

FROM THE **OCTOBER 2000** ISSUE✉ E-mail  Print

# The California We Love: Los Angeles

## Museums, eateries and antiques

Los Angeles | Downtown

### **Nuevo L.A.**

For something more than formulaic California-French cooking, Ciudad—that's Spanish for city—pays tribute to the cuisines of Barcelona, Havana, Buenos Aires, and other great Latin meccas. The decor is a hoot: lime-yellow walls and loopy murals that samba right up onto the ceiling—not to mention the waiters in sherbet-colored guayabera shirts. Owners Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken are the partners behind Santa Monica's campy Border Grill and the stars of the forthcoming PBS series *Border Girls*. Ciudad is a great downtown spot for lunch, or for a mojito (that wicked concoction of rum, lime, sugarcane, and mint) and appetizers before a Music Center performance. Best bets? Hearts of romaine, flanked by plantain chips, with Spanish blue cheese and roasted red peppers; Honduran ceviche laced with coconut, cilantro, and fresh pineapple; *papas rellenas*, potatoes stuffed with oxtail stew. Lunch, \$45; dinner, \$70. 445 S. Figueroa St., L.A., CA 90071; 213- 486-5171; [www.millikenandfeniger.com](http://www.millikenandfeniger.com).

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### **Art Moderne**

The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), somehow hidden in the towering California Plaza at the top of Los Angeles' Bunker Hill, is a large complex of galleries, designed by Arata Isozaki, beneath pyramids of glass. It opened in 1986 to the great glee of L.A.'s intelligentsia—at last L.A. had a gritty contemporary gallery, and indeed, visitors should have a strong stomach for the very modern. MOCA has a permanent collection of over 4,600 pieces, and exhibits change more or less quarterly. You never quite know what you're in for—at one point last year several of the galleries were taken over by thin metallic string stretched taut around nails in the wall. In some cases it was difficult to tell if there was anything there at all. The galleries are large and the exhibits laid out with a rare, extravagant sparsity.

Before MOCA on South Grand was completed, there was the Temporary Contemporary, so called for having stored and shown works waiting to move into the new museum. It proved so popular that it stayed on as an annex and was dubbed MOCA at The Geffen Contemporary. Two 50-foot-high warehouses were combined and redesigned by renowned architect Frank Gehry. They form, quite simply, a vast and glorious rectangle with which you can do almost anything. The ceiling is dark wood, the floors are plain concrete, and the lighting is a system of tracked spots. As with the main MOCA, there is no permanent exhibition, so call ahead. There's a shuttle between the two buildings, which share opening hours.

MOCA at The Geffen Contemporary, 152 N. Central Ave., L.A., CA 90013; 213-626-6222;

[www.moca.org](http://www.moca.org).

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### Sea Treats

Start with a dozen oysters on the half shell, maybe Kumamotos or Fanny Bays. Or the extravagant seafood platter served on a stand. That's the fare at Water Grill, the handsome downtown seafood house. Now that Michael Cimarusti has taken over the kitchen, it finally delivers on its promise. Cimarusti gets in the freshest fish from all over the world. Whole *loup de mer* (sea bass) is served over fennel; white clam chowder is laced with apple-smoked bacon. Don't pass on dessert. Pastry chef Wonyee Tom worked at New York's Gotham Bar and Grill and she turns out superb sweets. \$100. 544 S. Grand Ave., L.A., CA 90071; 213-891-0900.

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Los Angeles | Chinatown | Westlake | Silver Lake

### A Treasure Trove Of Cheeses

Say Cheese, a premier purveyor in bohemian Silver Lake for over 30 years, stocks over 200 types of cheeses from around the world. Choosing a variety is serious business here—the staff helps by doling out tastes. The shelves of the tiny, crowded shop are amply stocked with all manner of gourmet goodies: pungent Dijon mustards, Valrhona chocolates, distinctive oils and aged vinegars, dried morels, oil-cured Mediterranean olives—and the pick of the season's crop of cookbooks. The adjoining café puts together a terrific sandwich, too, and is something of a neighborhood hangout. 2800 Hyperion Ave., L.A., CA 90027; 323-665-0545; fax 323-665-6545.

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### Best Meal In Town Under \$5

Philippe the Original is probably the most egalitarian restaurant in L.A. Lawyers and judges, journalists and minimum-wagers, baseball fans and kids converge in Chinatown to line up at the counter for French-dip sandwiches. They are said to have been invented at Philippe's in 1918, when a bun accidentally fell into a roasting pan and soaked up some of the good juices. A French-dip beef, lamb, or pork sandwich will set you back between \$3.85 and \$4.15. Be sure to slather on Philippe's own punch-packing mustard. Carry your repast back to the communal tables, maybe with a piece of gooey coconut custard cake. Philippe's also has a savvy list of wines by the glass—Silver Oak Cabernet? Ravenswood Zinfandel?—because owner Richard Binder is something of a wine buff. \$ 1001 N. Alameda St., L.A., CA 90012; 213-628-3781; [www.philippes.com](http://www.philippes.com).

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### Hole-In-The-Wall

Mandarin Deli, in a Chinatown mall, makes fabulous pot stickers (try the hand-chopped filling of pork and greens) and steamed dumplings (the fish version is ethereal). By looking through a window onto the small kitchen, you can watch the cooks roll out the dough. In chilly weather share a bowl of "ground flour soup noodle"—a soothing broth laced with swatches of handmade noodles. You can't find a better meal for the price. \$ 727 N. Broadway, Suite 109, L.A., CA 90012; 213-623-6054.

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**Deli-Cious**

Don't even *think* about ordering anything else. Langer's Deli serves what is undisputedly the best pastrami sandwich on the West Coast—it's good enough to go head-to-head with any of the more celebrated New York versions. The meat (over two million pounds since 1947) is hand-sliced and piled high between pieces of Jewish rye. Best of all, you can ride the subway from Hollywood or downtown to half a block from Langer's door. (Just take the red line to Westlake-MacArthur Park.) \$ 704 S. Alvarado St., L.A., CA 90057; 213-483-8050; fax 213-483-7171.

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Los Angeles | Boyle Heights | West L.A.

**Beyond Huitlacoche**

After being closed for remodeling for almost two years, La Serenata de Garibaldi, the beloved Boyle Heights Mexican seafood spot, is back—spruced up, doubled in size, and now with valet parking out front. This is East L.A.—a ten-minute drive at the most from downtown. Courtly José Rodríguez is a master of sauces. At La Serenata, you pick your fish—Mexican sea bass, fresh snapper, halibut, giant prawns—and then a sauce to go with it. And if the specials include the delicacy huitlacoche, or corn fungus, don't hesitate. Mexican sea bass with *huitlacoche* in a smoldering red chile sauce is one of the finest dishes to come from Rodríguez's kitchen. You might want to order some of the fish tacos or a seafood empanada as an appetizer. All entrées come with a small bowl of soupy and delicious beans—and, of course, freshly made corn tortillas. Lunch, \$45; dinner, \$60. Wine and beer only.

If it's a Mexican breakfast you want, go to La Serenata de Garibaldi's casual offshoot, La Serenata Gourmet. Eat out on the purple-painted patio. Huevos rancheros come in a particularly graceful sauce with a bowl of fat brown beans and warm, freshly made corn tortillas on the side. Maybe even better: the *chilaquiles verdes* with a couple of eggs sunnyside up—a Mexican *pain perdu*. Who would have thought stale tortillas could be this good, simmered in chicken broth until they soften and soak up all its flavor, splashed with a stinging salsa verde, and topped with those golden-yolked eggs. Weekend breakfast 'til 2 p.m., \$8. La Serenata de Garibaldi, 1842 E. 1st St., L.A., CA 90033; 323-265-2887. La Serenata Gourmet, 10924 W. Pico Blvd. (in West L.A., near Westside Pavilion), L.A., CA 90064; 310-441-9667.

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**Amazing Mezze**

This West L.A. hole-in-the-wall with men smoking at the two tables outside on the sidewalk feels like downtown Beirut. Sunnin Lebanese Café, according to the menu, is "owned and operated by Famous Chef Much Loved Em-Toni". When she was the chef at L.A.'s premier Lebanese restaurant, Al Amir, the Lebanese community used to drive miles for her light and skillfully made *kibbeh*, those enticing lamb-and-bulgur croquettes. Though her own place is just a simple lunch counter, she's serving much the same menu. The best strategy here is to fill up on the wonderful *mezze* (appetizers); main courses, mostly kebobs, are not nearly as compelling. There's grass-green tabbouleh drenched in lemon, smoky



baba ghanouj, creamy hummus decorated with paprika and gold-green olive oil, and tri-cornered pastries filled with spinach and tart ground sumac berries—and, of course, the kibbeh. 1779 Westwood Blvd., L.A., CA 90024; tel/fax 310-477-2358.

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### **The Best Bottles**

A longtime favorite of the Hollywood crowd, Wally's, in West L.A., is the wine shop for older vintages of the great Bordeaux, Champagnes, Burgundies, and highly sought-after California boutique wines. Expert wine buyers like Christian Navarro will lead you to the perfect bottle. Be warned: customers from the film and music industries tend to have deep pockets! 2107 Westwood Blvd., L.A., CA 90025; 888-992-5597, 310-475-0606; [www.wallywine.com](http://www.wallywine.com).

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Los Angeles | Brentwood

### **Getting Into The Getty**

The new J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center has been lauded higher than the Brentwood hilltop on which it sits. Once you are up there looking down on Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and the ocean, you get the aesthetic point. It is not unfair to say that the Getty's attraction is due as much to the site itself as to its considerable contents. The heart of the complex is a pattern of interconnecting exhibition pavilions following the natural ridge of the hills and enclosing a large courtyard, all clad in Italian travertine. You really could be in a 16-century Tuscan hilltop town looking down on the valleys beneath (were it not for the Getty's modern architecture). There is a striking sense of light and flow. Visitors follow their own route. Movement from inside to out is relaxed. Hours can be spent among rich colors and materials—then suddenly you find yourself on a beige expanse of pavement softly reflecting the sun, as if it were a Florentine piazza.

The collection shows great strength and diversity. It reflects a clear passion for classical statuary; has one of the greatest collections of Greek vases in the world; features priceless illuminated manuscripts; and the furniture is a triumph of big pieces and reconstructed French period rooms.

### **Getting In**

A price has been paid for this location. Although it is for the public, the public can't get to it without first reserving a parking space a week in advance in the underground garage, which is down by an access road off the 405 Freeway. It's a very L.A. conundrum. Don't even think about public transport—it's a nightmare. Instead, you can arrange to have a hotel car or trustworthy cab drop you off and pick you up. And two nearby hotels, the Luxe Summit Hotel Bel-Air on Sunset Boulevard (310-476-6571) and the Holiday Inn on North Church Lane (310-476-6411), run shuttle buses for guests.

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### **Eating Out**

The Restaurant at the Getty Center, as it's called, may be more ambitious than any other museum restaurant in the country. White tablecloths, attentive waiters, an appealing California menu, and a wine list with every wine available by the glass set it apart—not to mention the spectacular view. It's hard to beat the tables



on the breezy outside terrace. 1200 Getty Center Dr. (off 405 Freeway, two exits north of Sunset Blvd.), L.A., CA 90049; 310-440-7300; [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu).

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### Getting Into The Getty

#### **A True Taste Of Italy**

Gino Angelini, the chef at Vincenti, grew up in Rimini, on the Adriatic, so he has a particular affinity for seafood. Taste his pasta with *calamaretti*, or tiny squid. His food has an unfussy, not oversauced Italian flavor, based on exceptional products (some brought in from Chino Farm, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from San Diego). He cures his own *guanciale*, the pork jowl that is essential to an authentic *amatriciana* sauce. Angelini also uses a wood-burning rotisserie for whole fish, poultry, and meats. The design of the Brentwood restaurant is as sophisticated as they come. \$90. 11930 San Vicente Blvd., L.A., CA 90049; 310-207-0127.

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#### **A Classy Bar And Grill**

Bruce Marder, who founded the now defunct and much-lamented West Beach Café in the early '80s, reprises his American cuisine at the cozy Brentwood Restaurant and Lounge. The bar boasts premium tequilas and glorious single-malt scotches (Steve Wallace of Wally's wine shop is one of the owners). The sublime Porfidio margarita was developed by Marder's wife, Rebecca, for her nuevo Latin place, Rebecca's. There's a swell shrimp cocktail with a subtly nuanced sauce; dry-aged New York steak is flown in from the Midwest; the 10-ounce burger is a classic; and the fries are about as good as they come. For dessert, dive into Dr. Bob's dainty banana split, made with a diminutive tropical banana, old-fashioned vanilla ice cream, and an exemplary hot fudge sauce. Dinner only, \$90. 148 S. Barrington Ave., L.A., CA 90049; 310-476-3511.

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### Los Angeles | West Hollywood

#### **See And Be Seen**

The Ivy, decked out in white picket fence, frilly umbrellas, and flowery cushions, is no place to go for eating, but it remains one of the perennial West Hollywood hot spots for star- and starlet-gazing. Even more so now that Robertson Boulevard is lined with boutiques. 113 N. Robertson Blvd., L.A., CA 90048; 310-274-8303; fax 310-274-8170.

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#### **Hollywood Insider**

Owned by Peter Morton, of Hard Rock Cafe fame, and his twin sister, Pam, West Hollywood-based Mortons is a real powerbroker place. Industry muck-a-mucks converge in this beautiful, airy space with its great art (note the Francis Bacon painting on the back wall), sensuous leather booths, and solid California cuisine. The steaks are consistently excellent (the twins' father is of Morton's of Chicago steakhouse fame). Other favorites include the house salad and lime-grilled chicken. \$100. 8764 Melrose Ave., L.A., CA 90069; 310-276-5205; fax 310-854-1067.