

THE REVIEW

## Restaurant review: LA Mill Coffee Boutique in Silver Lake



Richard Hartog / Los Angeles Times

Diners lunch at LAMILL Coffee Boutique in the Silver Lake area of Los Angeles, Wednesday, April 16, 2008.

**A chic newcomer to bohemian Silver Lake, LA Mill is outshining every other cafe in town.**

By S. Irene Virbila, Times Restaurant Critic  
April 23, 2008

THE SERVER asks the two of us about coffee. We look at each other knowing there's no question -- we're going with the siphon, a Japanese contraption for brewing coffee that looks straight out of a chemistry lab. I love the magic-show of it, the moment when the server turns on the butane burner and the water begins to bubble in the spherical glass globe at the bottom, and then slowly rises up the stem and floods the chamber above where the coffee, coarsely ground, awaits. She stirs the muddy mix with a spatula -- slowly, carefully.

When almost all the water has done its rising act, she turns off the flame and the brewed coffee falls into the bottom chamber. She pours us each a cup of dark, fragrant coffee, which seems to hold all the richness of the bean in each sip.

At [LA Mill Coffee Boutique](#), the new coffeehouse in Silver Lake from the Alhambra roaster LA Mill, coffee-making is performed with ceremony. The options are dizzying: an espresso drink, French press or Chemex performed for the table; a single cup brewed in an \$11,000 Clover machine; or a cup of strawberry essence layered with donut-infused milk and topped with espresso.

To someone not much into coffee, this might seem well over the top. Yet none of it comes off as pretentious, just delightful. In its attention to detail, LA Mill feels more like a chic Paris tea salon than the usual coffee cafe.

In fact, there's nothing usual about the place. As an adjunct to its coffee and teas, LA Mill serves food that outclasses any other cafe in town.

### **Splendid menus**

SANDWICHES? We're not talking tuna fish or egg salad. Michael Cimarusti, the extraordinary chef behind [Providence](#) in L.A., devised the menu for LA Mill owner Craig Min. The deceptively casual food he's come up with makes LA Mill a destination not just for the exceptional coffee, but also for breakfast, lunch and, very recently, dinner.

At breakfast, you can have vegetarian-fed-hen eggs soft-scrambled or cooked in earthenware *cocottes* (little casseroles). Soft-scrambled *huevos Blanchet* with smoked salmon, asparagus tips and loads of chives makes a perfect start to a lazy weekend morning. Or have your eggs coddled with sautéed wild mushrooms and Niman Ranch apple wood-smoked bacon.

There's also a wonderful house-cured Tasmanian sea trout laid out on the plate like carpaccio and scattered with a confetti of tiny rice crackers and wasabi "peas" scribbled over with wasabi crème fraîche.

Morning pastries, though, are mostly unimpressive. Croissants are tough and not as flaky as they should be. The tall coffee cake has a lovely filigree of spices, but the texture is too dense. The blueberry muffin, loaded with berries, is the best.

Like the elegant desserts here, these are from Providence's talented pastry chef, Adrian Vasquez. Traditional baking must not be his forte.

Nevermind, you can always order Not Quite French Toast, a sophisticated rendition of childhood's cinnamon toast, made with great cinnamon and caramelized vanilla sugar on buttery brioche toast. For just \$4.50, it's a brilliant *petit déjeuner* with a cup of joe.

At breakfast I like to sit at the counter and watch the baristas in training work the espresso machine. They don't always get it right yet. The comfy upholstered stools swivel, all the better to take in what's going on in this chic cafe, which belies Silver Lake's scruffy self-image.

Take the elegantly dressed woman staring into the screen of her MacBook Air, or the Silver Lake bohemian with Pre-Raphaelite hair, a fringed leather bag and the world's skinniest jeans.

In the corner, two fledgling entrepreneurs go over their business plan, while mommies getting out for some caffeine pull fancy baby carriages around their table like wagons around the campfire.

### **Eclectic interior**

THE DÉCOR, by Scott Mangan at Rubbish Interiors across the street, practically defines the word eclectic. A hand-painted neoclassical wallpaper mural covers two walls, and an extravagant brass chandelier hangs in the main room. Mid-20th century armchairs are covered in the colorful leathers you'd expect on handbags.

Every single item, from the heavy paper napkins to the stainless steel creamer and stylish porcelain, has been selected for its design. And as of Tuesday, some of the coffee and tea paraphernalia (as well as coffee beans and teas) is available next door at LA Mill's retail shop.

### **Leeks and clams**

LUNCH includes some beautiful soups and salads. The delicious Yukon Gold potato and leek soup is laced with clams and apple wood-smoked bacon and crowned with a clam fritter.

Butternut squash purée has a deep, bold flavor heightened by a swirl of cream infused with a little coffee and Turkish urfa pepper. Coffee, too, gives the vinaigrette for the pretty *frisée aux lardons* salad a subtle jolt of caffeine. LA Mill makes a terrific *jambon beurre* -- a baguette spread with unsalted Vermont butter and fine slices of pink French ham, which like all the sandwiches comes with fabulous hand-cut Yukon Gold potato chips, olives and pickled *cipollini* onions.

The Asian BLT employs braised pork belly instead of bacon, arugula in place of lettuce, and gets a smear of preserved black bean paste. It's not my favorite, but it has passionate devotees. I favor the Farcell, made with Spanish cow's-milk cheese with a coffee-washed rind, roasted piquillo peppers, scallions and chorizo.

The prosciutto panino is made with Reblochon, a cheese that takes well to warming in the panini press. And although \$12 or \$14 for a sandwich may sound outlandish for this once-funky neighborhood, the fact is, for what you're getting, it's a great value. The quality is there, and that sandwich is large enough to share.

Another way to experience LA Mill is to come in the afternoon for coffee and one of Vasquez's fascinating desserts. Again, \$9 may seem like a lot for what is basically a hip coffee shop, but these confections are at the same level as at a high-end restaurant.

The standout is a passion fruit gelée with hydrated, sweet basil seeds and a white chocolate-coconut soy broth poured around the gelée. Ice creams are delicious and unusual, and if you crave just a

small hit of sweet, try a liquid center lollipop, but remember to eat it all in one fell swoop.

A few weeks ago, LA Mill began extending its hours and introduced a dinner menu, which adds four main courses to the lunch menu. Nobody nearby is offering better food at this price level.

Crisp-skinned New Zealand char is perfectly cooked, a deep rose at the center, served on silky *shimeji* mushrooms in a soy beurre blanc. There's also a great *onglet*, or hanger steak, charred rare and served sliced in a red wine sauce -- with frites, of course.

Smoked salmon risotto is more like rice than risotto, and my least favorite. Go with the chai-spiced duck breast instead.

And then if you're very, very good, you can stay for the five-course dessert tasting. One is plenty for two, or two orders for four. It's a wonderful way to spend time with friends. I wonder, however, if the kitchen would have trouble getting the elaborate desserts out in timely fashion if it were actually busy (it wasn't on the two times I went for dinner.)

Dinner is already a bargain in view of the quality for the price (nothing over \$24). It's also strictly BYOB, (no corkage fee), making it even more so. Service is lovely, informed and enthusiastic, in the best possible way.

If you order one of the coffee preparations for the table, it's like getting your own personal coffee seminar with advice on various grinds, roasts and methods of brewing.

Real coffee geeks will go straight to the coffee menu, which I can't begin to describe in this small space. Don't forget teas, either. Or the lovely lemonade made from fresh-squeezed lemon, a little sugar with a squirt of carbonated water just at the end, and garnished with a shard of caramelized sugar studded with lavender.

Silver Lake may never be the same.

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[LA Mill Coffee Boutique](#)

**Rating:** \*\*

**Location:** 1636 Silver Lake Blvd., Los Angeles, (323) 663-4441;  
[www.lamillcoffee.com/LAMILL\\_Boutique](http://www.lamillcoffee.com/LAMILL_Boutique).

**Ambience:** Unique Silver Lake coffee cafe from the Alhambra-based roaster LA Mill with a serious commitment to quality -- in coffee-making and presentation and in the food from consulting chef Michael Cimarusti of Providence in L.A. Breakfast is dreamy (except for the morning pastries); lunch solid and interesting. At night, a handful of entrees is added to the menu as well as a five-course dessert tasting from Providence pastry chef Adrian R. Vasquez.

**Service:** Friendly, smiling and informative.

**Price:** Breakfast dishes, \$8 to \$12; morning pastries, \$3 to \$3.50; sandwiches, \$8 to \$16; soups and salads, \$9 to \$14; dinner main dishes, \$19 to \$24; desserts, \$9; five-course dessert tasting, \$27.

**Best dishes:** Cinnamon brioche toast, eggs *en cocotte*, soft-scrambled *huevos Blanchet*, Asian BLT, *jambon de Paris* on buttered baguette, house-cured Tasmanian sea trout, *frisée aux lardons*, *onglet frites* (hanger steak and fries), passion fruit gelée, sweet potato "pie" with masala spice ice cream.

**Wine list:** There isn't one. The 10-page beverage menu includes coffee drinks, lemonade and iced tea. No corkage fee for dinner: It's strictly BYOB -- and bring your own glasses, too, unless you want to drink out of a tumbler.

**Best table:** One along the banquette.

**Details:** Open 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. No alcohol. Lot parking in back.

*Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality.*  
\*\*\*\*: Outstanding on every level. \*\*\*: Excellent. \*\*: Very good. \*: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory



At LA Mill Coffee Boutique in Silver Lake, barista Courtney Margueritte works the espresso machine.



A graceful chandelier and neoclassical mural offer a Paris-salon ambience at LA Mill, which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. Consulting chef Michael Cimarusti created the menu.



A butane burner heats the water to brew coffee by the Japanese siphon method at LA Mill Coffee Boutique.



A rich, dark brew is the result of the Japanese method.



Eggs with mushrooms, served in a cocotte, or little casserole.



The Asian BLT is made with braised pork belly and arugula with a smear of preserved black bean paste.



S'mores offer sweet comfort for dessert.



White chocolate-coconut soy broth is poured onto passion fruit gelée, circled by hydrated, sweet basil seeds.



A tree emerges in the milky swirl of a cafe latte.



Tiramisu reveals its layers in a glass, with a frothy topping.