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AN L.A.
LIFE-
GUARD
PAGE 150

IS THE
CITY
GOING
BROKE?
PAGE 112



★ \$4.95
★ OCTOBER 2010
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Jonathan Waxman, Mark Peel, Nancy Silverton. Their spirit lives on in Michael Stern's menu, which abounds with top-quality local ingredients: beet salad with hazelnut-crustéd chèvre and wild arugula, wild striped bass with melted leeks and potato-chorizo hash. Truth is, what could taste bad in this setting? Power brokers who would rather dine than be seen retreat to the rain forest of a back patio; in the romance department, Michael's scores through the roof. » 1147 3rd St. (310-451-0843 or michaelssantamonica.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D Mon.-Sat. Full bar. California **\$\$\$**

THE PENTHOUSE AT THE HUNTLEY ★

The Pacific panorama is breathtaking, the cocktails dangerous, and the mood lively in these penthouse digs at the Huntley Hotel. A young crowd is ducking into booths that evoke beach cabanas. They're grabbing bellinis and ground sirloin sliders. They're washing down crispy calamari with cucumber gin concoctions. Sheer draperies and leather chairs are all set against the sunset's red-orange glow. » Huntley Hotel, 1111 2nd St. (310-393-8080 or thehuntleyhotel.com). B-L-D daily. Full bar. American **\$\$\$**

RUSTIC CANYON ★

This is a filled-to-the-gills spot for folks who don't mind a conversational rumble. The food's got farmers' market written all over it: your beet salads, your pastas with fresh veggies, your roasted skate with braised endive and cannellini beans—all nicely turned out, if not revelatory. The cheese plate offered as an appetizer is more of a dessert, but it may be a good plan if you want a nosh to go with one of the festive prosecco cocktails (the Indochine with lemongrass, perhaps?). The beer and wine lists are well thought-out, and the alcohol-free quaffs are imaginative. » 1119 Wilshire Blvd. (310-393-7050 or rusticcanyonwinebar.com). D nightly. Beer and wine. American **\$\$\$**

UPPER WEST

There's not enough emphasis on drinks to call this place a gastropub, but it's close. Dishes hold a little bit of everything, from mussels in a saffron broth to ahi "tacos" served in plantain shells to grilled steaks and burgers, the latter served with a giant knife stabbing the center. (We're not sure what ours did to deserve the punishment.) Prices are sane, which helps to excuse the food's overall clunkiness. More than a dozen wines by the glass and the honey rye cocktail—made with Old Overholt, honey liqueur, and orange bitters—don't hurt either. » 3321 Pico Blvd. (310-586-1111 or theupperwest.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D nightly. Full bar. American **\$\$**

VALENTINO ★★

A couple of decades ago, Piero Selvaggio's Santa Monica landmark was serving some of the best Italian cuisine in L.A. In recent years it's been struggling to keep up the pace, and now the owners have brought in Sardinian-born chef Nico Chessa to try his hand at reviving the legacy. Results are mixed. A butter lettuce salad is magnificent: a stack of crisp leaves lovingly dressed with a Taleggio dressing and a sprinkle of hazelnuts. The artisanal *gli* spaghetti, however, lacks any of the kick one would expect from the advertised Pecorino and spicy oil. *Branzino* cooked in parchment is a delicate wonder, while braised veal cheeks sit in a clunky brown sauce. The restaurant added a wine bar that offers a smart menu of antipasti, pizzas, and pastas as well as the opportunity to explore the award-winning wine list. » 3115 Pico Blvd. (310-829-4313 or valentinoisrestaurantgroup.com). L Fri.; D Tue.-Sat. Full bar. Italian **\$\$\$**

WILSHIRE ★★★

With its two bars, indoor dining room, patio with fire place, and cigar lounge all cleverly divided, Wilshire doesn't feel as big as it is. Chef Andrew Kirschner gives every dish his full attention. A mixed lettuce salad might have persimmons, feta, and hazelnuts; lobster and braised sweetbreads elevate a tagliatelle appetizer. Deft treatments, such as the horseradish and parsley *gremolata* on a salmon fillet or the *crostnes* (a tuber with a hint of artichoke flavor) served with roasted duck breast, indicate a confident kitchen. » 2454 Wilshire Blvd. (310-586-1707 or wilshirerestaurant.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D Mon.-Sat. Full bar. California **\$\$\$**

XINO RESTAURANT + LOUNGE

One of several Northern California transplants to Santa Monica Place, Xino is an extension of the Bay Area contemporary Chinese restaurants Sino and Straits. The dining room is edgy, with high-gloss wood and a photo of a dragon-tattooed woman covering one wall. The menu takes on Chinatown classics like tangerine beef, ginger chicken, and dim sum with upscale ingredients—though our

corner all-you-can-eat buffet can whip up similar (and in some cases better) versions. The outdoor lounge feels like a VIP club, serving sake flights and fruity cocktails. Be prepared for some thumping hip-hop—the owner is chummy with rapper Ludacris. » 395 Santa Monica Place (310-755-6220 or xinorestaurant.com). L-D daily. Full bar. Chinese **\$\$\$**

ZENGO

Richard Sandoval has a string of upscale Latin restaurants across the country. The Santa Monica Place branches of Zengo and its sister, La Sandia, are his first in California. Zengo attempts to fuse the varied cuisines of Latin America and Asia through dishes like Peking duck tacos, rice noodles with pork *carnitas*, and sushi rolls with *chipotle*. The fried plantains are exemplary (and wickedly gooey), and *achiote-hoisin* pork *arepas* hit that magical mark between sweet and savory. A *chipotle* miso soup questionably spiked with truffle oil, however, goes overboard with salt, and the *masala-achiote* chicken tandoori bears little resemblance to any Indian dish we've had. But add the tamarind-*togarashi* margarita to your list of new classic cocktails. » 395 Santa Monica Place (310-899-1000 or richardsandoval.com/zengosm). L-D daily. Full bar. Latin-Asian **\$\$**

NEW

MALIBU & PACIFIC PALISADES

THE BEACHCOMBER

You can't ask for a better view, at the base of the Malibu Pier, and the room's cute, an upscale version of a crab shack. The food? A crapshoot. Mini ahi tacos could do without the squiggles of chili-laced mayo. Grilled fish with rice or potatoes is a safer way to go, but note the asparagus—the tips will have been given to someone else. Put it behind you with one of the house margaritas or an order of the hot doughnut bread pudding. » 23000 Pacific Coast Hwy., Malibu (310-456-9800 or thebeachcombercafe.com). L-D daily. Full bar. California **\$\$\$**

CAFÉ HABANA

It's an odd match: edgy New York restaurateur Sean Meenan's Latin spot and the Malibu Lumber Yard. Surely the hipster waitstaff has never been strayed so far from Echo Park. The funky café pours *caipirinhas* as strong as the chili oil is hot. Grilled corn rolled in *cotija* cheese and dusted with chili powder is a signature starter. Topped with grilled skirt steak, the *huevos rancheros* aren't just for breakfast. Kids and their parents gleefully munch *cubano* sandwiches on the patio, and ladies giggle over real-deal daiquiris at the bar—we like where this is going. » 939 Cross Creek Rd., Malibu (310-317-0300 or cafehabana.com). L-D daily. Full bar. Latin **\$\$\$**

PLATE

Don't let the phrase "earthy California cuisine" scare you off. It just means everything is so fresh, it practically snaps. The menu ranges from an avocado mango salad to brochettes (skewers of marinated beef, chicken sausage, and mushrooms) with sweet potato fries. Veal wiener schnitzel is a nod to the Austrian co-owner (you can healthy it up with brown rice if you like). The kitchen makes a sublime homemade chocolate cake—a moist, dense black cube drizzled in *crème anglaise* and served at times with vanilla bean ice cream. » 22601 Pacific Coast Hwy., Ste. 103, Malibu (310-317-6800 or platemalibu.com). B-L-D daily. Wine and beer. California **\$\$\$**

SADDLE PEAK LODGE ★★★

Everything at this old-school "occasion" restaurant, which is housed in a historic lodge, is imposing: The wine is big, the menu is heavy on game, and the heads of horned beasts adorn the walls. Amid this Hemingwayesque scene, the meat—New Zealand elk, venison saddle, squash, Berkshire pork—is cooked with a precision that verges on daintiness. A *pot de crème* of foie gras is carefully paired with warm fruit—and-nut bread, and the service has that ideal mix of formality, personality, and smarts. » 419 Cold Canyon Rd., Calabasas (818-222-3888 or saddlepeaklodge.com). D Wed.-Sun.; brunch Sun. Full bar. American **\$\$\$**

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

ASANEBO ★

At this standout on Studio City's sushi row, the honey-breaded oysters are soft and sea flavored under their sweet crust. Translucent slices of *kanpachi* are dotted with shaved black truffles. A fragile quail egg yolk teeters atop a lump of uni. Even miso soup is heightened by the addition of spiny lobster. Its location and size have kept Asanebo under the radar, but its new Michelin star could change that. » 11941 Ventura Blvd., Studio City (818-760-3348). L Tue.-Fri.; D Tue.-Sun. Beer, wine, and sake. Japanese **\$\$\$**

BISTRO GARDEN ★

It's one of the prettiest dining rooms in the city, so genuinely retro it's breathtaking. The old-world bar is a block long, tables are separated by acres of real estate, and a lofty skylighted ceiling makes the main room feel like a patio—even at night. The food is continental: liver and onions, broiled Gulf prawns, linguine with smoked salmon, caviar, and champagne cream sauce. For dessert, the famous chocolate soufflé is divine, if not remotely lemony. » 12950 Ventura Blvd., Studio City (818-501-0202 or bistrogarden.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D nightly; brunch Sun. Full bar. Continental **\$\$\$**

BISTRO PROVENCE

Chef Miki Zivkovic, ex of Pinot Bistro, presents a fine Cal-French menu. Start with crab salad—heavy on the crab, light on the endive and orange vinaigrette. Entrées are a steal, mostly \$20 and under: paella with mussels, rock shrimp, clams, and sausage, or garlic-glazed chicken with garlic fries. » 345 N. Pass Ave., Burbank (818-840-9050 or bistroprovence.net). L Mon.-Fri.; D Mon.-Sat. Beer and wine. Cal-French **\$\$\$**

BOKADO ★

This sharp Spanish market and café spills onto the Ventura Boulevard sidewalk, where diners accompanied by their dogs devour *jamón*-laden charcuterie plates. A tapas menu includes *manchego* and chicken croquettes, zucchini pockets stuffed with Catalanian spinach, and a mini portion of seafood *paella valenciana*. Poking through a little cup of roasted artichoke hearts in search of briny *berberechos* (Spanish clams) is like a treasure hunt. Larger options such as skirt steak with *romesco* and a *dorado* fillet dressed with olive oil, sea salt, and garlic are available as well. » 12345 Ventura Blvd., Studio City (818-752-9222). B Sat.-Sun.; L-D daily. Full bar. Spanish **\$\$**

BRANDYWINE

The shoe-box-size dining room with lace curtains will have you thinking you're near Marseilles—as will the crock of French onion soup with melted Gruyère and the piping hot bouillabaisse with saffron, king crab, and the plumpest of shrimp. The menu includes everything from frog legs and beluga caviar to filet mignon and rack of lamb. You owe it to yourself to order

the *crêpes Suzette*. » 22757 Ventura Blvd., Woodland Hills (818-225-9114). L Tue.-Fri.; D Mon.-Sat. Beer and wine. Continental **\$\$\$\$**

8½ TAVERNA

In this town, if you name your restaurant after a Fellini film, you'd better be prepared to deliver. We appreciate the authentic Neapolitan charm of chef Enzo Sanseverino, but the menu at this casual Italian café could use the touch of a fine director. Our farro salad and starter of fried frog legs with lemon aioli lacked seasoning. The marinara sauce on the *gnocchi* did little justice to the tomato season's peak. Pizzas are a high point, with lovely medium-thick crusts and rich topping combinations like smoked mozzarella with braised pork and sweet corn with potatoes and béchamel. We get it—this is a neighborhood spot, so the wraparound patio, more than a dozen wines by the glass, and an ambitious beer list earn the place extra credit. » 11334 Moorpark St., Studio City (818-308-1100 or 8andahalf.com). L-D daily. Beer and wine. Italian **\$\$**

KIWAMI ★

When sushi chef extraordinaire Katsuya Uechi joined with nightlife company SBE to open Katsu-ya, many of his fans were disappointed. But his newest restaurant,

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

» The Montage Beverly Hills is gaining another restaurant—a branch of chef Scott Conant's acclaimed New York eatery *Scarpetta*.