

# NEXT GEN FUSION

AS LOS ANGELES  
CONTINUES  
TO CELEBRATE ITS  
EVER-INCREASING  
DIVERSITY,  
CHEFS EXPERIMENT  
WITH MENUS THAT  
UNABASHEDLY BEND  
BORDERS.

BY ROGER GRODY

38 WHERE GUESTBOOK





PREVIOUS SPREAD:  
A FEAST OF INDIAN-INSPIRED  
FLAVORS AT SAMBAR

FROM TOP: THE  
DINING ROOM AT THE  
DISTRICT BY HANNAH AN;  
WHOLE GRILLED  
SEA BASS AT CASSIA

A couple of decades ago, Los Angeles chefs began experimenting with bold cross-cultural menus, combining the best elements of disparate cuisines. The movement, which usually involved Pacific Rim influences, was generally known as “fusion.” That term has since fallen out of favor with contemporary chefs, but the passion for combining eclectic elements from contrasting cuisines has only picked up steam.

L.A., a bona fide capital of the Pacific Rim, is a natural place to see a variety of Asian cuisines popping up in kitchens of professional chefs of all backgrounds. Given the region’s Mexican heritage, it’s also no surprise to find chefs combining traditional flavors from Mexico with those from other countries, including Italy and France. Unlike ethnic enclaves in some older American cities, where borders remain intractable, neighborhoods in L.A. are remarkably porous, and those blurred lines result in cross-cultural experimentation that has become L.A.’s culinary signature. A prime example: Chef Roy Choi, a Korean-American who grew up on streets dominated by Latin cuisines, launched his Kogi truck in 2008, and its Korean-inspired tacos are an iconic Angeleno dish.

Japanese and French are inherently compatible cuisines, both bringing distinctive techniques and aesthetics to the table. This combination is now taken for granted at French restaurants around the world, and chef Josef Centeno takes it one step further. At his refined Orsa & Winston downtown, Centeno combines various European traditions—predominantly French, Italian and Spanish—with Japanese and occasionally other Asian cuisines to create unique, contemporary American fare. On his daily changing tasting menu, you may encounter risotto made with prized Koshihikari rice that is laced with uni and topped with a clam espuma, or dry-aged Chinese-inspired duck with cherry mostarda.

Cassia is part of the burgeoning dining empire of restaurateurs Josh Loeb and Zoe Nathan, the couple responsible for Rustic Canyon, Huckleberry Bakery & Café, Sweet Rose Creamery, Esters and Milo & Olive. Ensclosed in a historical art deco building in downtown Santa Monica, Cassia combines the concept of a French brasserie with the flavors of Southeast Asia, courtesy of immensely talented chef Bryant Ng, who most recently

helmed the dearly missed Spice Table. The menu at Cassia is inspired by Southeast Asia, primarily Singapore and Vietnam, where Ng’s and his wife’s families are from. “It’s a very personal menu because it combines the food of my heritage but also has influences from my professional experiences, having worked in French, Italian and California-Mediterranean restaurants,” he explains.

This establishment features several distinct spaces, including a lounge, private dining room and wood grill—cooking over wood accommodates Ng’s passion for simple preparations—decorated with vintage Vietnamese birdcages. The overall look of the place is modern, combining raw wood and concrete, but retains the soul of a bustling Montparnasse brasserie.

Ng, who cooked refined French cuisine with heavy-weight chefs Roland Passot at San Francisco’s La Folie and Daniel Boulud at Daniel in New York, is able to apply all of that classical technique he learned to the flavors of Southeast Asia. At Cassia, therefore, you might

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find a traditional French pot-au-feu, but with a broth in the spirit of a Vietnamese pho, while escargots are prepared with lemongrass-infused butter. Among his signature dishes, passed down from the Spice Table, are kaya toast, a soulful Singaporean street food with coconut jam and a slow-cooked egg, and an exotic jellyfish salad with chicken, crispy rice and sesame-bacon dressing.

“Southeast Asian cuisine, particularly Vietnamese, meshes well with French cuisine for one obvious reason: colonization,” says Ng, who certainly doesn’t romanticize that era. “There was some delicious food that came out of this sordid period.” Like any good brasserie, Cassia offers impressive platters from the raw bar, as well as a charcuterie selection that includes Singaporean candied pork, Vietnamese meatloaf and Sichuan lamb ham. Snow-crab claws are offered, but so are steak frites with Phú Quoc island peppercorn sauce and whole grilled sea bass with turmeric, dill and lime. For dessert, there are riffs on classic French pastries, beignets and a seductive coffee pudding.

“Understanding the soul of a cuisine is the greatest challenge,” says Ng, who insists a chef needs to do more than simply introduce a single ingredient or tech-

nique to make this kind of cross-cultural cooking work. “Trying to incorporate multiple culinary influences requires a lot of self-editing and discipline,” he says, adding that the final compositions need to respect the represented cultures.


When it comes to a modern interpretation of Vietnamese cuisine, the An family—consisting of matriarch Helene and her five daughters—is the closest thing L.A. has to royalty, and the District by Hannah An is its latest achievement. The family dynasty began in San Francisco, where Hannah’s grandmother opened the family’s first restaurant, followed by the original Crustacean. The Beverly Hills edition of Crustacean, with its glass-covered, koi-filled stream meandering through the dining room, is a perennial celebrity hangout that’s also welcoming to civilians. After her sisters opened restaurants in Orange County and Santa Monica, Hannah, who was pursuing a career in engineering, returned to the family business. Last year, it was her turn to create a new restaurant concept, debuting the District in a two-level building near Cedars-Sinai hospital that fuses colonial charm with modern sophistication.

The District is Hannah An’s very personalized interpretation of her native cuisine, a restaurant where classic Vietnamese dishes are created with high-quality, seasonal California ingredients and where influences from France, Spain, China and Japan remind diners of Vietnam’s complex culinary history. The menu celebrates the five elements of Vietnamese cuisine—spicy, sour, bitter, salty and sweet—in dishes that are inspired by both street vendors and French-trained Vietnamese chefs. One can start with a pork-belly bánh mì or a bone-marrow dish that features elements of French onion soup before moving on to a signature dish of noodles with crab and uni, Vietnamese braised short ribs or coriander-crusted lamb with mint pesto.

Like Hannah An, chef Shawn Pham took a circuitous journey to opening his own restaurant. As a chef, Pham worked in some of the top kitchens in California: the French Laundry, Craft and the Bazaar by José Andrés. Eager to explore his Vietnamese heritage, the chef, who was born and raised in America, spent several years in Ho Chi Minh City, immersing himself in Vietnamese culture and cuisine. When he returned to L.A., Pham opened a restaurant that reflected his multiple personalities as a chef. Little Tokyo’s Simbal combines the best of Ho Chi Minh City’s food



CHEF RAY GARCIA  
ADDS SOME KICK TO HIS  
CAMPECHANA VERDE  
AT B.S. TAQUERIA,  
DOWNTOWN.



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stalls with sophisticated Western technique and Pham's playful attitude.

The creative chef plays fast and loose with international borders, suiting L.A.'s cultural sensibilities and generating excitement. Pham proves that sweetbreads, an ingredient long associated with staid Continental restaurants, can be brought to life with Asian flavors. At Simbal, they're served crispy with a fish-sauce glaze and plated with pickled Chinese mustard greens. Pham deconstructs a Vietnamese bánh mì sandwich into a salad inspired by an Italian panzanella and presents mussels with chili jam and Chinese doughnuts. His short-rib potpie with beef tendon, a nod to the beef stew called bò kho that he grew up eating, is seasoned with lemongrass and annatto.

Other attractions at Simbal are a 14-seat kitchen-view counter that hosts monthly guest-chef pop-ups, as well as a full bar with an extensive inventory of whiskey, bourbon, tequila and mezcal. Biodynamic wines and local craft beers are also on offer, and mixologist Brandyn Tepper complements Pham's cuisine by incorporating intriguing Asian ingredients like Thai basil syrup and lemongrass into his creative cocktails.

The potential for Indian cuisine to withstand contemporary, progressive treatments has long been underestimated. Downtown's Badmaash, a contemporary Indian gastropub, has advanced the cause. There, cross-cultural items like chicken tikka poutine and cheddar-stuffed naan that mimics an American grilled cheese sandwich demonstrate Indian cuisine's versatility.

Recently, chef/restaurateur Akasha Richmond, whose restaurant Akasha helped establish downtown Culver City as a dining destination, unveiled Sambar just steps from her original establishment. The pioneering Richmond has devised a fun, approachable cuisine at Sambar, which applies Indian concepts to familiar American foods. Under the menu heading "New Wave Masala" are various Indian treatments to iconic, all-American dishes, including masala-spiced chicken wings and a lamb burger topped with preserved tomato chutney instead of ketchup. The innovative chef even combines Indian and Mexican concepts in her "truck stop goat tacos," in which paneer, chili-lime slaw, tomato-onion chutney and pickled jalapeños are layered on corn rotis that resemble Mexican tortillas.

For her sevpuri, a ubiquitous stuffed-bread snack in India, Richmond substitutes California avocado for the typical potato filling. Conversely, she gives the beet-and-

goat-cheese salad, a staple on contemporary American menus, an Indian makeover at Sambar by using paneer as a cheese and dressing it with a turmeric-oil-lime vinaigrette. On Sambar's lunch menu, Richmond even offers a "Chindian" bowl, an homage to the small Chinese community in India. A true fusion dish, it combines shrimp stir-fry with cabbage, cauliflower, spinach, carrots, long beans, puffed rice and tamarind sauce.

Richmond first visited India many years ago, when she was studying yoga, and when she moved into an ashram in L.A., she began incorporating ingredients with healing properties (e.g., turmeric and ginger) into Western dishes. "The menu at Sambar was inspired by years of studying Indian cuisine and eating Indian food all over the world," she says.

The unconventional, celebrity-favored chef is also inspired by the city of L.A. itself, where she has lived for 35 years. "We have real ethnic communities in L.A., which gives us all kinds of great restaurants, incredible street food and the opportunity to experience authentic dishes from different cultures," she says. "I like to approach my own city like I would if I were traveling," adds Richmond, who refers to her cuisine at Sambar as "Indian-inspired and reimagined through a California lens."

At Little Sister, a bastion of Asian eclecticism that debuted in Manhattan Beach and recently expanded to downtown L.A., executive chef/partner Tin Vuong demonstrates the diversity of Asian cooking on a menu that simply ignores international borders. Vuong is classically trained but grew up in the San Gabriel Valley, where hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese bánh mì shops line Valley Boulevard alongside glitzy Hong Kong dim-sum palaces.

"Nowhere else in the world, in my opinion, has better food than the San Gabriel Valley," says Vuong, whose menu features "626 Provisions," a special section that pays tribute to his old stamping grounds. "Little Sister Downtown is the restaurant I've always dreamed of opening," he says. "My grandparents fled Vietnam during the fall of Saigon and have passed along a wealth of knowledge about Southeast Asian cuisine," says Vuong, who draws on that and his San Gabriel Valley upbringing for inspiration.

The young chef is remarkably fluent in a dozen or more cuisines represented on his menu. Signature dishes include deep-fried Balinese meatballs with banana ketchup (a Filipino condiment), and an okra curry celebrating the exotic cuisine of Myanmar (Burma). "I find the



OPPOSITE: CHEF BRYANT NG AND SOUS CHEF TRACEY HARADA PREPARE PLATTERS OF SEAFOOD AT CASSIA.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: MA LA BEEF TARTARE AT LITTLE SISTER; THE BANGALORE BLUES COCKTAIL AT SAMBAR

FROM TOP: DAN COLLOPY; JESUS BANUELOS; OPPOSITE: RICK POON



THIS PAGE: THE DINING ROOM AND BÁNH MÌ SALAD AT SIMBAL IN LITTLE TOKYO

OPPOSITE: A SMATTERING OF SMALL DISHES AT E.P. & L.P.

word ‘fusion’ to be implied,” says Vuong, who explains, “Southeast Asian food is already fused with influences from other cultures. At Little Sister, we just aim to present authentic dishes with classic French technique and modern plating.”

Its proximity to Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam makes the Land Down Under even more of a Pacific Rim culinary melting pot than L.A., and Aussie entrepreneurs Grant Smillie and David Combes bring exotic cross-cultural concepts to E.P. & L.P. in West Hollywood. A musical inspiration—E.P. (“extended play”) is the second-story dining room, and L.P. (“long play”) is the sprawling rooftop lounge—comes naturally, considering Smillie’s status as a globe-trotting DJ and investors who include a member of the band Swedish House Mafia.

The chef at this hipster hangout is Louis Tikaram, whose heritage includes Fijian, Indian and Chinese and who is himself a product of Australia’s underappreciated culinary diversity. The young Lakers fan honed his skills at one of Sydney’s most exclusive Japanese restaurants and rose to prominence as executive chef at Longrain, a trendsetting Southeast Asian-influenced eatery in the same city.

A signature dish at E.P. & L.P. is nama “sea pearls,” a version of one of the first things Tikaram cooked in Fiji with his grandmother, who inspired his passion for cooking. Nama, a salty seaweed, is served ceviche-style with coconut milk, lime and chilies. Other intriguing starters include wood-grilled baby green-lipped abalone on the half shell with curry paste and aromatic Thai seasonings, and a hot-and-sour wagyu beef tartare served with cassava and rice crackers. Bar snacks like Southeast Asian chicken wings pair well with exotic beverages consumed at L.P., such as boozy boba-pearl cocktails and “Pump Up the Jam,” served in a wild-looking vessel shared by four.

The art of fusion, or whatever we should be calling it now, is hardly limited to Asian cuisines. In downtown L.A., innovative young chef Ray Garcia infuses Mexican cuisine with clever cross-cultural nuances at Broken Spanish, as well as at a more casual venue called B.S. Taqueria. Garcia’s menus reflect the vision of a native Angeleno chef who appreciates his Mexican-American heritage but has been influenced by diverse cultures and cuisines simply by growing up in multicultural L.A. As a result, myriad flavors find their way onto a menu that may be grounded in traditional Mexican cooking but is not constrained by it.

Case in point is Garcia’s clever transformation of an unadorned slice of pan dulce, a morning staple in L.A.’s Mexican-American neighborhoods, into something with extravagant French undertones at Broken Spanish. Standing in for a slice of brioche, the pan dulce is slathered with a thin coating of foie-gras butter and dusted with piloncillo (brown sugar) for a memorable experience.

Garcia takes queso fundido—a dish akin to jalapeño-spiked, microwave-melted Velveeta that’s served in some neighborhood Mexican joints—and laces it with bacalao and roasted tomatoes, making the dish feel more grounded in the Iberian Peninsula than the Yucatán Peninsula. And the chef’s seasonal creamed corn, enriched with Japanese Kewpie mayonnaise, heated with manzano peppers and dusted with Parmesan, is a rich blend of European and Asian elements that wouldn’t seem too out of place in a classic American steakhouse.

Garcia’s menus borrow from different continents yet still honor his Mexican heritage. At B.S. Taqueria, his tacos feature some of the same toppings Mario Batali might put on his pizzas at Mozza, from mushrooms and garlic to clams and lardo. “Los Angeles is a great place to eat and operate restaurants because of its diversity,” says Garcia. “Dishes like the clam-and-lardo taco are examples of how we integrate ingredients and techniques from other cooking styles into traditional Mexican favorites like the taco,” a culinary approach he likes to call “cross-pollination.”

The imaginations of all of these chefs are consistently fueled by the cultural diversity of L.A., the most important ingredient of all. “Immigrants define Los Angeles as a great food city,” says Cassia’s Ng. “Driving from neighborhood to neighborhood, you can experience a culinary landscape that takes you not only from country to country, but regions within those countries,” he explains. “There are, undoubtedly, many immigrant populations all over the U.S. but very few cities with L.A.’s breadth and diversity.”

Fellow chef Garcia—he grew up in the same city at about the same time but viewed it from a totally different cultural perspective—concur with Ng’s assertion. “In a single-mile radius in L.A., you have instant access to a dozen different cultures’ cuisines and ingredients, all at your fingertips,” he says. Clearly, both Garcia and Ng, along with the other outstanding Angeleno chefs deft in the art of cross-pollination, work wonders with their hometown’s own special sauce.