



FRUGAL FIND

FROM MIDDLE EASTERN BREAKFASTS TO GREEK SALADS, BEST OF MEDITERRANEAN OFFERS THE REGION ON A PLATE
BY LINDA BURUM

The name's less vague than you'd think. Best of Mediterranean (or BOM—though we're iffy on the acronym, too) interweaves highlights from eastern Mediterranean cuisines. Meat-laden shish kebab plates piled high with filet mignon accompanied by a swirl of hummus draw ravenous Sunset Strip crawlers. Brightly seasoned meze include grape leaves stuffed with lemony rice, cheese boreg fresh from the oven, *foul*, the traditional fava bean breakfast, and *manaesh*, a griddle-seared cheese sandwich. **Chain gang:** The Krikorian family hopes to franchise BOM's multiethnic fast-food format soon. (The Web site already indicates a restaurant locator for every state.) For now, the West Hollywood and downtown outposts are the only spots offering mother Lucy's ravioli-like *manti* with creamy yogurt sauce and her cumin-laced spinach and lentil soup. // 8915 W. Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, 310-659-9023; 663 S. Hill St., downtown, 213-627-5680; or bestofmediterranean.com.

beans. There's no atmosphere to speak of, and no alcohol, but what Mo-Chica does offer is an unimpeded view of a talent and his food. » 3655 S. Grand Ave. (213-747-2141 or mo-chica.com). L-D Mon.-Sat. No alcohol. Peruvian \$

NICKEL DINER

This may forever be known as the place that brought the bacon doughnut to L.A. It's not surprising that the pastry chef has worked with Thomas Keller, but what makes this newfangled downtown diner even more special is the cumbersome-yet-juicy burger, the spicy barbecued pork hash, the selection of old-timey soda pops, the crispy-edged buttermilk pancakes, and the painted sign that boasts "this is the place." » 524 S. Main St. (213-623-8301 or 5cdiner.com). B-L Tue.-Sun.; D Tue.-Sat. No alcohol. Diner \$

RIVERA ★★★

Surveying the Spanish-speaking world with whimsy and insatiable curiosity, John Sedlar has created one of the most imaginative and provocative restaurants in all of Los Angeles. The *tortillas florales*—pressed with pansies and sage—come with "Indian butter," what Anglo California used to call guacamole. The banana-leaf braised pork shoulder of the *cochinita pibil*, cooked 17 hours, honors the Yucatán classic while expanding on it with poached yams and radishes, Peruvian potatoes, and grilled scallions. Desserts such as the crepes with a *mojito* sauce are no less memorable. » 1050 S. Flower St. (213-749-1460 or riverarestaurant.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D Mon.-Sun. Full bar. Nueva Mexicana \$\$\$

ROSA MEXICANO
The kitchen serves cleaned-up authentic Mexican along with *nueva mexicana*-style dishes. A chunky guacamole is made tableside. Pulled duck is layered between corn tortillas and slathered in habanero cream sauce. Each cube of beef tenderloin in the mixed grill (which also features chorizo and serrano peppers) achieves a perfect medium rare. Flavors are well balanced—maybe too much so. Even the dishes labeled "spicy" were mild to our Southern California palates. Margaritas are mainstream (many frozen or flavored), but a bang-up *Michelada* gives some beverage cred. » 800 W. Olympic Blvd. (213-746-0001 or rosa-mexicano.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D nightly. Full bar. Mexican \$\$

SYRUP DESSERTS

Holed up in a smart little space in the Hayward Hotel on Spring Street, Syrup is that odd thing in L.A.: a real dessert bar. There are cakes, pastries, even frozen yogurt—because, well, yogurt is everywhere—but the signature splurges here are the crepes and Belgian sugar waffles. Usually gussied up with chocolate syrup, a dollop of whipped cream, and strawberries, and chaperoned by a mound of ice cream, they're a delightfully massive undertaking that covers all the food groups (so no need for guilt). *Intelligentsia* and *LaMill* beans are in the brew, and the minty-fresh *mojito* iced tea is even tastier when sipped from the loft lounge late at night. Downtown needed this. » 611 S. Spring St. (213-488-5136). B-L-D daily. No alcohol. Desserts \$

WATER GRILL ★★★

Pre-theatergoers and post-boardroom suits flock here for seafood dishes accompanied by the likes of cumin-flavored spaetzle and candied tangerines. As adventurous as chef David LeFevre's presentations can be, the milder fish, such as barramundi and cobia, are never overpowered. Despite the warm woods and deco accents, the setting at times can feel corporate, but the raw bar, which has a half-dozen types of oysters in its broad selection, is rowdy come happy hour. Don't skip dessert. » 544 S. Grand Ave. (213-891-0900 or watergrill.com). L Mon.-Fri.; D nightly. Full bar. Seafood \$\$

WOLFGANG PUCK BAR & GRILL

Wolfgang needs another restaurant like pizza needs caviar. Nevertheless, here we are with Wolfgang Puck Bar & Grill. The menu is aimed at the mainstream, with a standard array of salads, pastas, pizzas, and meaty mains—well, all except that calf's liver entrée. For a run-of-the-mill dish, the spicy tuna tartare served with crunchy sesame chips hits all the right spots. The fillet of wild Alaskan halibut sits in an addictive *harissa* seafood broth. Many of the dishes seem to rely on salt, butter, and oil for impact, meaning this may not be the light dinner before a show you were looking for. » 800 W. Olympic Blvd. (213-748-9700 or wolfgangpuck.com). D Tue.-Sat. Full bar. American \$\$\$

LOS FELIZ & SILVER LAKE

BARBRIX

This residence turned wine bar is slammed with a sophisticated bohemian crowd sipping Baltic whites with their bloomy cheeses. Owner Claudio Blotta comes via Campanile and La Terza, and his well-priced list of obscure wines (most of the glasses are under \$9) encourages exploration. There's a menu of small plates from chef Don Dickman (formerly of Rocco) that changes regularly. Our visit featured fried garlic sweetbreads, *hamachi crudo* with ginger *crème fraîche*, and a fresh pea, farro, and mint salad that was the essence of spring. » 2442 Hyperion Ave., Silver Lake (323-662-2442 or barbrix.com). D nightly. Wine Bar \$

BLAIR'S ★★

On a quiet stretch in Silver Lake, Blair's fills candlelit tables and casual bar stools with regulars and first dates. They gather for sweet potato gnocchi with wild mushrooms, pan-roasted halibut with Spanish chorizo, and what could be the best short ribs in town. Doughnuts may be de rigueur on menus these days, but how many of them are made with Belgian Abbey ale and then dunked in toffee sauce? » 2903 Rowena Ave., Silver Lake (323-660-1882 or blairsrestaurant.com). B-L-D daily. California \$\$\$

CANELÉ ★

Chef Corina Weibel worked at Campanile and Lucques before opening her own restaurant, and you can see it in her dishes. A whole roasted *branzino* looks up from your plate alongside a bowl of fingerling potatoes, olives, and caper berries. The beef bourguignonne on a bed of eggy noodles is rich and fundamental. A buttermilk biscuit topped with *crème fraîche* is filled with poached pears one day, figs the next. A token of thanks—a fresh-baked *canelé*, natch, at the door—sends customers on their way. » 3219 Glendale Blvd., Atwater Village (323-666-7133 or canele-la.com). D Tue.-Sun.; brunch Sat.-Sun. Beer and wine. New Mediterranean \$\$

GOBI

Don't be fooled. Despite its location in a Silver Lake strip mall, this isn't your average Mongolian BBQ joint. Locals pile their bowls high with seasonal farmers' market produce; choice meats such as pork, lamb, beef, and chicken; delicate *soba* noodles; and ten house-made sauces, including Asian pesto and smoked oyster. A handful of hard-to-find craft beers rounds out the sake, wine, and brew selection (the Siamese Twin Ale is made with kaffir lime leaves). If you still have room for the warm, doughy sesame rolls, something's wrong with you. » 2827 W. Sunset Blvd., Silver Lake (213-989-0711 or gobimongolianbbq.com). L-D daily. Beer, wine, and sake. Mongolian BBQ \$

LAMILL

From the tableside java experiments to the unbeatable scone, this "coffee boutique" is no mere corner café. Providence chef Michael Cimarrusti is behind the clever *panini*. Espresso drinks like the "coffee and a jelly donut" are cute. Come for a science experiment: a siphoned cup of joe made in a beaker. » 1636 Silver Lake Blvd., Silver Lake (323-663-4441 or lamillcoffee.com). B-L Tue.-Sun. No alcohol. Café \$\$

LITTLE DOM'S ★

At this spin-off of West Hollywood fixture Dominick's, Los Feliz locals come for high-end basics with a mix of northern Italian and California influences. A plate of roasted beets and *burrata* is bright but not transcendent. Meyer lemon pesto gives a nice edge to tuna *crudo*. A generous portion of grilled blue bass arrives with *cavolo nero* and baby yams. » 2128 Hillhurst Ave., Los Feliz (323-661-0055). B-L Sun.-Mon.; D nightly. Beer and wine. Italian \$\$

ROCKWELL VT

With Rockwell VT—the courtyard small-plates spot disguised as a West Hollywood lounge circa 1999—the swankification of Los Feliz is complete. Men in dark suits with earpieces stand by the back-alley entrance. Once waved inside, diners and drinkers are greeted by a 30-foot coral tree at the center of a two-story, 6,000-square-foot indoor-outdoor seating area. Waitresses know to warn customers about the ultra-sug-

BOOKS FOR HOME COOKS

» Beer chicks Christina Perozzi and Hallie Beaune are just out with *The Naked Pint*, a refreshingly approachable guide to craft beer.

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