

## L.A.'s new restaurants serve up a great year

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RESTAURANT CRITIC

Each year I keep a running log to track restaurants slated to open each month. When this January rolled around and I started my new list, I fully expected the pace of openings to slow to a trickle.

That hasn't happened. Instead, despite the curdled economy, L.A.'s restaurant scene this year has busted out with new energy and invention. And it continues to inspire the entire country. I can't tell you how many New Yorkers and even, gasp, San Franciscans have told me that Los Angeles is now their favorite eating town. It's about time we got some deserved attention.

Instead of treading the tried and true, L.A.'s restaurateurs and chefs are experimenting with the wild and crazy, with pop-ups, crossovers and new genres. This year's crop of new restaurants includes sandwich shops, noodle joints, *izakaya*, wine bars, far-flung cuisines, wood-burning-oven specialists, plenty of communal tables and oddball bar concepts. Diverse doesn't begin to describe what's happening now.

And it's not just taking place on the Westside, traditionally the no-brainer address for a successful restaurant. (Because, the thinking goes, who would drive east of La Cienega? Well, the two Mozzas, and Campanile before that, drilled a hole in that theory, thank you very much.) Restaurants and bars are popping up downtown, on the Eastside, along the Wilshire corridor and elsewhere like mushrooms after rain.

The big surprise has been the South Bay restaurant revival, with former Water Grill chef David Le-

Fevre hitting his stride with a gutsy small-plates menu at Manhattan Beach's M.B. Post, which draws on influences from all over the globe. It's crowded. It's loud. It's beachy. And it has a terrific, well-priced wine list. Over at multilevel Strand House in Manhattan Beach, Neal Fraser (BLD, Grace) is consulting on a casual Mediterranean menu executed by Travis Lorton, formerly of Gjelina in Venice.

Even established restaurants have changed colors occasionally. [See Dining, E6]

We've seen French chef and food-show star Ludovic Lefebvre collaborate with Animal chefs Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo in an all-foie-gras dinner designed to stick it to those who want to outlaw the traditional fattened duck or goose liver. Lefebvre remains the highest-profile pop-up chef, probably in the country, with sold-out tenures at various kitchens around town and a truck making the rounds with his fried chicken. He's even brought the Ludo truck to Vegas, but not to Place Concorde in Paris yet.

The Animal boys opened a second restaurant devoted to seafood called, for no good reason, Son of a Gun, and decorated it with old buoys and nautical stuff from Dotolo's grandfather's attic.

Roy Choi of Kogi truck fame came out of the cold (again) to open the brick-and-mortar A-Frame in an old Culver City IHOP. He's added a fire pit out back and a menu that includes beer-can chicken and kettle corn dosed with seaweed and hot pepper.

At the Helms Bakery complex, Sang Yoon of Father's Office went upscale with Lukshon, his sleek, lively Southeast Asian restaurant.

At the edge of Little Tokyo, a former Pizzeria Mozza chef, Bryant Ng, came up with the Spice Table, devoted to Singaporean and Vietnamese food.

A couple of blocks over, Lazy Ox Canteen's Michael

Cardenas hired tattoo artists to cover the walls of Aburiya Toranoko, a modern *izakaya* with a skinny communal table running down the middle.

And Kris Yenbamroong, the young chef at WeHo's Talesai, added a pop-up called Night + Market inside the restaurant serving Thai street food on cheap enamel dishware.

Test Kitchen came and went. Ricardo Zarate, who, with that big smile, is everybody's favorite chef, finally got Picca open, a modern Peruvian tavern, with a boisterous crowd and punchy Peruvian cooking, including some killer ceviches and *anticuchos* along with quirky cocktails from mixologist Julian Cox. Meanwhile, Rivera's John Sedlar launched the more accessible Playa in the old Grace space on Beverly Boulevard with his smart take on Latin cuisine.

### Pizzas with pizzazz

Sotto, a rustic Italian trattoria from Steve Samson and Zach Pollack — with a Neapolitan-style pizza, a wood-burning oven from the old country and a savvy Italian wine list — moved in downstairs from Picca on Pico Boulevard, while in Los Feliz, Mother Dough is turning out the best margherita this side of Naples. This year, in fact for the first time, L.A. may outdo some cities in Italy in terms of number and quality of pizza places. I'd include Mother Dough, Sotto, Olio Pizzeria, Stella Rossa, Pizzeria il Fico and a new Pizzeria Mozza in Orange County in that company.

"Top Chef" winner (and former chef de cuisine at the Bazaar) Michael Voltaggio opened not one but two restaurants in WeHo, the first a sandwich shop called Ink.Sack and, finally, Ink. Serving his cutting-edge cuisine and with eight coveted seats devoted just to *omakase*, Ink quickly became one of the toughest reservations in



town, except for the hours nobody wants — 6:30 or 10:30 p.m. (What do you expect from somebody with 121,000-plus followers on Twitter?) Sounds like the early '90s, no? When restaurants were fully booked except for those awkward reservation times?

We also lucked into what has to be one of the best museum restaurants in the country with Ray's & Stark Bar at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It has sparkling cooking from Kris Morningstar and a posh outdoor bar looking onto Renzo Piano's Resnick Exhibition Pavilion.

SBE restaurant group (the Bazaar, Cleo, etc.) continues its quest for world domination with Mercato di Vetro, an Italian restaurant with four kitchens next door to the Troubadour in WeHo.

### **Tweaked formulas**

The burger craze got even crazier as entrepreneurs vied to strike it rich with the next new burger concept. Short Order from the late Amy Pressman, in

partnership with Nancy Silverton, may have the inside track when it opens in the next few weeks: The two spent months tweaking Silverton's already great burger recipe.

As I'm writing this, Josef Centeno of Lazy Ox Canteen has put the finishing touches on Baco Mercat, his global flatbread concept, in downtown L.A. Meanwhile, Ilan Hall of the Gorbals is busy tweaking the menu at Urbano Pizza Bar downtown. Claudio Blotta of Barbrix and chefs Dan Mattern and Roxana Jullapat just opened Cook County on Beverly Boulevard, serving California rustic cuisine and house-baked breads and pastries.

Even some old favorites are getting newer, fresher looks and menu updates. Mark Gold closed his sweet little Eva restaurant for a couple of weeks and reopened with a new menu and slightly lower prices. Wilshire has hired Nyesha Arrington as the new chef, who is in the midst of re-

vamping the menu at the Santa Monica restaurant.

Not to despair about the fine dining front: Under French chef David Féau, the Royce at the Langham Huntington hotel in Pasadena is doing great and delicious things. And just last week, Wolfgang Puck unveiled a new restaurant designed by David Rockwell in the revamped Hotel Bel-Air with an expanded, still very romantic outdoor terrace. Still to come: Maison Giraud in Pacific Palisades from former Bastide (and longtime Citrus) chef Alain Giraud, plus Tar & Roses from former Wilshire chef Andrew Kirschner.

And if you haven't made it to Pie Hole, a little place in downtown L.A. devoted to the art of pie, then it's time to get out and explore what's new this year. Have I left anything out? Probably. Remember too, there are still seven weeks before the end of the year.

Bring it on.

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LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times

**ARTFUL:** Ray's & Stark Bar at LACMA offers fine dining and a lovely view.



## Now on the menu

Here are the details for some of the restaurants mentioned in this article:

**A-Frame**, 12565 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 398-7700, [www.aframela.com](http://www.aframela.com)

**Aburiya Toranoko**, 243 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles, (213) 621-9500, [www.toranokola.com](http://www.toranokola.com)

**Eva**, 7458 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles; (323) 634-0700; [www.evarestaurantla.com](http://www.evarestaurantla.com)

**Ink**, 8360 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, (323) 651-5866, [www.mvink.com](http://www.mvink.com)

**Lukshon**, 3239 Helms Ave., Culver City, (310) 202-6808, [www.lukshon.com](http://www.lukshon.com)

**M.B. Post**, 1142 Manhattan Ave., Manhattan Beach, (310) 545-5405, [www.eatmbpost.com](http://www.eatmbpost.com)

**Mercato di Vetro**, 9077 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 859-8369, [www.sbe.com/mercato-divetro](http://www.sbe.com/mercato-divetro)

**Mezze**, 401 N. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 657-4103, [www.mezzela.com](http://www.mezzela.com)

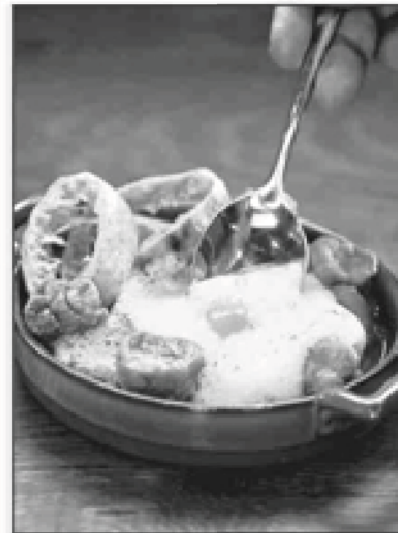
**Mother Dough**, 4648 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 644-2885, [www.motherdoughpizza.com](http://www.motherdoughpizza.com)

**Night + Market**, 9041 W. Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 275-9724, [www.nightmarketla.com](http://www.nightmarketla.com)

**Picca**, 9575 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 277-0133, [www.piccaperu.com](http://www.piccaperu.com)

**Playa**, 7360 Beverly Blvd. (between La Brea and Martel avenues), Los Angeles, (323) 933-5300, [www.playarivera.com](http://www.playarivera.com)

**Pie Hole**, 714 Traction Ave., Los Angeles, (213) 537-0115,



GINA FERAZZI Los Angeles Times

**SMALL PLATE:** Egg shakshouka at Mezze.

[www.pieholela.com](http://www.pieholela.com)

**Ray's & Stark Bar**, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 857-6180, [www.raysandstarkbar.com](http://www.raysandstarkbar.com)

**Royce at the Langham Huntington**, 1401 S. Oak Knoll Ave., Pasadena, (626) 568-3900, [www.roycela.com](http://www.roycela.com)

**Son of a Gun**, 8370 W. 3rd St., Los Angeles, (323) 782-9033, [www.sonofagunrestaurant.com](http://www.sonofagunrestaurant.com)

**Spice Table**, 114 S. Central Ave., Los Angeles, (213) 620-1840, [www.thespicetable.com](http://www.thespicetable.com)

**Sotto**, 9575 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 277-0210, [www.sottorestaurant.com](http://www.sottorestaurant.com)

**Strand House**, 117 Manhattan Beach Blvd., Manhattan Beach, (310) 545-7470, [www.thestrandhousemb.com](http://www.thestrandhousemb.com)

**Wilshire**, 2454 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, (310) 586-1707, [www.wilshirerestaurant.com](http://www.wilshirerestaurant.com)