MICHAEL BAUER

LEAVES HOME

AND EATS UP

LA

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To live and wine in L.A.

By Michael Bauer

Freewheeling, vibrant chefs embrace creativity and opportunity

Earlier this year, Alice Waters was the muse for the 143-pocketed 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 yuzu Chamäleon flavored with apricot liqueur and a spritz of liquid made from a distillation of a bagnote—inspired by one of Waters’ books where she describes the revelation of having apricot jam last.

Then we noticed a guy two seats over smiling, staring and bouncing on his seat before introducing himself as Voskod. He continued to gauge our reaction as we ordered our way through combinations like garamboi with gin and vermouth, and blood orange with rye.

Kaush, 31, tries every new iteration of the Walker Inn menu. A game-show producer by day and active food Instagrammer by night (the, kaush, review), he can’t contain his enthusiasm as he details other places he’s been: Mande, Animal, Beso, Chi Spacca, Humph, Petit Trois and others. “It’s the Los Angeles trend meter,” he said.

Kaush’ tastes were a growing legion of young Angelenos who have been spoiled for choice with a new crop of restaurants that track new restaurants as passionately as sports fans follow the Lakers or Dodgers.

“Until just a few years ago, it was all about the food,” he said. “But now it’s all about the food. Of course, the food still matters, but it’s so much more interesting to have a story to talk about.”

Kaush moved to Los Angeles five years ago and says the culinary awakening parallels the city’s. In fact, he always enjoyed his food growing up in San Francisco, which has a street food back-ground, such as Roy Choi.”

While the more established restaurants such as Suzanne Goin’s A.O.C., which even today doesn’t appear to impinge on its creative menu, share some stylistic similarities with their San Francisco counterparts, there’s a decidedly more eclectic attitude toward fare in Los Angeles. It’s more freewheeling with bold, 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 1990s 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. “There’s a place of some of the most popular chefs around here, most of them have a street food back-ground, such as Roy Choi.”

For many years people complained there was a certain sameness to the food of San Franci-co, 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 hard in Chinese residents and belts New York and San Francisco as well. It has the largest. Population outside of Thailand, and Latinos live in a city around the city. While I always enjoy every up all over Los Angeles, and diners are venturing out of their own neighborhoods. Many of these new trendy restaurants are more common than their counterparts in San Francisco, but the food so good create exciting new places in Los Angeles. For more top picks, check out sfcronicle.com/food. — Michael Bauer

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

Michael Bauer’s new L.A. favorites

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Baroo

Located in a dingy strip center, Baroo doesn’t feel like a restaurant. It’s more like its website describes it: “a free-stylist experimental kitchen.” Owner Kwang Uh, a Seoul native, and myth- ern food stock shakers in the restaur-

Rustic Canyon

Jeremy Fox is one of the owners 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 Liberty in Napa. Here, he’s not doing just vegetarian fare, he’s still seems to have a deep connection to non-meat items, whether it’s ricotta dumplings with but- ter beans and corn, or butternut squash and blackberries with quin-

Jeremy Fox, formerly of Ubuntu in Napa, at Rustic Canyon in Santa Monica.
Timothy Hollingsworth's Ocitum, above, has an ambience that includes pork belly, left, and Bellwether, below, that hulls its location next to the Koreatown in downtown L.A.

underused areas
That street food sensibility also leads to places like Night & Market Song, where chef Kris Venham song, who base- formal training, refuses to show mercy on the plate. He’s serving diners to his Thai restaurant in Silver Lake with his fiery dishes like larb gui (minced chicken) and som tum (green papaya salad).

Other highly credentialed chefs, such as Charles Odula, are abandoning larger restaur- antas for something more per- sonal. Last year he opened Bircha, a Filipino restaurant in a 25-square-foot space downtown. A far cry from his job as executive chef at Pati- na in the Wall Disney Concert Hall. Exciting cultural blends are happening at other places such as Brekom Spanish, where chef Ray Garcia offers modern Mexican cuisine; and at Hanji, where Stephane Bondon, who also owns Terrine and Faith & Flower, debuted an upscale Korean concept.

Hing is one of a growing contingent of prominent young chefs who are finding opportuni- ties in the Los Angeles area. They didn’t have in the Bay Area. That includes Carlos Salgado, who worked at Com- miss 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 vegetari- an restaurant in downtown Santa Barbara. He moved south five years ago and is again generat- ing national press as the chef of Rustic Canyon in Santa Monica, where people make a pilgrimage for such dishes as his pork belly, made with smoked Ranchito Gordo hammy and pollo negro. Last summer he also put his stamp on the new Eater Wine Shop & Bar just across the highway from Casssel, a beautifully designed restaurant that is getting great buzz for its bold southwest Asian flavors.

Timothy Hollingsworth, who worked at the French Laundry in Yountville for 12 years, re- cently opened Ocitum, adjacent to the Broad Museum in downtown Los Angeles within the shadow of Wall Disney Concert Hall.

Hollingsworth originally moved to southern California with the idea of opening a two-

concept. He quickly realized that market was saturated and began looking for other opportu- nities, which initially includederved and Ashes, a familiar restaurant he opened in Studio City.

“Years ago I said I’d never be a restaurant in Los Ange- les,” said Hollingsworth. “I thought of L.A. as a place where people didn’t appreciate food and were always burning for the next thing. For a long time no one supported restaurants, with a few exceptions, like Slange.

Hollingsworth’s modern, abstract Ocitum was one of the biggest openings of last year; it features a gravel patio and an eclectic menu that spans the globe, ranging from truffles to fois gras with funnel cakes to pasta puttanesca and whole grilled fish.

He realizes the menu is lon- ger than it would be in the Bay Area, but says that in doing research before opening the Los Angeles continues on Lao

Bestia
This Italian restaurant is probably the hottest reser- vation in town, located in a warehouse where the cou- red loading dock is used for seating. Chef Di Me- nashe offers very generous dishes — try the tomato and tomato punch baked with a few hot peppers. Much has changed since Wolfgang Puck once said Los Angeles drivers wouldn’t touch sweet- breads and offal. The Besti- a menu includes par- manched chicken gizzards with beets, grilled pig ears with baby kale, apple and kohlrabi and roasted lamb with grilled fennel. Of course, there’s also grilled whole traminos, skirt steak and a half dozen pastas. The menu is ambitious but the same trum up what’s on the plate.

2127 E. Seventh Place, Los Angeles; (213) 632-3524 or bestia.com. Dinner nightly.

Cassia
Bryan 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 intent. The menu includes dishes like excr in rem- ongauge butter served with toasted rice; grilled beef tripe in pho broth; grilled lamb breast with Schum peppers and black chile in an anchovy broth with Chinese lettuce and yuca relish. Top: Cassia is across the entrance from Esalen Wine Shop & Bar, where the contin- uing the same menu is creat- ed by Jeremy Fox (see Rustic Canyon).

234 Eyrian Street, Santa Monica; (310) 821-5829 or cassia.com. Dinner nightly.

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

9400 W Olympic Blvd, Beverly Hills; (310) 403-7795 or vivianerestaurant.com. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Continues on page Lao

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

It looks like a kind of 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 Fatima, offers two seatings a night for his self-catering vegetable-centric menu ($59), which features two meat or seafood options. Much of the produce comes from what’s grown in a community garden. That translates into such things as a silicon pumpkin vehicle with Greek yogurt or spaghetti squash with wheat berries, green pumpkin seeds and dried fruit. He’s also known for his “handing dishes from behind the counter, pouring wine and explaining what’s going on.” Toiletes must be purchased online for 6:30 or 8:30 p.m. seatings.

3065 W. Scott St., Los Angeles; no phone; jecompto.com. Dinner Tuesday and Thursday-Sunday.

Pot

Pino Cher started in a food truck and has expanded to a brick-and-mortar empire, including this Korean hot pot restaurant in Koreatown’s Linc Hotel. He calls Pot “Korean and American 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 generator young crowd. The menu features a few sides, plates of “K-town lovers” (including spicy chicken wings and steamed dumplings), and mains such as hot-sauce-smoked duck breast. The hoe 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.

3355 Wilshire Blvd. (213) 368-2020 or whiskpot.com. Dinner Wednesday-Saturday.

Petit Trois

Realists claim sauciers give on a house a homely appeal. I vote for butter. Heading into this strip-mall restaurant with views of a gas station’s garbage can, it became apparent that butter pulls off miracles. Diners sit at the $75 small market counter, which is a wonderful place to use butter. The dark brown flours are coated in clarified butters. The much-red wines are as detected and enhanced with loads of garlic and parsley. The omelet is one of the best I’ve had. Ownerly Ludo Lefebre, Virgin Dobin and Jon Shook, this is the follow-up to Trois-Mc in the same strip center. It’s 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.

3710 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles (213) 488-8919 or petittrois.com. Lunch and dinner daily.

Korean American food crafted by Sieun Ahn and Matthew Kim

Economists are a major factor creating new restaurants in Los Angeles and San Francisco, the latter of which has more than 10 of the highest leases in the nation. It’s much easier to open a shop in Los Angeles, a city that covers roughly 460 square miles, as opposed to San Francisco’s 45.

No one knows this better than Hung. The La Vie Borde

move away from food — and chefs are increasingly accepting audien-

cies for their visit. Los Angeles is in the bubble of discovery, creating a more diverse food- wheeling dining venue.

“San Francisco has more. Los Angeles for me, for sure, are true neck and dining rings. Eater’s Bill Addison. “California is in a fierce competition. We need some place to be eating in the country.”

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

Otim

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 season courses that blend rustic and refined elements and influences from myriad cultures. That includes dishes that start with a grill on top for the smoky Hail of harrama with garlic, rice, blowfish and a egg, Market with pasilla poutine and seafood with chicken and Middle Eastern flavors. It’s all beautifully presented. Clearly Hollingsworth, who was formerly the chef at the now-closed La Pergola, has a better place to be eating in the country.

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

Night & Market

No matter how hard you try, Angelenos seem to hunger. A line of diners with electric orange, pink and blue walls and a dot of Kurt Cobain’s coat under the lights, Night & Market has no formal hearing, but he is passionate about recreating Mexican food. His chicken thighs are an earthy relish of steamed and mashed water bugs. His last contains both pork and beef, as does the meatballs. He shows no mercy on the same next of his last entre (green chicken) or surr turn (green pasta). It’s a far cry from the Americanized food you get at most places. 3322 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles (323) 449-0223 or nightmarket.com. Lunch Monday—Friday, dinner Monday-Saturday.