

THE BEST OF 2008

A look back at some memorable restaurant meals



Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times

EATING LOCAL: Gjelina's rustic vegetable dishes and pizzas cooked in a wood-burning oven make this Venice spot stand out.

New restaurants such as Anisette unveiled dishes this critic is still savoring, while old favorites like Providence keep the dining magic alive.

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Restaurant Critic

It's impossible to capture the delights and terrors of a year of eating out in Los Angeles in a single short list. Some meals I'd rather forget, thank you. But others, the ones that yielded dishes that are still fresh and vibrant in memory, are the ones I'd like to repeat given the chance.

Casting my mind back over the last year, when I think of dishes or meals I really would like to have again, I come up with a dozen that stand out. This isn't a listing of the best restaurants necessarily, or even the best dishes -- I didn't read back over the notes I'd made on the hundreds, maybe even thousands, of dishes I tasted in the course of a year as The Times' restaurant critic. But these are the ones that stick out in my mind, in some cases even months after I tasted them.

Many of these dishes come from restaurants that opened this year. A few are from older, favorite places. The good news is that despite the economic downturn, 2008 saw a

bumper crop of new and enticing restaurants with owners smart enough to know they need to offer something more than the same old-same old. And that's something to celebrate, along with restaurants that keep the faith of honest, soulful cooking.

Let's hope that all our favorites will manage to hang in until the good times roll around again. And that worthy newcomers, especially those opening up in downtown L.A. or anywhere else off the beaten track, will find an audience of enthusiastic eaters.

The Bazaar's Philly cheese steak

The ebullient Spanish chef José Andrés has blown in from Washington, D.C., to open the Bazaar by José Andrés (yes, that's the official moniker) in the new SLS Hotel on La Cienega Boulevard. And it's quite the movable feast, with a sprawling *louche* bar, two tapas bars (Rojo and Blanca, traditional and modern, respectively) plus a pastry boutique with a long table and throne-like chairs that could be the setting for the Mad Hatter's tea party. A specially outfitted cart turns out foie gras cotton candy, waiters proffer liquid "olives" to pop in your mouth, and the tapas bars have some really beautiful *jamón*. But for sheer magic, try Andrés' unique take on the all-American Philly cheese steak sandwich, this one presented on gossamer-light "air bread" filled with a light cheese foam and topped with paper-thin slices of barely seared Kobe beef. Just two or three bites, it's a wonderful introduction to the delights of tapas Jose Andrés' way.

The Bazaar by José Andrés, SLS Hotel, 465 S. La Cienega Blvd., Beverly Hills, (310) 246-5555, www.slshotels.com.

LA Mill's artful coffee

An ordinary cappuccino or latte seems so, well, dull, compared with the offerings at Silver Lake's LA Mill Coffee Boutique. Owner Craig Min brings a sense of fun and fantasy to the art of coffee, not only roasting his own beans, but also serving up a coffee menu that runs to pages. At this hyper-cool cafe, you can indulge in a cup of joe brewed to order in a pricey Clover machine, a perfect espresso or latte. Or a glass of coffee infused with orange and set, literally, on a pedestal. But my favorite is the Japanese siphon, "performed" by a waiter who boils water in a glass receptacle over a Bunsen burner until it rises into an upper chamber filled with ground coffee beans, mingles and then falls back into the bottom as perfectly brewed coffee. But LA Mill doesn't serve only coffee or pastries. There's also a menu of delicious breakfast dishes, salads and sandwiches conceived by Providence chef Michael Cimarusti plus ingenious desserts from Providence pastry chef Adrian Vasquez.

LA Mill Coffee Boutique, 1636 Silver Lake Blvd., L.A., (323) 663-4441, www.lamillcoffee.com.

Pizza contenders

Pizza lovers lead a charmed life in L.A. these days. First there was Angelini Osteria's authentic pies. Then came Pizzeria Mozza and Nancy Silverton's irresistible *pizze* from the wood-burning oven. Now Jason Travi of Fraîche in Culver City has thrown down the gauntlet at Riva in Santa Monica with his own interpretation of the beloved Italian pie. It's taken him awhile to get the crust right, but as of last week, he's very close. And with a topping of sausage, bacon, meatballs, pancetta, caramelized onion and tomato, his "*molto maiale*" -- lotsa pig -- is a clear winner, the sweet taste of pork fat melding with the tomato sauce and judicious amount of cheese into something very like pig heaven.

On Monday nights too, Nicola Mastronardi at Vincenti gets into the fray with his thin-crust *pizze*. Keep a look out for the one topped with sweet pork sausage, *caciocavallo* cheese and either dusky fresh porcini or meaty shiitake mushrooms -- and, in season, truffles.

Riva, 312 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, (310) 451-7482, rivarestaurantla.com.

Vincenti Ristorante, 11930 San Vicente Blvd., L.A., (310) 207-0127, www.vincenti.

Gjelina's rustic vegetables

The menu at Gjelina on Abbot Kinney exhorts diners to "eat local." And you can do so most reliably by feasting on the rustic vegetable dishes chef Travis Lett turns out in a wood-fired oven. He does some terrific pizzas there too, but I find myself lusting after his baby beets and their greens drizzled in walnut oil and nestled against dollops of milky sheep's milk ricotta. Roasted eggplant and peppers in *agrodolce* (sweet and sour) -- cooked with raisins, a pinch of sugar and a splash of vinegar work a kind of magic too. And pairing the humble sunchoke with a vibrant salsa verde or artichokes with gremolata and Parmesan, well, that's just plain soulful.

Gjelina, 1429 Abbot Kinney Blvd. (at Milwood Avenue), Venice, (310) 450-1429.

Zoe Nathan's pastries

Not since the early days of Campanile when Nancy Silverton was turning out batch after batch of fresh-baked breads and pastries has breakfast riveted the attention of food lovers. That's because pastry chef Zoe Nathan of Rustic Canyon Wine Bar & Seasonal Kitchen in Santa Monica decided to do breakfast on Saturday mornings. It didn't take long before the place was mobbed with hungry early birds munching on Nathan's delightful *crostatas* filled with raspberries and blackberries, her flaky strawberry turnovers, or old-fashioned

buttery coffee cake with a vein of cinnamon crumble running through it. She'd start baking at 4 a.m. And keep baking all through the morning, even frying up divine French doughnuts to order. Sad to say, that breakfast is no more. Nathan has shut up shop while she and Rustic Canyon owner Josh Loeb work on Huckleberry, a bakery and cafe slated to open early this spring a few blocks west of the restaurant. If this is what she can do with Saturday breakfast, it boggles the mind to think what she'll get up to once she has an entire bakery to herself.

Rustic Canyon, 1119 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, (310) 393-7050, www.rusticcanyon.com.

Bratwurst at Wurstküche

Not since Sue Miller of the Let's Be Frank hot dog cart handed me a grass-fed beef dog have I been so excited about a mere sausage. Wurstküche, way downtown, proposes some 20 classic and exotic sausages along with almost two dozen truly interesting beers on tap, another dozen bottled beers -- and fat Belgian fries. That's pretty much it for the menu. But do you really need more? Drop in any time (they're open all afternoon and evening until 10, but soon, as in when the bar in back opens, they'll be open till 1 a.m). The bratwurst is fast (well, seven minutes) food at its best: a bun with some substance, a plump, handmade pork sausage bursting with juices, a dab of sauerkraut, maybe some sweet roasted peppers, brown mustard and you're home free. Have it with an Erdinger Dunkelweizen or a St. Bernardus ABT or, if you're teetotaling, one of the artisanal sodas. Hang around for awhile to bask in the arty downtown vibe. It kind of restores your faith in the viability of downtown.

Wurstküche, 800 E. 3rd St., L.A., (213) 687-4444, www.wurstkucherestaurant.com.

Marché Moderne's bistro food

This last year we've definitely moved into French bistro and brasserie revival mode with the opening of Anisette in Santa Monica, Comme Ça in West Hollywood and Church & State downtown, among others. Yet Marché Moderne at South Coast Plaza remains for me the quintessential modern French bistro. Chef-owner Florent Marneau makes his own charcuterie: rabbit rillettes, duck terrine and head cheese. He bakes *tartes flambées* (a savory Alsatian tart) in a wood-burning oven, and on Thursdays he makes bouillabaisse. He does a beautiful steak tartare, moules frites and braised rabbit with mustard. Add in his wife Amelia's luscious desserts and it's a destination.

Marché Moderne, 3333 Bristol St., Suite 3001, Costa Mesa, (714) 434-7900, [www](http://www.marchemoderne.com).

Braised lamb at Palate Food & Wine

Whenever I go to Palate Food & Wine in Glendale, I check the menu first thing to see if there's any baby Sonoma lamb from "dw" (that's farmer Don Watson, who drives down to L.A. a couple of times a month to deliver his delicate and flavorful lamb). On various visits, I've enjoyed the roast leg and some wonderful little chops, but the best piece of meat I had this year was a glorious braised shoulder of baby lamb Becerra served up one night scented with thyme and served in its own juices. Chef-owner Octavio Becerra knows enough not to trick it up. And this, like almost every dish on Palate's menu, is a model of balance and finesse.

Palate Food & Wine, 933 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale, (818) 662-9463, www.palatefood.com.

Anisette's fruits de mer

A good friend, a table at Anisette and a towering *plateau de fruits de mer*: That's my idea of a perfect light supper at Alain Giraud's oh-so-French brasserie. I love to order a bottle of minerally white wine and alternate sips with crisp, tiny Kumamoto or Hood Canal oysters, pretty little clams and Carlsbad mussels, meaty crab legs and plump shrimp dipped, French-style, in a tomato-tinged Marie Rose sauce. If I really want to splurge, I'll order the biggest platter, the Royal, which comes with a whole poached lobster and makes a splendid dinner for two or three. Be sure to ask about any *arrivages de la marée* -- arrivals from the sea -- that *ecailler* (shellfish man) Christophe Happillon has got in that day. And if you're still hungry, order the lovely rack of lamb for two served with a sumptuous gratin dauphinoise.

Anisette, the Historic Clock Tower Build

ing, 225 Santa Monica Blvd. (at Second

Street), Santa Monica, (310) 395-3200,

www.anisettebrasserie.com.

Santa Barbara spot prawns at Providence

Providence has to be the best seafood restaurant in all of Southern California, but unlike Hungry Cat, where you can slip in any time, this Hollywood icon makes more sense for special occasions. The setting is elegant, the service first-rate, and the food, from chef-owner Michael Cimarusti, is ever-inventive and surprising. He's one chef who knows how to pace a tasting menu. Between two intricate and edgy courses, he'll slip in something absolutely simple, such as his glorious Santa Barbara spot prawns buried and cooked in salt, each bite a hauntingly sweet, briny note of the sea. Don't forget about lunch on Fridays, which this extremely talented chef makes a real occasion.

Providence, 5955 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, (323) 460-4170,
www.providenceLA.com.

Chameau's duck bestila

Bestila, the marvelous Moroccan sweet and savory pie traditionally made with pigeon, egg cooked in spices, almonds and sugar, is a great deal of work to make, so whenever I get that hankering, I head for Chameau on Fairfax in L.A. Not your typical Moroccan restaurant -- forget about belly dancers or waiters pouring warm water over your hands -- this little place is more like a bistro. But chef Adel Chagar's individual duck *bestila* is a thing of beauty. Instead of using phyllo dough, he goes to the trouble of making his own thin sheaves of the traditional pastry called *warka*, made by bouncing a ball of dough off a hot pan, leaving a thin layer of pastry behind. The filling is a wonderful savory and sweet mix of duck, eggs and toasted almonds scented with cinnamon and covered with a drift of powdered sugar. To be followed by a *tagine* of chicken with preserved lemons or a fragrant couscous embellished with vegetables.

Chameau, 339 N. Fairfax Ave., L.A., (323) 951-0039, www.chameaurestaurant.com.

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