

BEST OF L.A. FOOD & DRINK

LA WEEKLY

OCTOBER 9, 2009 \$6.99 (NOV. 16, 2009) WWW.LAWEEEKLY.COM





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FOOD & DRINK



You don't have to drive across town for the best dumpling or get on the freeway for the top taco anymore. In most cases you can walk down the street of your own neighborhood or ride a couple of stops on the train for some really good eats. After all, one-third of all California restaurants are in L.A. County.

Much of that has to do with real estate, of course, as well as the dramatic rise in all the hidden costs of what goes into that plate of food in front of you. As rents have gone up in the prime areas, chefs and restaurateurs have settled in neighborhoods that are cheaper and off the expensive beaten path. Increasing costs for rent, labor, linens, food, workers' comp and vendors charging extra for delivery are making it a challenging business.

"It's great for what it's done for local neighborhoods," Brad Metzger of Brad Metzger Restaurant Solutions tells L.A. Weekly. "L.A. has gotten so much more populated that these areas have been filling up."

"When Hatcher Hall opened in Culver City, people thought that was just the weirdest spot to open an important restaurant," says Metzger, who owns a hospitality recruiting firm that provides workers for L.A.'s top restaurants.

"You have to go where the real estate prices are, like Silver Lake or Highland Park. I think they're getting more expensive now, too, but two or three years ago when those deals were being cut, it was much cheaper than going into Abbott Kinney or prime West Hollywood," he says. That said, Highland Park real estate prices and rents already are feeling upward pressure.

As for what's ahead and pretty apparent in our neighborhoods already, it's

the growing fast-casual trend.

Metzger says fast-casual is getting bigger and bigger because there's much less labor and other costs for the owners. Many restaurant guests are fine with the concept of less service and not having to pay as much, especially the younger crowd. They don't mind waiting in line, ordering at the counter, grabbing their own silverware and drinks, and sharing a communal table.

"It's all about what's on the plate, the quality of the food," Metzger says. "The whole service mentality isn't as important to a lot of people today. People are getting out so much more now, it's less of what they really care about. It's more about the quality of the food and the price." That might account for the abrupt closure of many larger concept and upscale restaurants recently.

The California Restaurant Association says there are 25,382 restaurants in Los Angeles County — not including fast food chains or trucks — in an area that's divided up into five major regions.

The north includes the San Fernando Valley, Crescenta Valley and the Santa Clarita Valley. The south includes the South Bay, South L.A., Palms Verdes, Long Beach and Catalina.

The east includes Pasadena and all of the San Gabriel Valley, Boyle Heights and East L.A. The West side represents beach cities like Santa Monica and Venice as well as West Hollywood, Pico-Robertson and Sawtelle.

The central section encompasses areas such as downtown L.A., Koreatown, Atwater Village and Hollywood.

Here are our picks of what's best in your neighborhood, in an effort to spare you time on the freeways and help keep the carbon footprint down. —MICHELLE IFFEVEN



The Golden Bull's Caesar salad



PHOTO BY MATTHEW WELLS

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BEST SPICY BURGER: HARISSA

What makes this burger spicy is harissa, the zesty red chili paste native to North Africa. In this case it's Tunisian, because that's the birthplace of Alain Cohen, chef-owner of **Harissa**, the place to go for this burger. Cohen mixes harissa into grass-fed beef and brushes the bun with harissa mayo for extra pop. Still more flavor comes from preserved lemon, balsamic-flavored onions and roasted tomatoes. The bun is also Cohen's creation. It's a sandwich-sized version of his famous pretzel challah, both available next door at the bakery Got Koshier? Yes, both the bakery and the restaurant are kosher. Cohen makes the

harissa Tunisian style, using mostly pure red chili, with some garlic and salt. One version is mild, the other hotter. If you like the sandwich, you can buy two of the components to take home — the harissa and harissa mayo. You can buy the buns too, but you're on your own for the beef and garnishes. —**BARBARA HANJEN**
8914 W. Pico Blvd., Pico-Robertson; (310) 858-1920, harissala.com

BEST THAI: CHAO KRUNG

After decades of serving Americanized Thai food, Katy Noochlaor and Amanda Kuntee have taken over the baton at **Chao Krung** to create a chef-driven, elevated menu that reflects their parents' original offerings in what is now L.A.'s

oldest Thai restaurant. The curry selections are plentiful and would make any grandmother proud. The *kaeng hung-ley* (braised pork belly curry) is prepared with Northern Thai sweet pork belly and pork shoulder, simmered with ginger, palm sugar, turmeric, tamarind, curry powder and pickled garlic. The Thai green curry is made in the spicy central Thai style with green chiles, kaffir lime, coconut milk, eggplant, jalapeños and sweet basil. The menu is huge and may take a while to digest, but musts include "drinking food" small plates such as "Sister Ai's" *soar laam* sausage, which is a divine mix of pork, lemongrass, garlic, sticky rice and coriander root. It's served with fresh ginger, lime and bird's eye

chili. Another favorite is the *bai toad* — crispy broken crepes with steamed fresh mussels, garlic, chives and bean sprouts, served with sriracha. —**MICHELE TUEYEN**
111 N. Fairfax Ave., Beverly Grove; (323) 939-8361, chaokrungla.com

BEST BENTO BOX: BAR HAYAMA

Bar Hayama, located in a converted original Japantown bungalow at the end of the Sawtelle strip near Santa Monica Boulevard, is a family-run operation offering indulgent service. Whether in the traditional Japanese dining room for lunch, at the sushi bar or well-stocked sake bar, or outside around the firepit at sunset, this unsung gem boasts

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PHOTO BY MICHELE STUEVEN

some of the best sushi in town and an ever-changing bento box that can't be beat. Blending east and west, you might get beef-wrapped asparagus on one visit or black cod on another occasion, but it's never the same twice. Think Japanese advent calendar: Although the base will always include sushi and sashimi, the rest is up to what the market dictates. Don't be surprised if you find some lobster with your wild mushrooms in this creamy Japanese dynamite.

—MICHELE STUEVEN
1803 Sawtelle Blvd., Sawtelle; (310) 235-2000. bar-hayama.com

BEST REBOOT: CRUSTACEAN

Crustacean Beverly Hills, the award-winning restaurant from House of AN hospitality group, recently reopened its doors following an 8-month long, \$10 million redesign. That includes the Da La Rose restaurant located upstairs on the second floor with its own separate entrance, set to open later in the fall. The new, more modern interior of the main restaurant has a sleek new silver look, with the hot pond walkway still lead-

ing guests to their tables. The rebooted Crustacean features a brand-new menu of revamped classics (yes, the garlic noodles and Dungeness crab are back) and a whole new bar program from beverage director Peter Berriga, which features specialties such as a turmeric mule, with turmeric-infused gin, turmeric syrup, ginger syrup and citrus. Chef Tony Nguyen oversees both restaurants and is bringing to the table dramatic starters such as Tuna Cigars, made with instant emaki, brick de feuille, macadamia nut, Vidalia onion and tobacco caviar; Surf & Turf sashimi with wild salmon, A-5 Wagyu, crispy garlic, purple potato and tobacco chili vinaigrette; and Karate Salad with kohlrabi, black truffle, crispy Kennebec potato and garlic blossoms. For special occasions, reserve a front-row seat for two at the Chef's Kitchen Counter. —MICHELE STUEVEN
468 N. Bedford Drive, Beverly Hills; (310) 205-8990. crustaceanbh.com

BEST SQUID INK DUMPLINGS: LITTLE FAITY

David Kao's Little Faity is a Mar Vista neighborhood favorite hangout serving

Taiwanese favorites, but Kao's squid ink xiao long bao is the best on the Westside, if not the city. Served in the steamer and available only at dinner, the pitch-black soft pillows are filled with pork and shrimp surrounded by Kao's rich broth. No trip here is complete without orders of General Tso's cauliflower and orange chicken. —MICHELE STUEVEN
3809 Grand View Blvd., Mar Vista; (310) 574-7610. littlefaitydc.com

BEST CAESAR SALAD: THE GOLDEN BULL

A revitalized Santa Monica institution, the Golden Bull has a warm, friendly and intimate atmosphere with old-school decor, preserving the history and character of the original restaurant in a refined and contemporary setting. It's dimly lit with dark leather booths complemented by dark red walls and wood paneling. Chef Greg A. Daniels has rejuvenated the chophouse menu, and the Caesar salad, with Little Gem lettuce, delicate shaved crostons, freshly grated Parmesan and pecorino with chili flakes, really stands out. It's tossed with just the right amount of dressing and

garnished with mild slices of anchovy. —MICHELE STUEVEN
170 W. Channel Road, Santa Monica; (310) 230-0482. goldenbullsantamonica.com

BEST AVOCADO BURRITO: CAMPOS FAMOUS BURRITOS

It's nothing fancy or over the top, but Campos Famous Burritos has been bringing in Santa Monica for generations. Whether it's students from Santa Monica College across the street, Santa Monica High students after a football game or local hospital workers, Campos is a comfort zone to those who have been ordering at the counter since 1971. The avocado burrito is great for lunch, to eat it like a local, dive in and use your burrito as a vessel to dip the homemade tortilla chips and jalapeño salsa into. Campos also has menu breakfast on weekends and about 20 different breakfast burritos, plus dinner or the perfect hangover cure alongside a bottle of Mexican Coke or Jarritos soda. —MICHELE STUEVEN
2008 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica; (310) 450-4477. camposfamousburritos.com

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Crustacean's kampachi sashimi



PHOTO BY CARL LARSEN

**BEST BAR CHEF:
CHRISTIAAN ROLLICH**

The handsome bartender with the perpetual smile from the Lucques Group (Tavern, A.O.C. and Lucques), **Christiaan Rollich** can easily be credited with the mind-boggling renaissance of the cocktail in Los Angeles and the inventive use of ingredients and techniques that have exploded in local bars. Each season he brings new cocktails to the bar, dependent on what's best at the farmers markets. He makes his own gins with a personalized combination of herbs and botanicals for the most kickass gin and tonic you will ever experience. In summer he raids the farmers markets for bushels of cherries, which are painstakingly pitted and then branded with sugar, lemon, orange, star anise, cinnamon, saffron and lavender to be used as a garnish for your Manhattan. The drink is a combination of rye whiskey and Rollich's house-made sweet vermouth and angostura bitters. His cocktail handbook of recipes, *Bar Chef*, comes out next year. —**MICHELE STUEYEN**
Lucques, 8474 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood; (323) 655-6277, lucques.com.

Tavern, 11648 San Vicente Blvd., Brentwood; (310) 806-6464, tavernla.com.
A.O.C., 8700 W. Third St., West Hollywood; (310) 859-9859, aocvinebar.com.

**BEST ROAST CHICKEN:
MON PETITE POULET**

Godefroy Prenot and Michael Denoun have brought the success of their restaurants in France to a small corner of a strip mall in Venice, where **Mon Petite Poulet** serves juicy organic and free-range oven-roasted chickens to go. They are cooked in natural juices with herbs like thyme and rosemary or fruits like oranges, olives and figs. You can get duck if you order in advance. Sides include *haricots verts*, roasted potatoes, lentils and ratatouille from Denoun's grandmother's recipe. There are lunch-box combos and madeleines or house-made chocolate cake for dessert. —**MICHELE STUEYEN**
705 Lincoln Blvd., Venice; (310) 314-2016, monpetitpoulet.la.

**BEST BBQ:
BABY BLUES**

I don't know how the neighborhood handles it, but the aroma of slowly

smoked meats starts wafting through the air early in the morning at **Baby Blues BBQ** in Venice. The down-home smokehouse joint with its rustic interior specializes in Southern-style pulled pork and baby back ribs. Get a platter, such as the *Porker*, which comes with a third of a rack of baby back ribs and Memphis-style ribs, one side dish (beans, coleslaw, potato salad) and the most insane butter-drenched cornbread. There's also catfish and grilled shrimp as well as smokin' wings, which are dry-rubbed, smoked and then grilled with your choice of house-made sauces (BBQ, Buffalo-style, XXX or sweet style). If you have room, try the key lime or butter-milk pie for dessert. —**MICHELE STUEYEN**
Baby Blues BBQ, 444 Lincoln Blvd., Venice; (310) 396-7675, babybluesbbq.com.

**BEST MUSHROOM PIZZA:
SOTTO**

When you walk into the romantic underground **Sotto**, you get a slice of something other than Los Angeles. Inspired by the regions of Italy, Sotto's mushroom pizza will transport you. A mélange of fresh wild mushrooms, including oysters, is nestled amid roasted

onions, garlic and chives on a tissue-thin crust. A sprinkling of melted scamorza cow's milk cheese finishes the rich pie. Uncomplicated, yet unforgettable. It's enough for two, along with a blistered Little Gem salad or the coastal organic heirloom tomatoes with Blue Lake beans, celery, white anchovies, Castelvetrano olives and shallots.

—**MICHELE STUEYEN**
9575 W. Pico Blvd., Pico-Robertson; (310) 277-0210, sottorestaurant.com.

**BEST FRENCH BAKERY:
PITCHOUN**

There are too many sweet and savory pastries to count at the Beverly Center location of **Pitchoun**. It offers traditional baguettes, country loaves, sourdough loaves, focaccia (olive, tomato/egg, bacon/egg.) The WelHo Lemon turnover is a neighborhood favorite, as is the Paris Beverly, a twist on the traditional Paris-Brest choux dessert, with praline-flavored cream inside, or a Nutella filling. It has seasonal favorites too, such as pumpkin spice macarons and pumpkin charcoal cubes for the month of October. From Oct. 15 through Oct. 31, the master bakers have

conjured up a casket full of Halloween specials, like Woodoo cookies, brain and pumpkin eclairs, a chocolate mice tart and a poisoned apple, made up of apple mousse, pain de Gênes and a caramel heart. —MICHELE STUEVEN
8500 Beverly Blvd., Beverly Grove; (323) 381-5328, pitchounbakery.com.

BEST MEDITERRANEAN FOOD: JAFFA

Named after the ancient neighborhood in the city of Tel Aviv, Jaffa is a favorite indoor/outdoor hot spot for the WeHo crowd. Chef Anne Conness blends new world and old world flavors with her largely plant-forward Israeli cuisine, including *hummuska* (hummus, spicy *shakshuka* sauce, poached eggs and pita) and market couscous with avocado hummus, roasted root vegetables and harissa. Fish options include an organic roasted Chinook salmon with spinach, figs, saffron *labneh* and pumpernickel croutons. And fear not, carnivores, there's chicken, rib-eye and lamb with Moroccan spices. Try the jidori chicken and matzoh ball soup with Hawaii spice and Yemenite green hot sauce. Plenty of

traditional favorites with a modern twist including *kafte*, *labneh* with figs and *kubaneh* bread. —MICHELE STUEVEN
8048 W. Third St., West Hollywood; (323) 433-4978, jaffa.la.

MOST ROMANTIC CHEF-DRIVEN PATIO: MICHAEL'S

The longtime Santa Monica classic Michael's is still setting trends with chef Miles Thompson at the helm, breathing new life into the place and bringing the Santa Monica Farmers Market to the tables of the restaurant's candlelit garden oasis. You'll see Thompson every Wednesday morning at the market, selecting all the produce himself and carting it up the Promenade to Michael's, and he's never too busy to share a few cooking tips with civilian shoppers. Changing seasons dictate the best menu items, such as octopus with candied chestnut puree, *gochujang* and fried kelp, or figs with smoked trout roe, lemon verbena and popped sorghum. —MICHELE STUEVEN
1147 Third St., Santa Monica; (310) 451-0843, michaelsantamonica.com.

BEST DESTINATION BAR: BIBO ERGO SUM

The stylish Bibo Ergo Sum, in an unassuming plaza, provides the West-side with a civilized and very grown-up cocktail destination. The drinks are on point, with a menu designed by the team behind Death & Co, the Normandie Club and Walker Inn. The decor takes its cues from the art deco era hut, rather than a pastiche theme bar, it's a thoughtful place to while away a couple of hours as you sample everything from simple well-made classics such as the Brooklyn or Singapore Sling to more ambitious, avant-garde libations—my favorites are the Cold Hollow, with apple and rum, or the complex High Note with mezcal, coconut and Thai chili. —JANELLE BENNETT
Bibo Ergo Sum, 116 N. Robertson Blvd., Beverly Grove; (424) 343-0066, biboergosum.la.com.

BEST THEATER BAR: THE BROADWATER PLUNGE

Let's just get it out of the way: At the Broadwater Plunge the guy who serves you a drink may very well be a familiar figure, a pop culture icon actually, the

guy who shot J.R. on *Dallas* and dreamed the entire show, then woke up on TV a few years later as Suzanne Somers' loving hubby on the sitcom *Step by Step*. Patrick Duffy's son Padraic owns the bar inside the Broadwater Theatre, and his dad gets his — and your — drink on from time to time. But this lively bar, popular with the actor and playwright crowd, is a destination regardless of the celebrity factor. The senior Duffy is a consistent supporter of the local theater scene, and his Broadwater complex hosts some inspired productions, including those of the Sacred Fools Company, helmed by his son. The family-owned bar is a new way to expose what's happening on Hollywood's Theatre Row but it's also a place for the community to gather, rehearse or party after shows. You don't have to be a thespian to drink here. A nice beer and wine selection and cocktail menu inspired by Sacred Fools (the Bombay Sapphire-based *Siren's Call* and mezcal-heavy *Serial Killer* both reference plays there) will make anyone want an encore. —LINA LECARO
6324 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood; (323) 538-5660, thebroadwaterla.com.

Little Fatty's squid
ink xiao long bao



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Pitchoun

October 4, 2018



LAWEEKLY

LA Weekly is a weekly newspaper that covers news, entertainment, art, culture and lifestyle.
(Circulation: 89,683)