back room might serve as inspiration but they won’t survive: The group plans to restore that secret room to its original purpose: a venue for private parties, and also a place where celebrities can hang out undisturbed.

“We want to bring it back to what it was,” Green says. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to please everyone, but we’re trying to be true to the soul of the place.”

In 1991, filmmaker John Waters said of the Formosa, “I always thought this is exactly what Hollywood should look like. The worse it gets, the more I like it.” In its final years before the gray-paint fiasco, the Formosa was basically a dive bar – a dive bar with a glamorous past, but a dive bar nonetheless.

In many ways, 1933’s operators aim to restore some of the Formosa’s legacy that time stole, to return it to its days as a fancy celebrity haunt. Even if they wanted to, they probably couldn’t restore it to a dive bar. You can’t manufacture a historical dive — only time and whiskey and sorrow and cheap beer and good times can create that particular magic.

Still, there are ways to preserve these places that don’t involve history-destroying renovations and don’t rely on the wishful thinking that nothing will ever change, that rents won’t rise too much, that elderly customers will easily be replaced by younger dinners and drinkers. Perhaps the most interesting strategy is the old-restaurant-new-food approach, à la Red Med at Formosa. It didn’t work out in that instance, but that concept is showing promising results at Michael’s in Santa Monica, where Miles Thompson’s wildly modern menu somehow fits in beautifully with the late-’70s leafy-wonderland decor.

There are some restaurants where the food should be preserved for historic reasons — it would be a tragedy to lose the ability to taste the past at Dal Rae, and the menu at Lawry’s is an edible chapter in the history of the American restaurant. But imagine if the Dresden served food that matched the glory of its stunning dining room; imagine if someone took over Club Tee Gee, the 70-year-old Atwater Village bar that’s on the brink of closure, and changed nothing except the quality of the bar snacks and beer selection. Sure, it would be nice if Club Tee Gee could continue forever exactly as it is, but that’s probably unrealistic. What’s the compromise that includes preservation yet ensures survival?

“I can go into any part of Los Angeles and find some place with high ceilings, hard surfaces, loud music,” Richard Foss says. “It’s interchangeable. But when I go to a place that has that real neighborhood feel — I’ll give the example of Old Tony’s on the Pier — you walk in and you are in 1950. This is like a mental vacation for me. This is a place that is unlike all the other cookie-cutter places that are modern. But unfortunately, the only incentive that matters is customers.”
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At Dal Rae, happiness is a warm banana flambé

By Jennifer Swann

At Dal Rae, the Pico Rivera restaurant where the same family has been serving surf and turf on white tablecloths for five decades, a traditional meal starts with the Caesar salad, and the Caesar starts with a dollop of anchovies. The pungent brown fish are finely minced in a food processor and then mixed with a dollop of anchovies. The pungent brown water. Finally there’s the lemon, gently squeezed through cheesecloth to prevent the pungent brown juice from the seeds. The Caesar salad is then served on a bed of crisp lettuce and topped with the pungent brown dressing.

At that time in the 1970s, Smith remembers, the restaurant was bustling with workers from the now-shuttered Ford auto plant across the street, horse trainers and celebrity jockeys from Santa Anita Park and cigar-smoking businessmen making deals over three-martini lunches. Smoking in restaurants was still de rigueur, California had yet to crack down on drunk driving, and business at Dal Rae was booming — so much so that Bill Smith purchased his own stable of racing horses, each named after his father, Ben, and uncle Bill.

And yet, even on the verge of extinction, tableside service is perhaps its most precious. Ben and Bill Smith originally prepared tableside dishes including steak tartare and Grand Marnier Supreme, and the younger Smith brothers built on the tradition decades later. “They had both Lorin and myself to bring in our youth and our experience — you know, because my father and uncle were pouring coffee into their 70s,” says Kevin Smith, who originated Dal Rae’s tableside Caesar and duck a l’Orange.

“You have to be very gentle, you don’t want to bruise the lettuce.”

—Dal Rae co-owner Lorin Smith, on the finesse of preparing a tableside Caesar

Tableside service dates back at least to the late 19th century, when the French chef Georges Auguste Escoffier introduced dishes that were intended to both dazzle customers and transform dining into a tasteful spectacle. Escoffier is credited with inventing desserts such as peach Melba and cherries jubilee, which he flambeed over vanilla ice cream for Queen Victoria at her diamond jubilee celebration.

Tableside service experienced a renaissance in the 1950s, when it exemplified the height of American fine dining — a welcome extravagance following the meat rationing of World War II. The preparations, which are time-consuming and therefore costly for restaurants, fell out of style around the midcentury.

And yet, even on the verge of extinction, tableside dishes are still found on the menu at Los Angeles restaurants such as the original Lawry’s the Prime Rib in Beverly Hills, where the roast beef is carved to order from silver carts and the Caesar salad is tossed tableside from a spinning bowl. Never steakhouses, such as BOA in West Hollywood and Bistango in Brentwood, pay tribute to the tradition by offering tableside Caesar and Greek salads, respectively. But other recent attempts to revive the art form have
not been so successful: RivaBella, where servers prepared risotto from a tableside wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano, closed in 2015 after just two years.

The more modern incarnation of food preparation—as-spectacle is different in nature and in purpose from old-school tableside service. At the fashionable new Felix Trattoria in Venice, for example, diners have a full view of the glassed-in room where chef Evan Funke rolls perfect pasta by hand. Felix celebrates the chef as an artist whose methods are worthy of inspection (albeit from a distance); at Dal Rae, on the other hand, the spectacle is meant to make the restaurant’s higher-ups more accessible to diners—and to be a source of kitschy fun.

Dal Rae manager Kent Mailand started working at the restaurant three years ago, which makes him a relative newcomer by Dal Rae’s standards (79-year-old chef Benny Kase has been with the restaurant for more than 45 years, and he’s not an anomaly). But Mailand is a longtime believer and practitioner of tableside service. In fact, he boasts that he once prepared banana flambe for a crowd of 2,000.

The dessert, as Mailand tells it, is a twist on the bananas Foster invented at the New Orleans restaurant Brennan’s in 1946; Dal Rae’s version adds almonds and peaches. Mailand uses a spoon to cut a halved banana into six pieces, then fries the fruit in a copper pan along with butter, brown sugar, banana liqueur and rum. “We have 151. Some restaurants use 150 but we use 151,” he says with a wink, pointing to the bottle. When the alcohol hits the heat, blue flames shoot into the air. For him, the splash of the alcohol, the crackle of the fire and the alchemy of the sugars are just part of the magic.

“When people see it across the dining room, they say, ‘Ooooh,’” he says. “It’s making them happy. When someone’s happy, it makes you happy.”

Lorin Smith, who during most shifts wears a black suit and a floral tie, has prepared the Caesar likely thousands of times, the way his dad and uncle taught him. But if he’s the least bit bored by it, he never lets on. “You have to be very gentle,” he told one table on that recent Friday night. “You don’t want to bruise the lettuce. How about cracked pepper? How about extra cheese? Garlic on top?”

When a customer tells him her brother dined here recently, he quips, “You’re much better-looking.” Then he turns to me and says: “We’ve only known them about 40 years.”
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Some of your favorite movies were filmed at these classic L.A. restaurants and bars

Photos and Text by Jared Cowan

In a city with thousands of restaurants and bars, it can be a daunting task for film or television production to find the perfect location for an eating or drinking scene. Does the film take place in modern-day or 1950s Los Angeles? Does the script call for an Italian restaurant or a coffee shop, a dive bar or a lounge? Can the screenplay be adjusted in order to better suit the story and fit the budget?

Once that's settled, the filmmakers have to hope the business owners are game to play along. Production designer Bob Ziembicki recalls that Miss Donuts in Reseda, the location for a robbery and shootout in Boogie Nights, was almost not in the film. As he told L.A. Weekly in 2015, “It was a problematic location, which [we were] almost at a risk of losing, because [the owner] didn’t seem interested. It was all about not disrupting the business. ... We also had gag squibs and had to do a big cleanup before morning, before they were back in business.”

While for most eateries business comes first, appearing as a location in a film or TV show no doubt has its merits and, more often than not, brings additional customers through the door.

After considering many places on the menu, here are some of L.A.’s most memorable movie restaurants and bars.

Cicada, housed in one of downtown L.A.’s art deco treasures, was the filming location of the famous snails scene from Pretty Woman. The restaurant, previously Rex Il Ristorante, has been used in Mad Men, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Indecent Proposal, The Artist and Bruce Almighty, to name a few.

Jim Morrison was famously thrown out of Barney’s Beanery in West Hollywood for urinating on the bar, as depicted in Oliver Stone's 1991 film The Doors. Today, a plaque on the bar informs people that Jim Morrison sat there.
Hop Louie on Mei Ling Way in Chinatown has been used in *I Love You, Man* and *Mystery Men*. The pagodalike façade was used as an establishing shot in *Beverly Hills Ninja* for the scene in which Chris Farley is the hibachi chef.

The Frolic Room, a Hollywood dive bar with a long history, has surprisingly not been featured in many movies. It’s best known on-screen for a scene in *L.A. Confidential* in which Detective Jack Vincennes, played by Kevin Spacey, begins to question his own ethics.
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Watching _Memento_ for the first time, you're most likely to be consumed by the reverse order in which the story unfolds. On a second viewing, after your brain has processed the twisty events, you'll begin to notice visual cues such as the motif of the color blue, different shades of which permeate Christopher Nolan's film — from locations to sets to wardrobe to star Guy Pearce's eyes. Locations were scouted with blue in mind, and it's no surprise that the Blue Room, a Burbank dive on San Fernando Boulevard, was chosen for a key scene. Around since the late 1940s, the bar has blue lighting and turquoise pleather booths.
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Rae's Restaurant in Santa Monica has been seen in Bowfinger, Lords of Dogtown and True Romance, among other films. In a True Romance scene written to take place at a Denny’s, Clarence (Christian Slater) and Alabama (Patricia Arquette) talk over pie at Rae’s.
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Los Angeles might be a city obsessed with newness, but it also has managed to retain a host of classic restaurants that are all but impervious to trends. Whether you’re looking for 1940s-era glamour or midcentury kitsch, there’s a restaurant around these parts that can authentically deliver it (along with an entree of lobster thermidor or a “lumberjack-sized” steak, respectively). So grab a chrome stool at the counter or slip into a red leather booth and start eating your way through L.A.’s delicious culinary history.

The Apple Pan
Some restaurant experiences are simply a rite 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. —Besha Rodell


El Cholo
One of the oldest Mexican restaurants in Southern California, with roots extending back to 1923, El Cholo embodies the feel of Old Mexico à la 1940s musicals featuring Carmen Miranda. That feels especially anachronistic sitting as it does on a stretch of Western Avenue that’s pretty hard to feel nostalgic about. The food at El Cholo is hearty and slightly more original than you might expect. The tacos al carbon combining top sirloin and bacon would be right at home on a top-flight taco truck. The seasonal (May to October) green corn tamales are remarkably light and flavorful, with a fresh-tasting sweetness. —Angela Matano

1121 S. Western Ave., Harvard Heights. (323) 734-2773, elcholo.com. Locations also downtown, Santa Monica, La Habra, Corona del Mar and Anaheim Hills.

Clearman’s Steak ’n Stein/ North Woods Inn
Where do you go for an off-the-beaten-path food experience that brings together an old-school L.A. vibe, bizarre set-designer whimsy and good-for-all-ages American steakhouse grub? How about the eclectic trio of cabinlike, midcentury restaurants in Covina, San Gabriel and La Mirada: Clearman’s North Woods Inn. As you step into a North Woods Inn, you’ll slowly pull open a heavy wooden door and peer into a dimly lit, richly decorated room of rustic log walls, massive taxidermied bears, jewel-toned stained glass, sawdust-strewn floors and eccentric hunting-lodge kitsch. The signs tell you to “Please throw peanut shells on floor.” The meat-centric menu has enormous “lumberjack-sized” steaks and giant baked potatoes. Vegetarian options are few, but the greasy, gooey cheese bread and iceberg lettuce salad are worshiped with
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, it’s the one listed in its own box on the menu. Absolutely snowed in by cracked pepper-corns, thin chips of bacon and sautéed green onions, the pepper steak feels like the only extravagant meal you’ll ever need to pay for — especially when you spring for the starter Caesar salad that’s spun tableside. With the elevator-lite music, the irreproachable waitstaff and the ink-dark booths full of everyone’s grandparents, Dal Rae is almost the distillation of an old-school steak place. Plus it has one hell of a parking lot. ~Farley Elliott

Dan Tana’s

With its red-and-white checkered tablecloths, black-tuxedoed waiters and well-preserved regulars from roughly the time it opened back in 1964, Dan Tana’s could be a favorite dinner-and-drinks spot from The Godfather. The old-school feel draws people famous and not so famous, and long waits are common. The overflow heads to the long wooden bar, a classic L.A. hangout and celebrity-watching perch. It’s a great spot to sit, sip a stiff drink and observe the dining room, where you might catch a glimpse of George Clooney, Rupert Murdoch, Clint Eastwood or other notables chowing down. But don’t snap pictures — the guys in tuxedos take their jobs seriously, and they frown upon the paparazzi, including amateurish fans. ~Patrick Range McDonald

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 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. ~Besha Rodell
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Lawry’s the Prime Rib

It’s harder to get more historic Angeleno than Lawry’s the Prime Rib. Open since 1938 and specializing in tableside service, the dining rooms are ensconced in wood paneling, and countryside murals take you back to Ye Olde England. The dishes prepared at your table range from prime rib carving (produced on a special, space-age silver cart) to baked potato prep. The spinning salad with “vintage dressing” is a Lawry’s original, and a little on the sweet side. But their tableside charm is undeniable as servers whip the large silver bowl of lettuce, spinach, beets, croutons and egg in a dizzying process that coats every morsel evenly. Lawry’s flair is indisputable. —Angela Matano

100 N. La Cienega Blvd., Beverly Hills; (310) 652-2827, lawrysonline.com/lawrys-primerib/beverly-hills.

Musso & Frank

Step out of the tourist trap–laden, frat-boy noise of Hollywood Boulevard, and step into what is basically a time capsule — Los Angeles circa 1948. Musso & Frank is famous as the hangout of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler and William Faulkner, and it still delivers the same vibe, the same style of service and the same completely outdated food that it has been serving for 94 years. There are things worth eating on this menu, things you simply don’t see anymore — lobster thermidor, mushrooms on toast, liver and onions — and there’s a lot worth skipping. But there are countless places in Los Angeles to get a decent meal, and only a handful that act as a living museum to the food and dining culture of the past. Musso & Frank is the granddaddy of these spots, and also the most charming and the most fun. If nothing else, a martini or Manhattan at the bar, served by one of the gruff, red-uniformed bartenders (some have worked here for 60-plus years), is one of the most essential of all essential L.A. experiences. —Besha Rodell


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. —Besha Rodell

1001 N. Alameda St., downtown; (213) 628-3781, philippes.com.
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10 OF OUR FAVORITE VINTAGE BARS

These L.A. watering holes only get better with age

The next time a friend asks you to recommend a hip, new place to drink, might we suggest that you instead rattle off a timeless, old place to drink. Because while the former runs a high risk of being overcrowded or overrated, the dive bars, tiki bars, old bars and older bars listed below will be (slightly) less crowded and infinitely more reliable. So raise a glass — be it a martini coupe, a frosty mug of PBR or a tiki tumbler — to these classic establishments that have withstood the test of time.

Chez Jay
For nearly 60 years, Chez Jay has been Santa Monica’s most star-studded nocturnal hangout, spanning the Rat Pack, the Brat Pack and beyond. Alan Shepard brought one of the bar’s peanuts to outer space and back; dubbed the “Astro-nut,” it now sits in a co-owner’s safe deposit box. Lee Marvin once rode in through the front door on a motorcycle. Staying at his brother-in-law’s beachfront pad, President John F. Kennedy used to send a car to pick up a gorgeous blonde patron out back. (Her name was Marilyn Monroe.) The Beach Boys escaped the sun there. David E. Kelley and Michelle Pfeiffer had their first date there. The Murray brothers, Bill and Brian, had their mail delivered there. Ben Affleck, Matt Damon and Quentin Tarantino massaged scripts in a back room, where Henry Kissinger and various political bigwigs often held court. But Chez Jay isn’t just a haven for celebrities — and the luminaries would just as soon blend right in with the crusty regulars. — Mike Seely
1657 Ocean Ave., Santa Monica; (310) 395-1741, chezjays.com.

Damon’s
The front entrance of Damon’s in Glendale may be the most subtle tiki façade in town. But once you get inside, there are no punches pulled. It is fully tiki-ed out, with thatched walls and tropical plants and fake nuts and bamboo-coated pillars, a look that suggests not so much an actual island bar as a sensationalized midcentury vision of one. The cocktail menu has a large handful of well-made tiki drinks and bar classics — and the tiki drinks are legitimately fabulous, particularly the mai tai and the chi chi. They are fruity without tasting like corn syrup and creamy without reaching sludgy milkshake viscosity. These drinks are also stronger than they taste, and if you come on the right night — Monday for mai tais and Tuesday for chi chis — they are shockingly cheap. No matter how many you have, you’ll never drink enough to convince yourself that Damon’s is a tropical paradise, but you may drink yourself back to a time when it kinda-sorta looked like one. — Ben Mesrow
317 N. Brand Blvd., Glendale; (818) 507-1510, damonglendale.com.

The Dresden
Perhaps no other film depicts the reality of young people chasing the Hollywood dream quite like 1996’s Swingin’ — and the location that’s most closely associated with Swingin’ is the Dresden. The Los Feliz restaurant and lounge was established in 1954, and it was Vince Vaughn’s relationship with the late owner, Carl Ferraro, that allowed the filmmakers the ability to shoot there. “It was a place I started coming to before I was 21. Is that bad to say?” Vaughn says on the DVD commentary. Not only did the film make the Dresden a must-see destination for out-of-towners but an inter-
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national audience also has discovered the bar’s 35-year resident lounge act, Marty & Elayne.—Jared Cowan

1760 N. Vermont Ave., Los Feliz; (323) 665-4294.

The Frolic Room

When a friend comes to town, why not take them to where Bukowski drank? Hollywood’s Frolic Room is one of the only places Bukowski obsessives agree that he actually haunted, and a portrait of him hangs above the cash register. But you don’t have to be a Bukowski fan to appreciate a good dive bar and, thanks to gentrification, Hollywood boasts precious few these days. The Frolic Room has been around since Prohibition ended and continues to offer a paradoxically classy dive-bar ambience. Bartenders aren’t overly tattooed, out-of-work actors but suited gentlemen who will remember your favorite spirits every time you step in. The walls feature caricatures of Groucho Marx and Albert Einstein, two people who almost certainly never drank here but whose images provide a kitschy, old-school charm.—Nicholas Pell

6245 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood; (323) 462-5890.

Golden Gopher

With a punk rock–filled jukebox, a photo booth and vintage arcade games like Ms. Pac-Man, this downtown dive bar may well be one of the best in Los Angeles. But what makes the Golden Gopher truly remarkable is its special liquor license, which was grandfathered in from 1905 and still allows the sale of beer, wine and liquor as takeout. Hence the bar’s slogan: “Liquor here, liquor to go.” At its counter, not only does the Golden Gopher sell six-packs of local and craft beers and a huge selection of Scotch and Irish whisky — you also can pick up condoms, mints and soaps in preparation for the wild night you might have after Golden Gopher closes at 2 a.m. Not feeling so lucky? As a $50 consolation prize, you can take home your own golden-gopher statuette.—Jennifer Swann

417 W. Eighth St., downtown; (213) 614-8001, goldengopherbar.com.

HMS Bounty

At this venerable heap with a nautical theme, big guys with rolling bellies loll at the bar, flinging stories like spitwads. Brooding drifter types hunch over brown bottles. A few blue-haired ladies perch in a leather-coated booth, slicing up their rib-eyes neatly and sipping dirty martinis. Once a hangout for musicians and younger folk seeking refuge from Hollywood hot spots, the Bounty seems to have reverted back to type, which can’t be a bad thing, unless dives aren’t your thing. Nestled alongside the lobby of the Gaylord, it’s essentially a hotel bar that has gone to pot, mutinied against itself, the tablecloths frayed around the edges, the framed photographs fading into the walls.—Andrew Simmons

3357 Wilshire Blvd., Koreatown; 213-385-7275.

Hop Louie

Built in Chinatown in 1941, Hop Louie was never a destination for great Chinese food (the restaurant is currently closed),
Walking into the party like, I’m with the DJ

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Once, during Prohibition, I was forced to live for days on nothing but food and water. – W.C. Fields

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but it is a kitschy cultural artifact — and the real treasure inside the iconic, five-tiered pagoda is the dive bar downstairs (which very much remains open). The bar pours a deadly scorpion bowl that for years was the closest thing the neighborhood had to a cocktail culture, and all the cocktails here are cheaper than what you’d find at other spots — particularly in nearby downtown. Enjoy the jukebox filled with classic pop oldies, the makeshift dance floor and the much-appreciated, low-key vibe. —Garrett Snyder

950 Mei Ling Way, Chinatown, (213) 628-4244.

The Prince

The Prince first opened in the 1920s, when it was called the Windsor. It became the Prince in the 1960s, and the decor hasn’t changed much since then. If you’ve never been but think you recognize the space, that’s because it’s been in a number of movies, as well as serving as a stand-in for several restaurants and bars on Mad Men.

The menu is a hedonist’s delight, organized by categories including “small but not so small,” “fried cocktail” and “dry cocktail” — the better to pair with your liquid calories, which can be purchased by the bottle, at prices from $30 to $500. The Prince also has a mid-’80s drink menu of improperly made Long Island iced teas, mai tais, Blue Hawaiians and the like. If you’re looking for a bit of whimsy with your buzz, this is the place for it. —Katherine Spiers

3198½ W. Seventh St., Koreatown. (213) 389-1586, theprincela.com.

Tiki Ti

There’s a lot of Hollywood history packed into this tiny garage (literally, a former garage, and then a violin shop) of a tiki bar. The founder, Ray Buhens, opened Tiki Ti in 1961 after working in a number of bars around town, including Don the Beachcomber, the world’s first tiki bar. The drink menu is huge, featuring among its 94 cocktails just about every concoction that has been considered a tiki drink over the years, including many that can’t be had anywhere else. Though it famously allowed indoor smoking, that changed recently when the Buhens hired their first non-family employee. (Check the online calendar to make sure it’s open; the bar closes during the Buhens’ vacation.) —Katherine Spiers


Tonga Hut

Though it’s been open since 1958, Tonga Hut has not always been a tiki bar specifically. I’m so glad the owners finally settled years ago on tiki, clearly the North Hollywood dive’s true purpose. The extremely dark bar (your eyes will need a minute to adjust) serves the most classic tiki cocktails in town, all made with love and thoughtfulness, as well as a bartender’s menu of new creations. There’s a separate 78-drink menu called the Grog Log — if you can finish the whole thing in one year, you’ll be inducted into the Loyal Order of the Drooling Bastard. —Katherine Spiers

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Hatch Chile Roasting Calendar

Fridays: 5-9pm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/11</td>
<td>West Hollywood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/18</td>
<td>Hollywood</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/25</td>
<td>Silver Lake</td>
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<td>9/1</td>
<td>Valley Village</td>
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<td>9/8</td>
<td>Santa Monica</td>
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Saturdays: 11am-3pm

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/12</td>
<td>Tarzana, Westlake Village, Calabasas, Santa Barbara</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/19</td>
<td>Newport Beach, Pacific Palisades, Long Beach, Irvine</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/26</td>
<td>Encino, Sherman Oaks, La Cañada Flintridge, Rancho Mirage</td>
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<td>8/27</td>
<td>Century City **</td>
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<td>9/2</td>
<td>Long Beach, Ladera Ranch, Laguna Beach, Calabasas</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>Dana Point, Del Mar, La Costa/Carlsbad, Pacific Beach</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/10</td>
<td>Marina Del Rey **</td>
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** Tasting event only; no roasting.