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MICHAEL BAUER

LEAVES HOME

AND EATS UP



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COVER STORY

To live and dine in L.A.

Freewheeling, vibrant chefs embrace creativity and opportunity

By Michael Bauer

Earlier this year, Alice Waters was the muse for the \$45 “omakase cocktail menu” at the Walker Inn in Los Angeles. Yes, an omakase cocktail menu — a series of drinks that changes completely every six weeks.

We took a sip of the opening salvo — a glass of yeasty Champagne flavored with apricot liqueur and a spray of liquid made from a distillation of a baguette — inspired by one of Waters’ books where she describes the revelation of having apricot jam on toast.

Then we noticed a guy two stools down smiling, staring and bouncing on his seat before introducing himself as Wes Kauble. He continued to gauge our reaction as we worked our way through combinations like gazpacho with gin and vermouth, and blood orange with rye.

Kauble, 31, tries every new iteration of the Walker Inn menu. A game-show producer by day and active food Instagrammer by night (the *hai-ku review*), he can’t contain his enthusiasm as he details other places he’s been: Maude, Animal, Bestia, Chi Spacca, Hanjip, Petit Trois and other spots on the Los Angeles trend meter. He is one of a growing legion of young Angelenos who has become obsessed with food and tracks new restaurants as passionately as sports fans follow the Lakers or Dodgers.

“It used to be that we would talk about going to movies, but it’s so much more interesting to be able to talk about the crazy food I had at this certain restaurant,” he said.

Kauble moved to Los Angeles six years ago, and his culinary awakening parallels the city’s. In fact, it was only about five years ago that San Francisco chef Traci des Jardins, who once worked in Los Angeles,



Gary Knight



Gary Knight

Michael Hung's Viviane in Beverly Hills, above, has a cool Hollywood vibe. Hung, formerly chef de cuisine at La Folie in S.F., offers fine dining and also serves a Southwest burger, left.

was participating in a New York Times panel and noted that in Los Angeles it wasn’t about what people ate, but what they didn’t eat.

This new-found vigor of America’s second-largest city, a metropolitan area of 18.5 million people, has sparked national praise for its growing, vibrant dining scene.

Bill Addison, the national restaurant critic for Eater and former reviewer for The Chronicle, calls San Francisco the best fine-dining city in America.

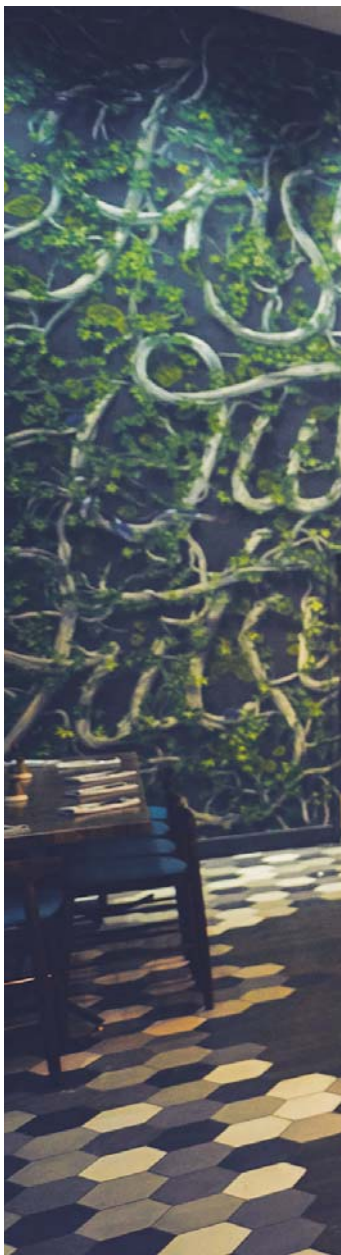
But, he believes Los Angeles currently has the most exciting dining scene.

It’s a pronouncement that might ruffle the feathers of the San Franciscans who think what’s been happening in our city is even more phenomenal than what’s happening down south. Still it’s impossible to deny that Los Angeles is setting some national trends and nurturing young, experimental chefs.

What I found after eating at more than two dozen restaurants in one week earlier this year, combined with my experiences in a trip last fall, was that chefs in Los Angeles are walking a different path than their counterparts in San Francisco.

While the more established restaurants such as Suzanne Goin’s A.O.C, which is even better today than when it opened in 2002, share some stylistic similarities with their San Francisco counterparts, there’s a decidedly more eclectic attitude thriving in Los Angeles. It’s more freewheeling with bolder, often less-refined, flavors. Ethnic influences are more prominent — particularly Korean, Mexican, Southeast Asian and Japanese, which has long been a strength in Southern California.

“In Los Angeles there wasn’t a big mainstream food culture, whereas in San Francisco the food culture has been developing since the late 1970s with such names as Alice Waters and Jeremiah Tower,” says Michael Hung, the former chef de cuisine at La Folie in San Francisco who moved to Los Angeles three years ago. “If you look at some of the most popular chefs around here, most of them have a street food back-



ground, such as Roy Choi.”

Choi gained national prominence for his Korean taco truck Kogi, which he followed up with several brick-and-mortar places including Chego, A-Frame and Pot, a hot pot restaurant.

Michael Bauer’s new L.A. favorites

For many years people complained there was a certain sameness about the food of San Francisco, most of it in the Italian/Mediterranean vein. Over the last few years that’s changed dramatically, but it still lags behind Los Angeles in diversity.

Los Angeles has the largest Korean population in the United States, and it’s third in Chinese residents behind New York and San Francisco-San Jose. It has the largest Thai population outside of Thailand, and Latinos make up more than 47 percent of the residents.

These influences are showing up all over Los Angeles, and diners are venturing out of their own neighborhoods. Many of these new trendy restaurants are more casual than their counterparts in San Francisco, but the food is so good they become destinations.

While I always enjoy established restaurants like A.O.C. and Pizzeria Mozza, here are some of my favorite new places in Los Angeles. For more top picks, check out sfchronicle.com/food.

— Michael Bauer

Baroo

Located in a dingy strip center, Baroo doesn’t feel like a restaurant. It’s more like its website describes it: “a free-style experimental kitchen.” Owner Kwang Uh, a Seoul native, and Matthew Kim stock shelves in the restaurant with fermentation jars filled with pastes, fruits and vegetables. The menu is written on the blackboard and starts with pickles including passion fruit kraut or watermelon rind with Brussels sprouts and berries. Bibim salad (\$9) mixes quinoa, oats, bulgur, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, fennel, carrot, radish and other vegetables in a chile paste and San Marzano dressing, all sprinkled with passion-fruit powder. Kimchi fried rice is made with fermented pineapple, toasted grains and roasted seaweed. Combinations are nearly indescribable, but also new and exciting. The dining room consists of two communal tables and a few stools. Service is spotty (the chef brings out orders); no alcohol is served.

5706 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles; (323) 819-4344 or baroola.strikingly.com. Lunch and dinner Tuesday-Saturday; dinner Sunday.

Rustic Canyon

Jeremy Fox is one of the nominees for the James Beard Outstanding Chef in the West region this year, for good reason. At this Santa Monica restaurant, he’s built on what he achieved at Ubuntu in Napa. Here, he’s not doing just vegetarian fare, but he still seems to have a deep connection to non-meat items, whether it’s ricotta dumplings with butter beans and sorrel or beets and blackberries with quinoa, avocado and pistachio. While the interior looks like a pleasant neighborhood restaurant, his food — and the cocktail program — raises the bar for what just about everyone is doing in California. His posole verde with mussels has become a deserved signature dish. If I lived in Los Angeles I would definitely be a regular.

1119 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica; (310) 393-7050 or rusticcanyonwinebar.com. Dinner nightly.



Emily Hart Roth

Jeremy Fox, formerly of Ubuntu in Napa, at Rustic Canyon in Santa Monica.



Sierra Prescott



Sierra Prescott

Timothy Hollingsworth's Otium, above, has an ambitious menu that includes pork belly, left, and a sleek, artistic look that befits its location next to the Broad Museum in downtown L.A.

underserved areas.

That street food sensibility also leads to places like Night + Market Song, where chef Kris Yenbamroong, who has no formal training, refuses to show mercy on the palate. He's luring diners to his Thai restaurant in Silver Lake with his fiery dishes like larb gai (minced chicken) and som tum (green papaya salad).

Other highly credentialed chefs, such as Charles Olalia, are abandoning larger restaurants for something more personal. Last year he opened Ricebar, a Filipino counter restaurant in a 275-square-foot

space downtown, a far cry from his job as executive chef at Patina in the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Exciting cultural blends are happening at other places such as Broken Spanish, where chef Ray Garcia offers modern Mexican cuisine; and at Hanjip, where Stephane Bombet, who also owns Terrine and Faith & Flower, debuted an upscale Korean concept.

The freewheeling and experimental mentality is attracting new talent to Southern California.

Hung is one of a growing contingent of prominent young chefs who are finding opportunities in the Los Angeles area they didn't have in the Bay Area. That includes Carlos Salgado, who worked at Commis in Oakland and last year was named one of Food & Wine Magazine's Best New Chefs for his Taco Maria in Costa Mesa (Orange County). He serves tacos by day and a fixed-price menu at night.

Another chef who made the

transition is Jeremy Fox, who gained a national reputation at Ubuntu, the now-closed vegetarian restaurant in downtown Napa. He moved south five years ago and is again generating national press as the chef of Rustic Canyon in Santa Monica, where people make a pilgrimage for such dishes as his pozole verde, made with mussels, Rancho Gordo hominy and poblano pepper. Last summer he also put his stamp on the new Esters Wine Shop & Bar (just across the hallway from Cassia, a beautifully designed restaurant that is getting great buzz for its bold southeast Asian flavors).

Timothy Hollingsworth, who worked at the French Laundry in Yountville for 12 years, recently opened Otium, adjacent to the Broad Museum in downtown Los Angeles within the shadow of Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Hollingsworth originally moved to Southern California with the idea of opening a taco

concept. He quickly realized that market was saturated and began looking for other options, which initially included Barrel and Ashes, a barbecue restaurant he opened in Studio City in 2014.

"Years ago I said I'd never open a restaurant in Los Angeles," said Hollingsworth. "I thought of L.A. as a place where people didn't appreciate food and were always searching for the next thing. For a long time no one supported restaurants, with a few exceptions, like Spago."

Hollingsworth's modern, vibrant Otium was one of the biggest openings of last year; it features a grand space and an eclectic menu that spans the globe, ranging from crudos to foie gras with funnel cakes to pasta puttanesca and whole grilled fish.

He realizes the menu is longer than it would be in the Bay Area, but he says that in doing research before opening the

Los Angeles continues on L10

Bestia

This Italian restaurant is probably the hottest reservation in town, located in a warehouse where the covered loading dock is used for seating. Chef Ori Menashe offers very good pizza — try the burrata and tomato punched up with Castelvetrano olives, oregano and fermented chiles. Much has changed since Wolfgang Puck once said Los Angeles diners wouldn't touch sweetbreads and offal: The Bestia menu includes pan-roasted chicken gizzards with beets; grilled pig ears with baby kale, apple and kohlrabi; and roasted lamb neck with pickled fennel. Of course, there's also grilled whole branzino, skirt steak and a half dozen pastas. The menu is ambitious but the scene trumps what's on the plate.

2121 E. Seventh Place, Los Angeles; (213) 514-5724 or bestiala.com. Dinner nightly.

Cassia

Bryant Ng channels his Chinese heritage and his wife's Vietnamese background to fuel the Southeast Asian menu at this ambitious Santa Monica restaurant. They take the idea of street food to a new level with a refined interior. The menu includes dishes like escargot in lemongrass butter served with blistered naan; grilled beef tripe in pho broth; grilled lamb breast with Sichuan peppercorns; and black cod in an anchovy broth with Chinese lettuce and lychee relish. Tip: Cassia is across the entrance from Esters Wine Shop & Bar where the small menu is created by Jeremy Fox (see Rustic Canyon).

1314 Seventh St., Santa Monica; (310) 393-6699 or cassiala.com. Dinner nightly.



Gary Knight

Michael Hung, formerly chef de cuisine at La Folie in S.F., opened Viviane in Beverly Hills.

Viviane

Michael Hung, formerly the chef de cuisine at La Folie in San Francisco, brings a meticulous fine-dining sensibility to the restaurant in the midcentury Avalon Hotel. The dining room opens onto a pool and the rooms where Marilyn Monroe once lived. With its cool Hollywood vibe it's something you can find only in Los Angeles. Hung's menu consists of starters like seared combo tuna with charred avocado and citrus and radish vinaigrette, and salmon cured like pastrami with whipped ricotta cheese. Share plates include roast chicken and dumplings; a whole fish baked in salt; and duck roasted en croûte with truffle vinaigrette and charred sour peaches. The menu and the cocktail offerings re-envision the continental food of the 1950s in a very 21st century way.

9400 W. Olympic Blvd., Beverly Hills; (310) 407-7791 or vivianerestaurant.com. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily.

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Los Angeles from page L9

restaurant he learned that many comparable menus had 40 or more items. In San Francisco, many top places have fewer than 20.

“I’m not saying Los Angeles has the best food, I’m saying it has a lot of opportunity,” he explains. “Now there’s much more interest, and L.A. is becoming more recognized on a national level.”

Leading the way is one of the city’s most acclaimed local chefs: Ludo Lefebvre, who has impeccable French credentials and was in charge of the kitchen at both L’Orangerie and Bastide, but became even better known when he went on the road with his pop-up LudoBites in the mid 2000s. He further set the direction of the L.A. dining scene in 2013 by teaming up with Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo to open Trois Mec, a tiny strip-mall restaurant with just four tables and an eight-seat bar. It features a lottery ticket system to secure a seat. He followed that up a year later with Petit Trois, 22 counter seats next to Trois Mec, where he serves one of the best French omelets on the planet.

Counter seating is another trend that seems to have taken a firm hold in Los Angeles. Last year Gary Menes, known for his stints at high-profile restaurants like Patina, Melisse and the French Laundry, opened Le Comptoir, a vegetable-centric tasting menu restaurant in the Normandie Hotel with just 10 counter seats.

Many of these nationally buzzworthy spots are found in warehouses or modest spaces away from the mainstream areas that have traditionally attracted destination restaurants.

Even two years ago downtown Los Angeles was deserted; now it’s booming with



Photos by Emily Hart Photography



Rustic Canyon in Santa Monica, above, is earning national buzz for former Bay Area chef Jeremy Fox with dishes like grilled country toast, left.

places like Bestia, an Italian restaurant in a drab warehouse that a few years ago would repel rather than attract diners, and Redbird, a bright, sunny modern American restaurant in the former rectory of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese’s cathedral.

Strip malls, where the sur-

roundings may not be glamorous but where rents are cheap (or at least cheaper), have become a kind of incubator of concepts with places like Baroo, located next to a shuttered 7-Eleven in Hollywood. The bare-bones restaurant offers only communal seating, but people line up for the inventive

Korean American food crafted by Kwang Uh and Matthew Kim.

Economics are a major factor separating new restaurants in Los Angeles and San Francisco, the latter which now has some of the highest leases in the nation. It’s much easier to set up shop in Los Angeles, a city that covers roughly 468 square miles, as opposed to San Francisco’s 47.

No one knows this better than Hung. The La Folie veteran moved south after finding it was too expensive to open his own project in San Francisco — even in the Tenderloin, supposedly one of the most affordable areas in the city. He had zeroed in on a space but then discov-

ered that it would cost about \$3.8 million to complete. “It opened my eyes to the expense of San Francisco in terms of taking it to the next level,” he says.

Instead, he moved to Los Angeles as the opening chef of Faith & Flower; earlier this year he became the chef of Viviane in the Avalon Hotel in Beverly Hills. It’s the kind of restaurant you would never see in San Francisco: A midcentury-inspired dining room designed by Kelly Wearstler opens onto a kidney-shaped pool. Hung’s carefully crafted cuisine might include seared tuna with charred avocado, or poached chicken breast with heirloom carrots, peas and smoked potato puree.

San Francisco has, since the Gold Rush, nurtured a population that cares deeply about food. This has led to a more refined but at times overly homogenous dining scene in the Bay Area.

In recent years, the Los Angeles dining scene has become less about being seen and more about the cuisine. Increasingly, Angelenos like Kauble are celebrating the more sensual side of food — and chefs are finding an increasingly accepting audience for their vision. Los Angeles is in the bubble of discovery, creating a more casual, free-wheeling dining environment.

“San Francisco and Los Angeles, for me, are truly neck and neck as dining cities,” says Eater’s Bill Addison. “California is on fire right now. There’s no better place to be eating in the country.”

Michael Bauer is The San Francisco Chronicle restaurant critic. Find his blog at <http://insidescoopssf.sfgate.com> and his reviews on www.sfgate.com. Email: mbauer@sfgate.com Twitter: [@michaelbauer1](https://twitter.com/michaelbauer1)

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Le Comptoir

It looks kind of like an old-fashioned lunch counter until you notice the 10 well-dressed patrons sitting behind plates of beautifully imagined food. Chef Gary Menes, who worked at the French Laundry and Patina, offers two seatings a night for his six-course vegetable-centric menu (\$69), which features two meat or seafood options. Much of the produce comes from what he’s grown in a community garden. That translates to such things as a silken pumpkin veloute with Greek yogurt or spaghetti squash with wheat berries, green pumpkin seeds and dried fruit. His commis and two interns also work as waiters, handing dishes from behind the counter, pouring wine and explaining what’s going on. Tickets must be purchased online for 6:30 or 8:30 p.m. seatings.

3606 W. Sixth St., Los Angeles; no phone. lecomptoirla.com. Dinner Tuesday and Thursday-Saturday.

Pot

Pot

Roy Choi started in a food truck and has expanded to a brick-and-mortar empire, including this Korean hot pot restaurant in Koreatown’s Line Hotel. He calls Pot “Koreatown and Korean food through the eyes of an American with Korean blood.” Each marble-topped table has a hot plate built in, and a shelf lies below to hold chopsticks — and to keep smartphones handy for the generally young crowd. The menu features a few salads, plates to share, “K-Town loves” (including spicy chicken wings and steamed dumplings), and mains such as hickory-smoked duck breast. The five pots range from old school with rib eye and noodles to a spicy vegan pot. Tip: It’s right around the block from the Walker Inn, a great place for a cocktail — or two.

3515 Wilshire Blvd; (213) 368-3030 or eatapot.com. Dinner Wednesday-Saturday.

Petit Trois

Petit Trois

Realtors claim sauteed onions give a house a homey appeal. I’d vote for butter. Heading into this strip-mall restaurant with views of a gas station’s garbage cans, it became apparent that butter pulls off miracles. Diners sit at the 17-seat marble counter and witness the cooks digging into mountains of butter. The dark brown fries are cooked in clarified butter. The must-order snails are drenched in it and enhanced with loads of garlic and parsley. The omelet is one of the best I’ve had. Owned by Ludo Lefebvre, Vinny Dotolo and Jon Shook, this is the follow-up to Trois Mec in the same strip center. This is classic French food in top form — a place where melted butter flows like water before the drought. The unapologetically rich food reminds me of how L.A. tastes have changed. Calories be damned.

718 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 468-8916 or petittrois.com. Lunch and dinner daily.

Timothy Hollingsworth was chef de cuisine at the French Laundry before opening Otium.

Sierra Prescott

Otium

Otium

Timothy Hollingsworth’s restaurant has a completely open kitchen and an artistic look that befits its home next to the Broad Museum. The ambitious menu features more than 30 savory courses that blend rustic and refined elements and influences from myriad cultures. That includes donabe, a clay pot with a grill on top for the smoky fillet of hiramasa with garlic, rice, bok choy and an egg; falafel with eggplant; pasta puttanesca; prawns with chile-coconut curry; and beef tartare with lavash and Middle Eastern flavors. It’s all beautifully presented. Clearly Hollingsworth, who was formerly the chef de cuisine at the French Laundry, is trying to forge a new trail and make the restaurant his own.

222 S. Hope St., Los Angeles; (213) 935-8500 or otiumla.com. Lunch and dinner Monday-Saturday.

Night+Market Song

Night+Market Song

No restaurant better illustrates how Angelenos embrace the street-food culture than this Silver Lake restaurant in a bare-bones dining room brightened with electric orange, pink and blue walls and a riot of colorful oil cloth table coverings. Chef Kris Yenbamroong has no formal training, but he is passionate about recreating northern Thai street food. Fried chicken thighs have an earthy relish of steamed and mashed water bugs. His larb contains both pork liver and blood, as do the meatballs. He shows no mercy on the spice level of his larb gai (minced chicken) or som tum (green papaya). It’s a far cry from the Americanized Thai food you get at most places.

3322 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles; (323) 849-0223 or nightmarketsong.com. Lunch Monday-Friday; dinner Monday-Saturday.