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BEST NEW RESTAURANTS

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BOURBON LEGEND  
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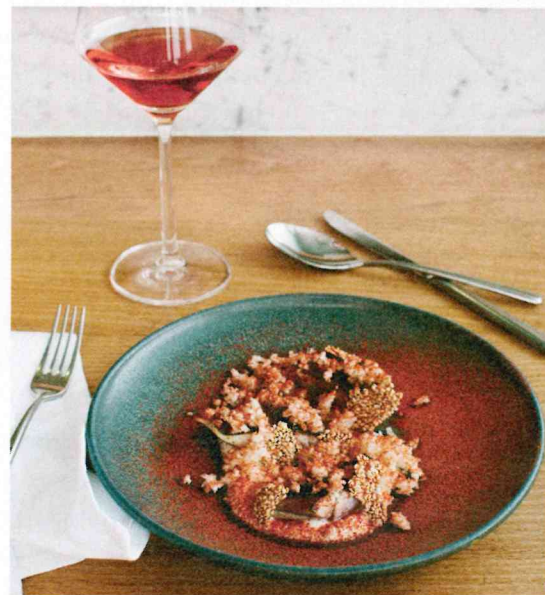
# DINING OUT IN LOS ANGELES

Five new venues from accomplished chefs • **BY HARVEY STEIMAN** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIHA MATEI

Offbeat delights in unexpected places highlight the current restaurant scene in Los Angeles. Behind the facade of a nondescript pizza parlor, a modernist chef makes cutting-edge cuisine almost homey. Down a street in a factory district east of downtown, the former chef of Valentino offers luscious and distinctive Italian cuisine. A long-awaited supersized bistro reenergizes a space that changed the geography of L.A. dining 25 years ago.

In recent decades, L.A. has spearheaded a nationwide trend toward refined cuisine in casual surroundings, so it's no surprise that none of the places reviewed here (all of which opened in 2013) involve white tablecloths or anyone resembling a *maître d'*. The excitement level is high, in part because the chefs and restaurants involved sport long résumés of success. They deliver dining experiences with confidence.

Chef Ludovic Lefebvre created formal cuisine at L'Orangerie in the 1990s and futuristic efforts at Bastide in the 2000s. More recently, his fanatically followed series of six pop-up restaurants, called Ludobites, weaves these strands into soulful, thoroughly approachable plates. At his new Trois Mec, Lefebvre rejects the current trend of scattering ingredients artistically around the plate, preferring to make them



Above: Chef Ludovic Lefebvre serves a dinner course at the kitchen-view counter at his new Trois Mec; tables are available for larger groups. Above right: A dish of pickled mackerel and cauliflower exemplifies Lefebvre's creative approach at Trois Mec, a dusting of sesame seeds and seasonings used in tandoori dishes sparking the flavors.



huddle together to keep warm and make the elements relate to one another effectively. Every dish has something special. It was the best meal I had on a rewarding February visit to Los Angeles.

There was a dramatic arc and a sense of classic artistry to the menu; every element was beautifully cooked or prepared, and the balance on the plate was impeccable. Things that sound like a simple tune on the printed menu sing a whole chorus in your mouth. A dish of smoked peanut butter on grilled steak? Genius. Lightly pickled Nantucket bay scallops nestle in a smear of cauliflower puree, seasoned with sesame seeds and the typical mixture of seasonings for Indian tandoori dishes. Another arresting combination was simply a mound of riced potatoes over a smear of *soubise* (onion sauce) and topped with a sprinkle of bonito flakes.

The \$75 five-course menu included a few preliminary “snacks” and a couple of mignardises at the close. The scallop dish was an extra \$15.

Offbeat French labels dominate the wine pairings, offered at \$49 and \$79, and the bottle list of 120 options. No corkage is allowed, however. I splurged on A. Clape Cornas Renaissance 2011 (\$150). Bigger spenders can opt for familiar Burgundies, such as Dujac Morey-St.-Denis 1998 (\$450), or the trendy Jacques Selosse Brut Blanc de Blancs Champagne NV (\$450).

Tickets (covering reservations, menus, tax and tip) must be purchased online, and go on sale two to three weeks in advance. Once inside, smaller parties can sit at the counter and watch the team of chefs assemble the plates; tables are reserved for parties of three or more. But finding Trois Mec can be a challenge. It's at the back of a building just a half-block from Mozza and Pizzeria Mozza, but fronted by Yum Yum Donuts. The precise location is indicated only by a defunct pizza sign, its “I” no longer lit.

Where Trois Mec is intimate and precise, République is big, loud and bustling. About a mile distant, it occupies the space made famous by Campanile, which was similarly out of the way when it opened in 1989 on a stretch of La Brea Avenue that was bereft of destination dining. Bankrolled and thoroughly redesigned by high-profile restaurateur Bill Chait, République's soaring central space now is even more dramatic, an ideal setting for the talents of chef Walter Manzke.

Manzke has done his share of refined dining, including as Patina's executive chef in the 1990s and a masterful stint at Auberge de Carmel from 2004 to 2007 (and briefly at Bastide, through 2008). But his heart clearly gravitates toward really good fundamental cooking, casually but artfully served. That was the impetus behind Church & State in Los Angeles, which he joined as executive chef in 2008.

At République, this approach informs dishes such as grilled pork chops and pork belly served in an iron pan, with flavor and texture



République offers a casual and convivial vibe in a dramatic, newly redesigned space to go along with satisfying plates and bistro bites from chef Walter Manzke, and an eclectic, compact wine list.

accents from escarole, turnips and Fuji apple, all roasted together with the chop. Tender chunks of octopus and whole manila clams add depth to ebony-black and classically textured risotto nero. In the hamachi crudo crostini, Manzke underlines the richness of the fish with avocado puree and contrasts it with tart blood orange and thin slices of Castelvetrano olives, all in single bites. And how can you dislike a bistro that offers its house-baked baguettes with rotisserie drippings as an alternative to butter?

Manzke's wife, Margarita, who has worked with him since the Carmel days, is the pastry chef. She scores hits with her hazelnut ice cream-filled cream puffs, drizzled with chocolate, as well as a Rainier cherry tart (more like a clafouti) topped with yuzu ice cream.

The 74 wines on the eclectic list run from the soft and simple Schloss Lieser Riesling Feinherb 2011 (\$40) to serious reds, such as Diamond Creek Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Red Rock Terrace 2003 (\$356) and Elvio Cagno Barolo Cascina Nuova 2005





The Factory Kitchen's *mandilli di seta* pasta with almond-basil pesto is among dishes inspired by Italy's Liguria region, while the wine list tilts to gems from all over Italy.

(\$108). Seventeen selections are available by the glass (with generous pours) or quarter-bottle carafe.

**H**inoki and The Bird relies on graceful balances and Japanese elements to create a more serene experience. This oasis of calm is hidden in a new office building at the remote, far southern end of Century City (just off of Olympic Boulevard). Discreet waterfalls mute conversations in a covered patio, which has become a favorite of talent agents for lunch.

Chef Kuniko Yagi has been owner David Myers' right hand since the final years of Sona (it closed in 2010) and the rise of his popular *Comme Ça* brasseries in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. With Hinoki, she strikes an ideal balance between the two, incorporating Japanese inflections into unpretentious dishes. You can taste the high quality ingredients cleanly and clearly, in smart and satisfying combinations.

Mochi—the soft, glutinous rice flour cake—here is cut into small dice and toasted to a crisp, adding crunch to a silky butternut squash soup. Peeled fuyu persimmons contrast with rich burrata in a seasonal appetizer. Soft eggplant and tangy Thai basil add depth to a bowl of rice noodles in a curry sauce of soulful seasoning, tender slices of monkfish floating serenely. A miso marinade lifts grilled skirt steak into a different arena. Ice cream balls with unique flavors, such as butterscotch with *togarashi* wrapped in miso mochi, make light desserts.



At Hinoki and The Bird, chef Kuniko Yagi emphasizes pristine ingredients, letting them shine through in smart but unpretentious Japanese-inflected preparations.

Many of the treasures from Sona's *Wine Spectator* Grand Award-winning wine list have been relocated to this cellar. The 275 selections on the current list are backed by about 1,000 more, waiting to be seeded in gradually. At present, one can splurge on mature bottles such as Château Mouton-Rothschild 1982 (\$2,282), or zero in on relative values such as Clos Fourtet St.-Emilion 2003 (\$164) or Kosta Browne Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2008 (\$92/375ml). Whites include such charmers as Weinbach Riesling Alsace Réserve Personelle 2011 (\$59) and Talley Chardonnay Central Coast 2011 (\$54).

Connie and Ted's, a venture by the folks behind the splendid seafood restaurant Providence, shows how good a simple fish house can be when it uses impeccable ingredients and serves them with integrity. On a nondescript stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood, executive chef Sam Baxter, longtime chef de cuisine at Providence, homes in on New England (where Providence chef Michael Cimarusti grew up). The familiarity shows in how well the kitchen handles freshly shucked clams, soft bellies still attached, as fried clams, clam cakes, steamers, clam chowders and clam rolls, and seafood platters, each more mouthwatering than the last. Grilled true cod comes out moist, sweet and flaky. These guys know fish inside and out. (The macaroni and cheese is a winner, too.)

The compact wine list, only 44 strong, aims for simplicity and reasonable prices, but the dazzling beer program overshadows it.



Donato Poto, Cimarusti's partner and maitre d' at Providence, knows wine well, so he could significantly improve the selection and offer real wine glasses instead of just those small tumblers.

East of downtown, in what's being called the Arts District but still looks like row upon row of warehouses, The Factory Kitchen is the latest star. To stand out from the crowd of hot trattorias in Los Angeles, Angelo Auriana, chef at Valentino in Santa Monica until 2003, partnered with Matteo Ferdinandi, who has managed Wolfgang Puck restaurants in Beverly Hills and Las Vegas and had his own casual Italian place amid the Melrose Avenue restaurant cluster.

Though he doesn't promote the focus, Auriana looks to Italy's Liguria region for something different to feature. Especially winning is the *mandilli di seta* ("silk handkerchief") pasta in an insanely creamy-textured, nut-rich pesto. The *focaccine* (flatbreads) are to swoon over. Even a salad of seared tuna and greens was special, and the roasted items from the kitchen, including chicken, duck and fish, have soul.

The list of 80 or so wines leans heavily to Italy, which is fine when the choices include gems such as Jermann Venezia-Giulia Vintage Tunina 2009 (\$150) and La Spinetta Barbera d'Asti Ca' di Pian 2009 (\$66).

Aside from offering compelling cuisine, all these restaurants have set up shop in offbeat locations, an indication that looking for satisfying dining in the usual places may not always be the way to go. In Los Angeles, highly rated restaurants have clustered in Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, Santa Monica and, more recently, the heart of downtown. Neighborhoods such as Culver City and Abbott Kinney Boulevard (in Venice) bustle with happy dining crowds. And, as Trois Mec demonstrates, a little bit out of the way might be just the ticket.

## Connie and Ted's

8171 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood Telephone (323) 848-2722 Website [www.connieandteds.com](http://www.connieandteds.com) Open Lunch, Wednesday to Sunday; dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$15-\$42 Corkage \$20 Credit cards All major

## The Factory Kitchen

1300 Factory Place, Los Angeles Telephone (213) 996-6000 Website [www.thefactorykitchen.com](http://www.thefactorykitchen.com) Open Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner Monday to Saturday Cost Entrées \$18-\$32 Corkage \$20, two-bottle limit Credit cards All major

## Hinoki and The Bird

10 Century Drive, Los Angeles Telephone (310) 552-1200 Website [www.hinokiandthebird.com](http://www.hinokiandthebird.com) Open Lunch, Tuesday to Friday; dinner, Tuesday to Saturday Cost Entrées \$19-\$38 Corkage \$25 Credit cards All major

## République

624 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles Telephone (310) 362-6115 Website [www.republiquela.com](http://www.republiquela.com) Open Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$18-\$38 Corkage \$30 Credit cards All major

## Trois Mec

716 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles Telephone None; send e-mail to [info@troismec.com](mailto:info@troismec.com) to make reservations by prepaid ticket up to three weeks in advance Website [www.troismec.com](http://www.troismec.com) Open Dinner, Monday to Friday Cost Five-course menu \$75 Corkage Not permitted Credit cards All major



Executive chef Sam Baxter (left) and chef and co-owner Michael Cimarusti flank co-owner Donato Poto of Connie and Ted's, where the lobster roll (below) is just one of many well-executed New England-style seafood choices.

