

L.A. Restaurants Go Global

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Kevin Luzande, chef de cuisine at Acabar in West Hollywood, was a Zagat's "30 under 30" honoree. PHOTO CREDIT: Acabar

By Rochelle Lash

The top restaurants in Los Angeles are meeting the world half-way. Cuisine in La-La Land has gone global and stayed local – and both directions are trending at the same time.

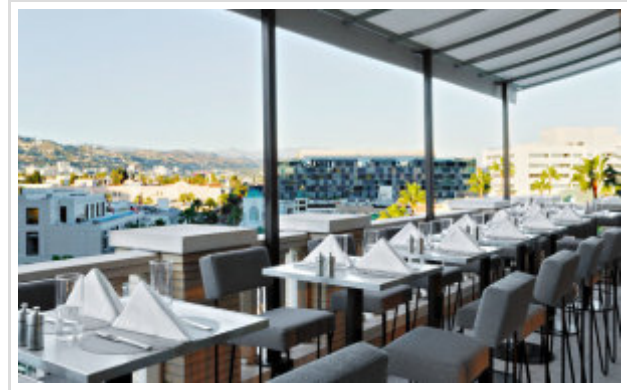
California changed everything about European-style fine dining 40 years ago when Alice Waters of Chez Panisse introduced dressed-down food and farm-to-table ingredients to a world of gastronomy that had prized imported products and fancy preparations.

Creativity still abounds, with new dining spots opening as fast as Hollywood produces action flicks, and seamless new fusions emerging as chefs without borders embrace foreign flavours that complement Americana.

There is wine, of course, from exclusive Napa Valley vineyards to the great regions of Europe. But exotic mixology rules the L.A. restaurant scene for now – cocktails popping with vivid garden colours, turbo-fuelled fun and an array of zingy tastes.

Several events around L.A. celebrate food: California Restaurant Month (Jan. 1-31), Santa Monica Eat Well Week (Jan. 4-11), Los Angeles' Winter dineLA Restaurant Week (Jan. 19-Feb.1), and the Summer dineLA Restaurant Week (July dates TBA). These culinary events will spotlight celebrity chef events, wine-pairing specials, gourmet prix-fixe dinners and seasonal tastings.

But we live in the Insta-moment. Right now in Beverly Hills, power lunchers and power shoppers are flocking to Freds which opened in October in the I-must-have-everything department store, Barneys New York. Freds is an established blend of couture and comfort cuisine for Tinseltown's VIP clientele, it's wildly popular for the Beverly Hills Club Sandwich and artisan pizzas such as robiola cheese with truffle oil. Carb-deniers are opting for Estelle's Chicken Soup and salads of shrimp, kale, artichoke and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms.



Freds at Barneys New York, Beverly Hills.

Venturing farther on the culinary map, here is a peek at four L.A. dining spots that invited me to sample their interpretations of the essences of Asia, South America, Europe and the good old U.S.A.: The new-in-2014 Faith & Flower that is shaking up California style in downtown L.A.; the inviting, French-inspired Jiraffe in Santa Monica; the exotic, eclectic Acabar in West Hollywood; and the slick, worldly Hakkasan in Beverly Hills.



Faith & Flower in downtown L.A. boasts stunning post-modern décor and sumptuous cuisine. PHOTO CREDIT: Faith & Flower

NEWEST OF THE NEW

Faith & Flower has been rocking the L.A. scene since it opened downtown in April. Spectacular post-modern interiors and the finesse of executive chef Michael Hung make this the city's most important recent launch.

Chef Hung brings precious Michelin-starred experience from Daniel and Aquavit in New York and La Folie in San Francisco. His range is impressive: Think gossamer halibut carpaccio all the way to rich, aromatic quail and wild mushrooms, hot from a wood-fired oven with a hint of a European hunting lodge.

He calls the provenance "rustic Californian," but I sense a universe of flavours and aromas in these delightfully different dishes: Tai snapper roasted in seaweed with scallion vinaigrette, kimchee devilled eggs, duck-liver mousse tarts, N.Y. steak tartare flavoured with miso cream, Longanisa sausage grilled over mesquite and pizza spiced with pork confit and chile verde.

Faith & Flower has an all-star team from drinks to dessert. Chief mixologist Michael Lay has adopted a Russian way of inhaling absinthe fumes, as well as cocktails brewed with Dutch gin, Japanese whisky and hints of basil, apricot and ginger. Executive pastry chef Ben Spungin marries light textures and rich flavours with Greek yogurt panna cotta and a hazelnut chocolate feuilletine.



Jiraffe in Santa Monica. PHOTO Jiraffe

FRANCE VIA CALIFORNIA

If you stroll through the Santa Monica Farmers' markets, you might run into chef Raphael Lunetta sourcing ingredients for his charming gourmet restaurant, JiRaffe.

JiRaffe is a rare gem: a real dining spot in unreal La-La Land, driven by a chef deeply committed to his calling. JiRaffe serves sophisticated food, but it's not fussy or precious.

Lunetta, a popular personality on TV and in L.A.'s culinary community, has operated JiRaffe for nearly 20 years and it is as fresh as Day 1. Crystal chandeliers add a touch of Europe to a Santa Monica storefront and the pretty bistro decor in ebony and ivory reflects California's casual style.

JiRaffe boasts no other frills, only authentic French-inspired food, good Champagne, Cabernet and Chablis by the glass and cocktails such as the white-peach vodka martini – infused with ripe fruit from the farmers'

market.

Lunetta was born in N.Y. and raised in Southern California, but when he was young, he regularly visited his aunt's farmhouse in the south of France. The family would cook Mediterranean seafood and Provençale vegetables over open fires stoked with grapevines. Et voilà! A chef with a passion for French-style cooking was born.

The tasty treats start with JiRaffe's caramelized onion soup, tomato tart with burrata cheese and balsamic, the summery shrimp salad with white beans and fennel and the dramatic black linguini with sea crab in a spicy tomato sauce. JiRaffe's signature mains include pan-roasted venison or rack of lamb, halibut au poivre, mushroom salad with shaved black truffles and chicken with polenta and roasted grapes.

MOORISH MYSTIQUE

At Acabar in West Hollywood, the design is Moorish and the menu is a melting pot of Middle Eastern, French, Mediterranean and Asian dishes.

Acabar is an exotic space of Arabic arches and secluded booths, an exciting gathering spot for dinner as well as a pre- and post-stop for cocktails and bites, with weekly live music and DJs on select nights.

It has solid L.A. credentials with high-profile patrons such as Charlize Theron, Ashton Kutcher, Tyra Banks, Will Farrell, Jim Carrey, Halle Berry, Sara Silverman and Mila Kunis. And, Acabar is partly owned by movie producer-director Roland Emmerich (Independence Day, The Patriot, White House Down).

Acabar's drinks kick off with tequila, mescal and vodka in fruity, spicy, aromatic, floral and spicy concoctions. Then, there's a category of just plain strong, like the Acabar Sazerac, a potent blend of cognac, rye and bitters.

Chef de cuisine Kevin Luzande is a former Zagat's "30 under 30" honoree and he doesn't hold back. Dinner is a world-beat of delicacies: crispy shrimp toast with Thai basil; spicy prawns in a Lebanese presentation of labneh and harissa; charred octopus with Spanish sausage, white beans and Valencia oranges; luscious lamb tagine with couscous. And the sea bass is served whole, for two

people, with Chinese greens, peanuts and Sichuan peppercorn sauce.

By now, you have lost all will power, bowing to premium spirits such as Brazilian cachaca or small-batch bourbon from Kentucky. The build-your-own dessert plate is the final blow. It's an unbridled platter of caramel, meringue, macadamia cookies, and bonbons of cherry, chocolate and banana.



Black pepper beef is one of the signature dishes at Hakkasan, a global group of 12 superb restaurants helmed by the Michelin-starred chef, Ho Chee Boon. PHOTO CREDIT: Hakkasan

CHINESE EMPIRE

If you are accustomed to dining well in London, Shanghai, Mumbai or Dubai, you probably have experienced the exquisite Chinese fare at Hakkasan, a global group of 12 superb restaurants helmed by the Michelin-starred chef, Ho Chee Boon.

Hakkasan radiates the high life. The contemporary Asian interiors are striking. The service is pitch-perfect. And the food is divine.



Acabar in West Hollywood boasts Moorish decor and a world-beat of delicacies. PHOTO CREDIT: Acabar

At Hakkasan Beverly Hills, the bar scene looks like a Scorsese-di Caprio take on swish night life: successful “suits” celebrate the day’s successes with meaningful drinks like the Dark & Stormy (rum-ginger) or Buddha’s Palm (bourbon-yuzu).

Moving to subdued tables behind an elaborate Chinese screen, the focus is on gastronomy. Chef Tong Chee Hwee creates Cantonese-inspired feasts such as wok-fried lobster, crispy duck salad, silver cod with Champagne, black-pepper beef rib-eye with Merlot. Grilled Wagyu beef and black-truffle roasted duck.

The repertoire – and it’s a biggie — ranges from comforting jasmine rice and dim sum with scallops to the extravagant roll-your-own Peking duck with caviar, pancakes and veggies. The whole duck, a mouth-watering prospect, costs \$288 for four.

DETAILS:

Tourism info at: discoverlosangeles.com, visitcalifornia.com.

Acabar: 323-876-1400, acabar-la.com; 510 N. Stanley Ave. at Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood/Los Angeles, Calif.; Tues.-Sat., 6 p.m.-2 a.m.

Faith & Flower; 213-239-0642, faithandflowerla.com, 705 W. 9th St., bet. Figueroa and Flower Sts.; lunch from 11:30 a.m, Mon.-Fri.; dinner from 5:30 p.m., Mon-Sun. Brunch, from 10:30 a.m., Sat.-Sun.

Freds at Barneys New York in Beverly Hills: 310- 777-5877, www.barneys.com; 9570 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, Calif.; open from 11 a.m., Mon-Fri.; from 10 a.m., Sat.-Sun.

Hakkasan, Beverly Hills: 310-888-8661, hakkasan.com; 233 N. Beverly Drive at Wilshire, Beverly Hills; dining from 6 p.m, Mon.-Sat.; bar from 5:30 p.m. Other U.S. locations include Miami, N.Y., Las Vegas and San Francisco.



The newly designed bar at Hakkasan Beverly Hills is a hot spot for cocktails such as the Dark & Stormy (rum-ginger) or Buddha’s Palm (bourbon-yuzu). PHOTO CREDIT: Hakkasan Beverly Hills

JiRaffe: 310-917-6671, jirafferestaurant.com; 502 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica, Calif; dinner from 5:30, Mon.-Sat.