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Editor's Note



Change Is Good. (Really.)

An overused adage? Maybe—but that’s probably because there is so much hyper-faux realism (i.e. anything in prime time claiming to be “reality”) that we need to constantly remind ourselves when something actually is the real deal. And since this past year has forced change upon so many people, the occasional reminder can’t hurt.

Heading into 2010, January is an opportunity to charge forward with the mindset of embracing change.

It’s so easy to get stuck in a rut (eating the same thing for breakfast every day, going to the same restaurants, taking the same route to work, etc.). Routine makes time itself all fuzzy—days run into weeks that run into months and before you know it, the year is over. (For example: How many of you, dear readers, remember 2008? That was the year we elected our current president and said goodbye to Heath Ledger. Seems like a hundred years ago, doesn’t it?)

So change forces us to engage with life. It makes us all lift our heads from our iPhones and notice that something is different. In a sense, changing things up seems to slow down time because we have to live in the moment, rather than, well, whatever the heck it is we usually live in.

I’d like to call your attention to a couple changes with *805 Living*. First, our creative masthead (page 10) has been changed to more accurately reflect the jobs of our talented team. (Truth be told, that’s the one thing I *don’t* want to change. The *805* team put together a dozen stellar issues last year—for those of you who have already forgotten, that was 2009—and I know we will do the same for you in 2010.)

Another change is the addition of a new column, *Social Savvy* (page 36), which is unveiled in this issue. Our resident etiquette enthusiast, Laura Samuel Meyn, dispenses sound advice about personal conduct in a world of blurred social standards. The column will run several times a year; its next appearance is scheduled for March. (If you have a question, write to edit@805living.com.)

There will be other changes throughout the year, since our job is to keep the magazine fresh for our readers who’ve been with us for more than five years, as well as exciting for those of you who are picking us up for the very first time. (Welcome!)

And for all of you, I hope 2010 is a healthy, prosperous, and very happy year.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynne".

Lynne Andujar, Editor in Chief
and Associate Publisher
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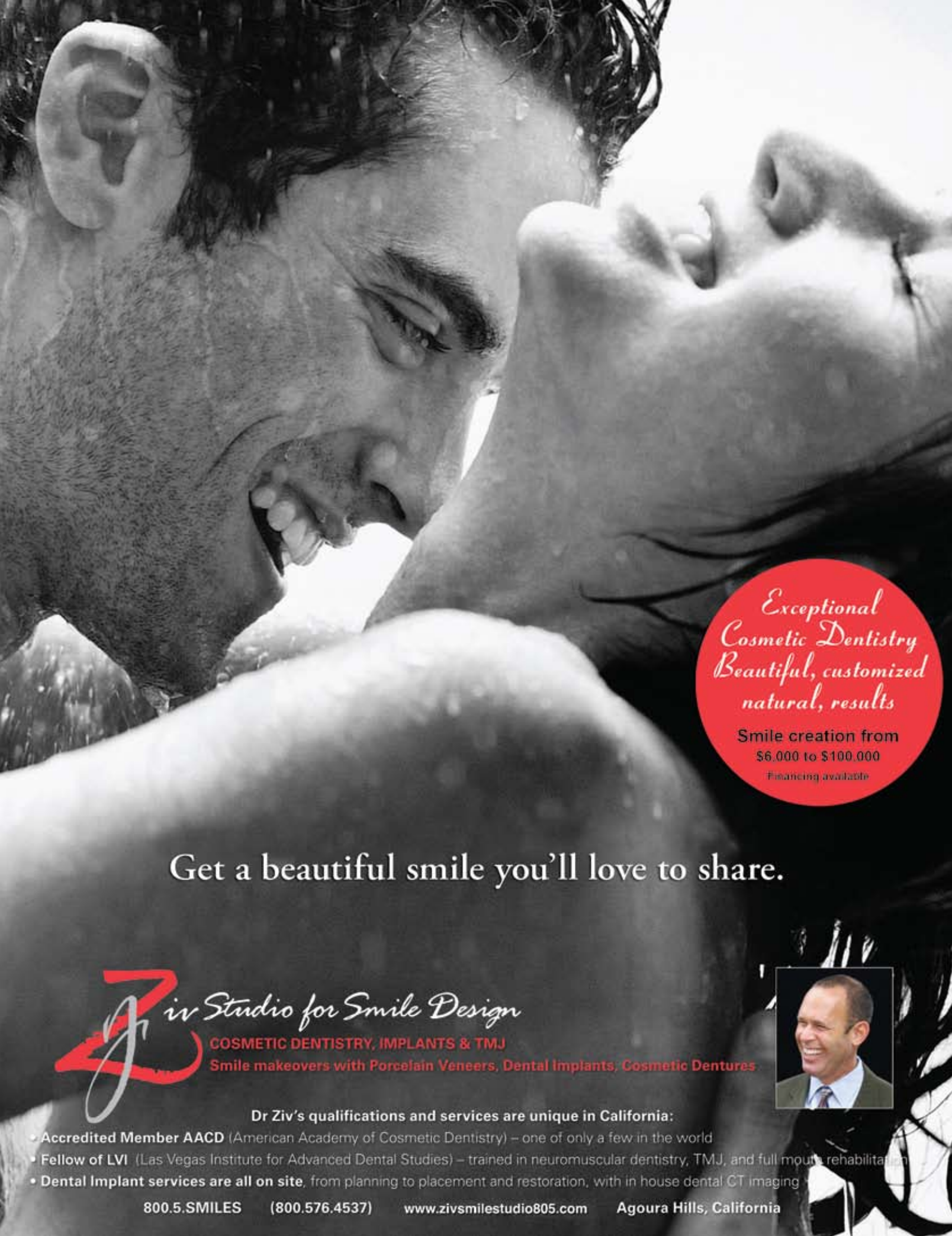
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Behind the Scenes

NO RESOLVE

Sure, New Year’s resolutions to exercise more have their place. But when imagining the year ahead that we most want to live, editing things out of our hectic lives can be even more important than adding items to an already crowded to-do list. In the spirit of less being more, we asked our contributors what they’ve resolved to *not* do in the year ahead.

Creative director **NICOLA AUGUSTSON** designs beautiful *805 Living* issues each month, always under deadline pressure. But it’s not going to phase her: **I resolve not to make decisions out of panic and fear this year. Instead, I plan to relax, take a breath, and make the best decision I can for all involved.**

Contributing photographer **JUDI BUMSTEAD**’s images regularly appear in *Good Deeds* (page 40), and, like many in her profession, she is awed by new toys—except this year: **I am resolving not to buy any additional camera equipment or large-ticket items at the Apple Store.**

HEIDI DVORAK (“The Future Is Yours,” page 48), a Los Angeles-based writer whose work has appeared in several national publications, joins *805 Living* as a contributing writer this month. **After seeing the Coen brothers’ film, *A Serious Man*, the moral of the story—receive with simplicity everything you do—really resonated with me. So I vow not to fret or panic about situations I can do nothing about. I learned that life unfolds as it does and all the worry in the world won’t change it.**



Executive editor **ANTHONY HEAD** (*Mind/Body/Soul*, page 34; “The Road to Whistler,” page 56; *Armchair Oenophile*, page 65; *Taste Spirits*, page 66) says that he typically makes broad, sweeping resolutions each January, the kind that can’t be traced back to him come December. **But 2010 is going to be different**

because I’ve decided not to be vague, but rather very specific with my resolutions. The only difference is that I will not tell anyone what they are.



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This Month at Ojai Valley Inn & Spa

MARK LANGTON (*Insider*, pages 24–33; *Good Deeds*, pages 40 and 42) was all too happy to consider the things he won't be attempting this year. Forget about putting that bottle of microbrew on a coaster. And, of course, there's not getting rid of all the accumulated bike parts in the garage. I'm also not going to be offended when friends I haven't seen in several months comment on how much more gray my hair has gotten (and I won't comment on how much weight they've put on). Langton, our events editor, is also a personal mountain bike instructor. For more information go to www.mountainbikeskills.com.



Senior editor **MALLORY McCREARY** (*Finds Travel*, page 22; *Upgrades*, page 44) writes, I don't make resolutions, because they are bound to be broken before the last float is finished in the Rose Parade. I do strive to be a slightly better person from one year to the next: Less stressed, more generous, more patient (that last one never happens). But let's face it: I'm still the same complaining curmudgeon. For 2010, I resolve not to try and be anything other than what I've always been—me.

SOPHIE PATENAUDE, who works on layout and production of the magazine, can't think of a thing she's not going to do in 2010, besides not buying too many shoes, not letting the paperwork pile up, and not forgetting to tell my loved ones how much I love them, even when things get crazy. Nope, not a thing.

Contributing editor **JEMMA WILDERMUTH** (*Finds Style*, pages 18 and 20) says that she wants to meet life on time and with a smile, so what she *won't* be doing this year is fitting: I resolve to stop being late to life's daily callings. Wouldn't want to miss the next great adventure. ■



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Finds

By Lynne Andujar



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3. Puma "Rudolph Dassler Rhythm" flats (\$100); **THE PUMA STORE**, Santa Barbara, www.shop.puma.com.

4. "W's Sugar & Spice" flats (\$120); **PATAGONIA GREAT PACIFIC IRONWORKS**, Ventura, www.patagonia.com.

5. Ecco "Lite Skimmer" flats (\$120); **THE WALKING COMPANY** at The Oaks, Thousand Oaks, 805-371-7955; or www.eccousa.com.

6. DKNY Active "Lorraine" flats (\$79); **DKNY COMPANY STORE** (see above).

7. Keen "Sienna MJ" flats (\$75); **JACK'S SHOES**, Westlake Village, 805-373-9328; or www.keenfootwear.com.



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5. Michael Kors "Rita" boots (\$158); www.michaelkors.com.

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Sonoma celebrates all things olive with the ninth annual Sonoma Valley Olive Season through February. Highlights include Martini Madness (January 8), where attendees sample martinis mixed by masters and vote on the favorites; the Feast of the Olive Dinner (January 23), a multi-course, olive-inspired feast prepared by Sonoma Valley's top chefs; and the Olive Season Finale Weekend (February 12–14), with dinners and tastings and a marketplace for Sonoma Valley wine and olive oil. Local businesses are offering complimentary tastings and olive-themed events (even spa treatments!), too. Visit www.olivefestival.com for a complete schedule of events and other promotions.

Les Petites Maisons (800-291-8962; www.lespetitesmaisons.com) is offering a special rate of \$130 for its four cottages (with full kitchens) in conjunction with the festival; the rate also includes a basket of Sonoma olive products. Each cottage has its own outdoor garden chiminea and is just a short walk from Sonoma Plaza.

The Inn at Sonoma (888-568-9818; www.innatsonoma.com) also has a festival weekday rate starting at \$135, which includes breakfast and afternoon hors d'oeuvres with wine in their 19 guestrooms (all with fireplaces).

Visit www.olivefestival.com for a full schedule of events, history, and recipes for olive goodies in conjunction with the Sonoma Valley Olive Season (above). The soothing water feature of the Agua Serena Spa at Hyatt Grand Champions in Palm Springs (below) welcomes guests with a special birthday deal.



Happy Birthday to You

Celebrate your birthday (through August 31) at the Agua Serena Spa at Hyatt Grand Champions in Palm Springs with a 50-minute complimentary spa treatment, a free entrée at Lantana Restaurant, a complimentary non-alcoholic beverage, and special birthday gift when you bring a companion in for a 50-minute spa treatment (or go by yourself and get a treatment for 50 percent off). The spa provides relaxation areas where waterfalls cascade into a reflecting pool, a Patchouli Garden with the scents of nature, as well as in-spa dining and a menu of massages to pamper you on your special day. Add a stay with a 25 percent discount on room rates—just mention the “Agua Serena Birthday Package.” 760-674-4100; www.grandchampions.hyatt.com

Hot Tip

With www.petairways.com, pets fly in the cabin (no humans allowed) instead of in cargo. Attendants make sure pets get potty breaks and check on them every 15 minutes; plus owners can monitor their pets' progress online as they fly. From LA, pets can travel to Denver, Chicago, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, New York, and Ft. Lauderdale. Rates start at \$149 and vary by distance of trip and size of animal.

More Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara is offering a “24 More, Compliments of Santa Barbara” promotion (through March 31), which means guests receive 24 extra hours (a free night) when they book two nights at participating hotels. There are also coupons for special deals at restaurants, wineries, museums, and retailers (two-for-one museum admissions and deals on wine tastings, for example). Participating properties include Brisas del Mar Inn at the Beach, Cabrillo Inn at the Beach, Canary Hotel, Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, Fess Parker's Wine Country Inn & Spa, Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara, Hadsten House Inn & Spa, Marriott Santa Ynez Valley, Upham Hotel & Country House, and more. Visit www.24-moresantabarbara.com for coupons and the hotel booking code. ■

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Alcohol 14.4% by Vol.

By Mark Langton

THROUGH 1/31

Through January 31: TOURING SANTA BARBARA THROUGH THE MAGIC LANTERN

Casa de la Guerra, Santa Barbara. This exhibit of hand-colored glass lantern slides takes visitors back to early 20th-century Santa Barbara. The collection shows the differences and similarities between today's trendy seaside city and the early days of its development. Casa de la Guerra is itself a historical treasure and a living tribute to the area's Spanish-Mexican heritage. Completed in 1827, it stands at the heart of Santa Barbara's history along with El Presidio de Santa Bárbara (1782) and Mission Santa Barbara (1786). For more information call **805-965-0093** or go to www.sbthp.org.

January 20–24: LOS ANGELES ART SHOW

Los Angeles Convention Center. Not just a collection of fine art from around the world, but a total art happening. Whether you're a collector or just curious, there is something for everyone, including seminars, lectures, and special themed exhibits. Considered the largest art fair on the West Coast, every artistic medium will be on display and for purchase, whether it's cutting-edge modern art or museum-quality masterpieces valued into the millions of dollars. For more information call **310-822-9145** or go to www.laartshow.com.

January 23–24: LOS ANGELES FITNESS EXPO

Los Angeles Convention Center. California's largest fitness expo features more than 250 exhibitors with the latest in fitness, diet, nutrition, and strength products. There will also be fitness professionals presenting educational seminars and demonstrations, not to mention bodybuilding, martial arts, wrestling, and strongest-man competitions. For more information call **888-348-3976** or go to www.thefitexpo.com.



January 26: HARRY CONNICK, JR.

Arlington Theatre, Santa Barbara. Contemporary crooner and pianist Harry Connick, Jr. has performed and recorded American standards, jazz, blues, and funk. For his latest release, *Your Songs*, he collaborated with legendary producer Clive Davis for a polished collection of some of the most iconic popular songs of the 20th century, performed flawlessly by Connick's handpicked string orchestra and big band. Songs he will perform include Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are," John Lennon and Paul McCartney's "And I Love Her," Elton John's

"Your Song," and Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love with You." For more information call **805-963-4408** or go to www.thearlingtontheatre.com.

January 29: MORPHOSES/THE WHEELDON COMPANY

The Granada, Santa Barbara. Only two years old, the company has been heralded by *The New York Times* as "a dream ballet troupe," with dancers consisting of members of some of the most prestigious ballet companies in the world, including New York City Ballet and Ballet of Britain. The show is a blend of classic and contemporary ballet with modern dance, visual arts, and design. For more information call **805-893-3535** or go to www.artsandlectures.ucsb.edu.

January 30–May 30: DELACROIX TO MONET: MASTERPIECES OF 19TH-CENTURY PAINTING FROM THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM

Santa Barbara Museum of Art. This collection of rare 19th-century paintings is on loan from the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. It features 40 paintings from some of the most important artists of the 19th century, assembled over a span of 140 years. This will be the only showing of these exquisite masterpieces on the West Coast. Superb examples of the Barbizon school, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, and Impressionism represent one of the most rapidly changing chapters in the history of Western art. For more information call **805-963-4364** or go to www.sbma.net.

February 4–14: SANTA BARBARA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Arlington Theatre, Santa Barbara. The stars will certainly be shining for this 25th annual event. A favorite among film actors because of its location, you can be sure many (if not most) of the top actors of the day will be at this comprehensive festival. In addition to screenings, there will be panel discussions with top producers, directors, and writers, as well as celebrity tributes and free family-oriented events and screenings. For more information call **805-963-0023** or go to www.sbiff.org. ■



Here's an idea:

BODIE HOUSE MUSIC. Grant R. Brimhall Library, Thousand Oaks. Over the past several years, a new form of live music venue has been gaining popularity: living rooms. Music lovers, like Renee Bodie of Agoura Hills, are opening their homes to intimate acoustic performances by local and national artists. The audience is small, usually around 50 people, allowing the artists to engage with them as if they are part of the show. After attending one of Bodie's shows, Thousand Oaks Library director Steve Brogden asked if she thought the concept would work in a slightly bigger setting, such as his library, to give artists who wouldn't normally play in the Conejo Valley a chance to perform for larger audiences. Bodie agreed, and since April 2008 she has attracted many talented artists to perform at the library. On January 30, Rosemary Butler, a successful background singer and vocal coach with credits and a client list that reads like a who's who of the pop and rock world, will perform. For more information call **805-449-2660** or go to www.bodiehouse.com.



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By Mark Langton

1/23-4/4

Through April 15: **AMERICA I AM: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMPRINT**

California Science Center, Los Angeles. Nearly 500 years of African-American contributions to the United States and the world are on display at this third stop of a 10-city, four-year tour. Presented by award-winning broadcaster Tavis Smiley, host of the PBS program *Tavis Smiley*, the exhibit chronicles the life and times of African-Americans through rare historic objects and multimedia programs. Artifacts include the typewriter Alex Haley used to write *Roots*; the door key and stool from the Birmingham jail cell that held Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; sports memorabilia from Michael Jordan, Arthur Ashe, and Muhammad Ali; and items from prominent entertainers such as Etta James, Michael Jackson, and Prince. For more information call 323-724-3623 or go to www.californiasciencecenter.org.

January 12: **SANTA BARBARA CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

Lobero Theatre, Santa Barbara. The Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra is conducted by maestro Heichiro Ohyama, a winner of numerous international competitions and awards. Ohyama has previously held principal positions as both a violist and conductor with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Children 10 to 18 years old are admitted free with accompanying adult. Several other concerts take place through the winter and spring months. For more information call 805-966-2441 or go to www.sbco.org.

January 14: **CONEJO VALLEY MOTHERS & MORE**

Westlake Village Civic Center. Join guest speaker Cheryl Freitas, director of the Conejo Valley Unified School District Development Center, for an informative discussion on how you and your child can prepare for kindergarten. Freitas will share her experience and knowledge about how to evaluate the area's kindergarten choices and how to determine the best fit for your child. For more information go to www.conejovalleymothersandmore.org.

January 15: **A UNIVERSE OF DREAMS**

Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Bank of America Performing Arts Center. Dazzling photographs of space taken by the Hubble space telescope serve as the backdrop for a spoken-word performance of works from some of the greatest poets of all time, including Stanley Kunitz, Jim Harrison, and William Shakespeare. Providing ethereal musical accompaniment is Celtic/Early Music crossover group Ensemble Galilei, featuring *Riverdance* fiddler Liz Knowles and US National Scottish harp champion Sue Richards. The show is narrated by award-winning journalist Neal Conan, host of NPR's *Talk of the Nation*. For more information call 805-449-2787 or go to www.civicsartsplaza.com.

January 22–April 24: **MAKING TIME: VOYAGE TO VIETNAM**

Santa Barbara Maritime Museum. This exhibit highlights a unique aspect of military memorabilia—canvas bunk art. These works come from soldiers and Marines who were making the three-week voyage to Vietnam in 1967 aboard the USNS *General Nelson M. Walker*. The men got the notion to use their bunk beds' canvas material to chronicle the trip and also leave messages and drawings with subjects that include patriotism, politics, humor, anxiety, and love. Also part of the exhibit is an original sleeping station salvaged from the ship, with the bunk beds and art intact. For more information call 805-962-8404 or go to www.sbmm.org.

January 23–April 4: **MERCEDES MATTER: A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION**

Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University, Malibu. One of the most influential avant-garde artists of the 20th century, Mercedes Matter (1913–2001) was an underappreciated yet highly talented painter of early American Modernism, European Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism. In her later years, she moved toward charcoal still lifes—powerfully original black-and-white works that critics consider to be her most moving and important art. Recently the *Wall Street Journal* declared it “one of the best New York painting exhibitions.” For more information call 310-506-4851 or go to www.arts.pepperdine.edu.

January 24: **WINTERFEST ALL-BREED DOG SHOW**

Seaside Park, Ventura. Presented by the Ventura County Dog Fanciers Association at the Ventura County Animal Shelter in Camarillo. Whatever your favorite breed, you're sure to see an example in its finest form at this biannual event (there's also a Summerfest show). For more information call 805-388-4341 or go to www.vcdfa.org.

January 30: **NORTH CAROLINA YOUTH TAP ENSEMBLE**

Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Bank of America Performing Arts Center. This talented troupe hails from North Carolina, but it has toured all over the world, performing almost every form of tap dance: South African Gumboot, sand dancing, buck, vaudeville, body percussion, funk, Latin, and jazz—it's like getting *Stomp*, *Riverdance*, Fred Astaire, and *Bring In 'Da Noise ...* all in one show. For more information call 805-449-2787 or go to www.civicsartsplaza.com. ■



Here's an idea:

Are your kids bugging you to learn how to ski or snowboard, but you just don't have the time? Let **BLUE ANGELS YOUTH SKI & SNOWBOARD PROGRAM** do the work for you. The five-Saturday program, from January 23 to February 27, includes lessons from a certified coach, all-day lift tickets, transportation to and from Mountain High Ski Resort, lunch, adult supervision, and a Pro-Tec helmet to keep. Classes are small enough—10 students or less—that children (ages 7 to 16) get lots of individual instruction. The company also has a local rental partner where you can rent equipment at a discount. For more information call 858-509-8926 or go to www.blueangelsnow.com.



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JANUARY

January 19–24: The Theater League presents the musical *AVENUE Q* at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza's Bank of America Performing Arts Center. Called "one of the funniest shows you're ever likely to see" by *Entertainment Weekly*, *Avenue Q* follows a young college grad (puppet) as he enters the real world. He moves into a building which is home to an out-of-work comedian, a slacker with a heart of gold, a straight-laced investment banker with something to hide, an Internet addict, and a cute kindergarten teacher—all coming together to discover love, friendship, and the meaning of life. Though the characters are puppets, the show is intended for mature audiences. For more information call 805-449-2775 or go to www.theaterleague.com.

January 22–February 20: Based on the Old Testament tale of a boy blessed with prophetic dreams, *JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT* is a musical written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. The performance features a little bit of everything, from country-western and calypso to pop and rock 'n' roll. This show is produced by The Conejo Players in Thousand Oaks, which has provided affordable community theater productions and vocational opportunities for those interested in all aspects of theater for more than 50 years. For more information call 805-495-3715 or go to www.conejoplayers.org.


January 29: Born in Russia, raised in Israel, and now based in Canada, jazz vocalist *SOPHIE MILMAN* is being heralded as one of the hottest rising stars in jazz. Her unique approach blends a variety of styles and explores a number of genres; her album *Make Someone Happy* won a JUNO Award (Canada's Grammy equivalent) in 2008. Catch her for one night only at the Center for the Arts at Pepperdine University in Malibu. For more information call 310-506-4522 or go to www.arts.pepperdine.edu.



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FEBRUARY

February 5–14: If you're a fan of The Andrews Sisters' pop songs of the 1940s, then **THE ANDREWS BROTHERS** is for you. Performed by the Ovation Award-winning Cabrillo Musical Theatre at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza's Bank of America Performing Arts Center, this romantic slapstick comedy follows three stagehands who jump in and save the day when the singing sisters don't show up for a USO gig. The show features 27 hit songs, including "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," "On a Slow Boat to China," and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree." For more information call 805-449-2787 or go to www.cabrillomusictheatre.com.

February 10: Do something different to celebrate Valentine's Day and board the Fillmore & Western Railway's **LOVE TRAIN**. This is no ordinary train trip: It's the only place where murder is a laughing matter, thanks to some lighthearted actors trying to solve a murder mystery—with the help of the audience. The evening begins with a three-course dinner and there's a full bar on board. For more information call 805-524-2546 or go to www.fwry.com.

February 18: Grammy Award winner **SUZANNE VEGA** brings her passionate and poetically laced songs to UCSB's Campbell Hall. In 1987 her song "Luka" paved the way for the female folk-rock movement, and her seventh studio album *Beauty & Crime*, an ode to New York City released in 2007, was hailed by *Newsweek* as "original, gritty, and gorgeous as ever" and by *People* magazine as "lovely and literate." For more information call 805-893-3535 or go to www.artsandlectures.ucsb.edu.

MARCH

March 12–13: More than 20 local professional and exhibition dance groups comprised of more than 100 dancers take the stage for **BASSH** at Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara. Performances include ballroom, Argentine tango, swing, salsa, and hip-hop. There is also an opening night gala following the performance, where guests can dance and mingle with the performers. For more information call the Santa Barbara Dance Alliance at 805-966-6950 or go to www.sbdancealliance.org.



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March 19–21: The Paso Robles wine region celebrates 100 years of zinfandel history in the area at the **ZINFANDEL FESTIVAL**. Events include special vintner tastings, samplings of zinfandel-friendly foods, and an auction with Paso Robles wine country items. A portion of the proceeds benefits health, education, and community services for the vineyard workers in the community. For more information call 805-239-8463 or go to www.pasowine.com.

March 25–April 1: Celebrating “The Method” school of acting, **METHODFEST** in Agoura Hills and Calabasas features fresh new filmmakers and actors, and pays tribute to established actors and filmmakers who have contributed to this genre. In addition to screenings of American and foreign feature and short films, there are acting workshops, filmmaking panels and seminars, and several live musical performances by indie artists. For more information call 310-535-9230 or go to www.methodfest.com.

APRIL

April 30–May 8: The **VENTURA MUSIC FESTIVAL** will feature Itzhak Perlman, considered one of the most important and talented violinists of the 20th century. A four-time Emmy Award and 15-time Grammy Award winner, Perlman will perform at the Oxnard Performing Arts Center on May 1. Several world-class performances will take place at locations around Ventura during the festival. For more information call 805-648-3146.

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FEBRUARY

February 2–7: All of professional golf’s top players will be trying to unseat 2009 champion Phil Mickleson at the **NORTHERN TRUST OPEN** at Riviera Country Club in Pacific Palisades. This year the American Cancer Society has joined the Professional Golfers’ Association’s “A Tour’s Tickets Fore Charity” program which benefits several local charities where PGA events are held. When you purchase tickets for the tournament through the American Cancer

Society, 75 percent of the ticket price will benefit the American Cancer Society's programs, and the remaining 25 percent of the ticket price will benefit the Los Angeles Junior Chamber of Commerce Charity Foundation. For more information call 213-427-7388 or go to www.northerntrustopen.com.

February 6: The Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum hosts **LA VIE EN ROSE**, its annual Valentine's Day exhibition and fundraiser. Located in the heart of Santa Barbara, the exhibit space transforms into a Paris lounge experience combined with a fashion show produced by Dressed & Ready boutique. Check out the live and silent auctions while models strut the runway. There will also be gourmet appetizers and wine, as well as live music. For more information call 805-966-5373 or go to www.sbcaf.org.

February 6: One of Santa Ynez Valley's most anticipated events of the year is **THE FAMILY SCHOOL'S ANNUAL AUCTION DINNER**. The Family School (preschool through grade 5) in Los Olivos boasts a low teacher-to-student ratio and a comprehensive curriculum with a hands-on environmental and ecological focus. It's no coincidence that this year's dinner will be prepared by chef Bradley Odgen of Solvang's Root 246, which promotes farm-fresh, locally grown ingredients. The event takes place at Solvang's Hotel Corque, which starts with wine tasting of some of the best of the Central Coast, and a silent auction with several unique wine lots and other offerings. There will also be a live auction and dancing. For more information call 805-688-5440 or go to www.syvfamilyschool.org.

February 20: The Community Conscience "Under One Roof" human services center holds its annual **MARDI GRAS BALL** at the Westlake Hyatt in Westlake Village. The event includes champagne and hors d'oeuvres, a five-course dinner with wine, silent and live auctions, and live entertainment and dancing. The Community Conscience complex allows nonprofit agencies in Thousand Oaks and the greater Conejo Valley to operate administrative offices rent-free. For more information call 805-494-3543 or go to www.communityconscience.org.

February 27: The Casa Pacifica Angels presents its **ANGELS BALL** black-tie gala at Sherwood Country Club in Thousand Oaks. The event features cocktails, dinner, dancing, and a live



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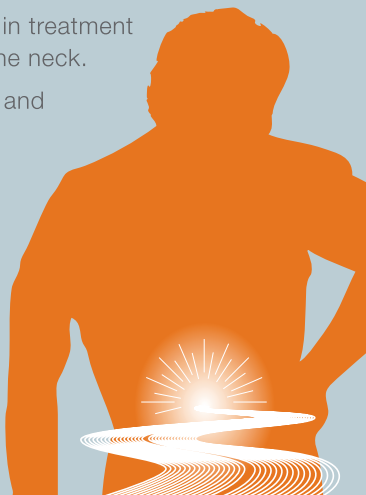


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MARCH

March 5: Formed in 2001 by a group of women in the Conejo Valley and the West San Fernando Valley, the Centennial Guild is dedicated exclusively to serving Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, the area's only children's hospital. Its major fundraiser this year, **STAND UP FOR CHILDRENS HOSPITAL LOS ANGELES—AN EVENING WITH JAY LENO**, will take place at the Skirball Center in Los Angeles. The evening begins with cocktails and dinner, followed by a performance by comedian Jay Leno, then dancing afterward. For more information call 818-936-4450 or send an e-mail to centennialguild@aol.com.

March 7: You can help the hungry and disadvantaged just by taking a little stroll around the Conejo Valley. The **32ND CONEJO VALLEY CROP WALK** raises funds that go to the needy in 80 countries to help with relief, development, and refugee assistance. Twenty-five percent of all money raised stays in the community and benefits MANNA Conejo Valley Food Bank, Meals on Wheels, Lutheran Social Services, and Catholic Charities. For more information call Sherrill Hyink at 805-492-3674.

March 20: Friends of Oak Park Schools presents **PARTY AROUND THE WORLD WITH FRIENDS** at the Dole Foods corporate headquarters in Westlake Village. Dole's corporate chef will create an international dining experience, coupled with wine and beers from around the world. The event benefits the Oak Park School District, which receives only about a third of its funding from the state of California. For more information call 818-735-3270 or go to www.friendsofoakparkschools.org.

March 22: Here's your chance to play the exclusive Sherwood Country Club greens in Thousand Oaks, the same course that recently hosted the Chevron World Challenge. The

As the first female Chief of Staff at Los Robles Hospital, I urge you to continue annual screening mammograms starting at age 40.

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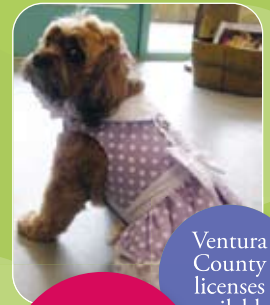


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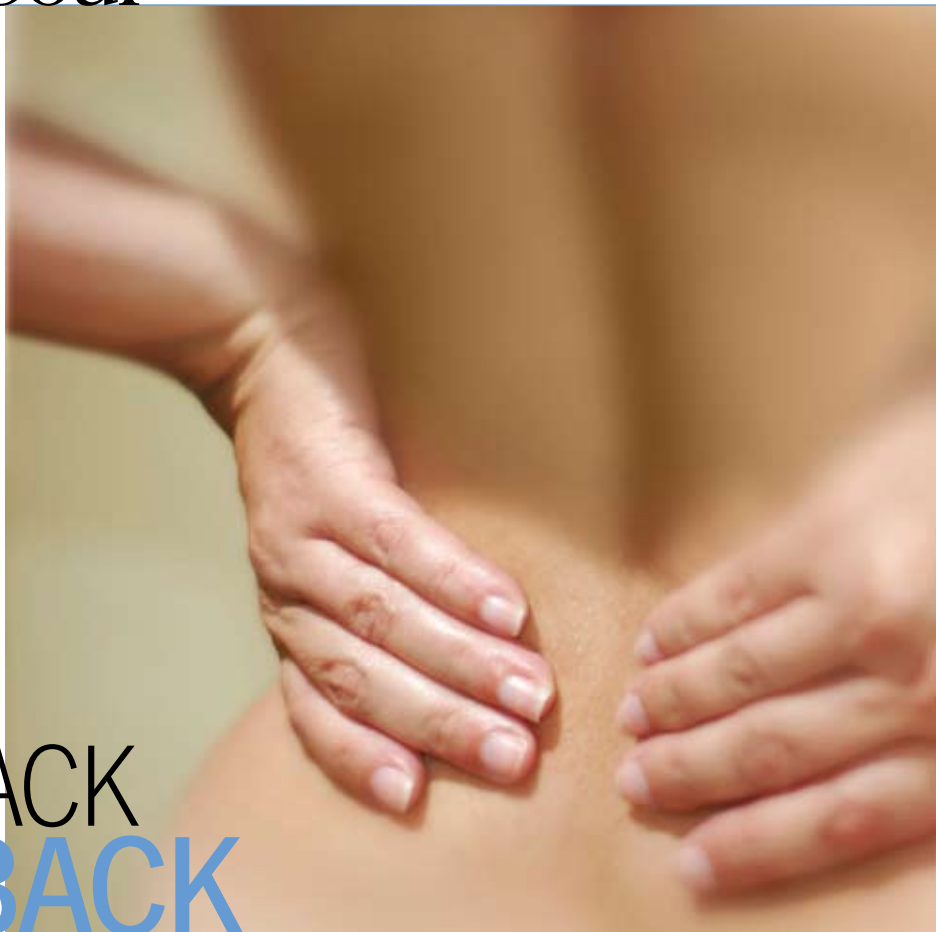
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Mind/Body/Soul

By Anthony Head



GETTING BACK TO THE BACK

Caring for what's behind you.

READERS OF A CERTAIN AGE should have no problem thinking back to their elementary and high-school days and remembering a kid who spent most, if not all, of his or her formative years in a back brace. The affliction was usually a result of scoliosis and it made some of us cringe (and sit up a little straighter) at the thought it could strike us, too.

Scoliosis was the extent of my thoughts on the back for most of my life, and that's what led me to flip through an article entitled "The History of Scoliosis," which proved fascinating for, if nothing else, demonstrating how far medicine has advanced when it comes to treating back conditions. Author Robert Lovett explains that the word "scoliosis" was coined by Hippocrates to mean, essentially, a curvature of the spine. A common treatment in his day (circa 460 BC) for this affliction was, and I quote Mr. Lovett: "Patients with spinal curves, however, were tied by the legs to a ladder, and the ladder raised and then dropped to the ground, striking on one end, thus tending to straighten the spine." Or perhaps ruining a perfectly good ladder.

Hippocrates had no idea what actually caused the affliction, which continues to be the case today. But there is some bright news according to Dr. Alan Moelleken, a Santa Barbara

orthopedic surgeon at the Spine and Orthopedic Center (www.spineandorthocenter.com): "Incidences of scoliosis have been decreasing worldwide, although no one knows why that is because we don't really know what causes it in the first place."

The human back may be out of the brace, but it isn't out of the woods. It turns out that despite declining rates for scoliosis, according to the Mayo Clinic, low back pain affects around 80 percent of the population at some point during their lives. It is one of the top reasons for missing work, and it can make just about any activity, even sitting and sleeping, extremely uncomfortable.

"When patients come to see me, they want pain relief and they want to know what treatment options are. But they want to avoid surgery," says Moelleken. "With our in-house, multidisciplinary approach to treatment, which may include physical therapy and acupuncture to decrease pain, we have a pretty good chance at avoiding surgery, even for people who have already been recommended for back surgery elsewhere."

While many professionals agree that the back is built to last, obviously, like the other parts of the body, it has vulnerabilities. And, because of the back's location and because the spinal column is so vital, just about everything else on the body is beholden to its

well-being. For example, leg pain known as sciatica results from nerves in the lower spine being compressed; and cervicogenic headaches begin with the very top of the upper spinal column at the neck.

A sizable bulk of back problems have a genetic history, according to Dr. Brian Rudin, an orthopedic spine surgeon in Westlake Village (www.thespinesurgeon.com). “If you have good genes, your back should last you a lifetime. But some of our backs are, unfortunately, genetically programmed to fail. So I always ask new patients if one of their parents had a ‘bad back.’”

Rudin says that a good percentage of problems he sees are a result of more controllable factors. He describes his most common patients, broadly, as “soccer moms throwing their backs out at the gym, with the kind of pain everyone gets at one time or another.”

Such low back sprains can hurt for up to eight weeks, but usually improve over time. Other common afflictions include a buildup of arthritis that puts pressure on a nerve, and a degeneration of the disks, which are like the spine’s shock absorbers.

Rudin says an overwhelming number of patients don’t need surgery. “We start conservatively, like Motrin or Advil for inflammation; maybe some physical therapy. We can do a shot of cortisone for sciatica. But when more aggressive work is needed,” he says, “whether to remove an arthritis-type bone spur or decompressing a herniated disk, the procedures are minimally invasive and patients usually go home the same day.”

There are, of course, more serious back problems, but even in those extreme cases, today’s approach to back surgery is not the traditional picture of screws and rods and other hardware in the back. “Flexible technology to help patients maintain their range of motion is where we’re at today,” says Moelleken. “Spine surgery is all about motion preservation.”

Whether back pain results from controllable factors or uncontrollable factors, just about everyone needs to look out for osteoporosis, a degenerative disease where bones lose mass and density, making them particularly fragile. The National Osteoporosis Foundation estimates that about 55 percent of Americans aged 50 and older are at risk or are suffering already.

“As the population ages, the incidences of osteoporosis seem to be going up,” says Moelleken. “And it’s preventable, to an extent, with a good diet early in life and with continuous weight-bearing exercises, like walking and elliptical walking, to increase and maintain bone density.”

Moelleken says calcium supplements have also been shown to be beneficial, even for older bodies that are already fully formed. “There’s no need to ever give up on our backs,” he says. “We can slow down the inevitable. If someone lives to age 90 and they’ve slowed down osteoporosis so that there are no fractures or pain, that’s a victory.” ■

Stretching: The Great Debate

While there’s no doubt that stretching feels good and may improve flexibility, the medical jury remains unconvinced that it is necessary for overall good health.

Moelleken: I stretch to some extent. It won’t increase your longevity, but by stretching you can stay more limber, maybe prevent some musculoskeletal injuries.

Rudin: I go to the gym but I don’t do a lot of stretching. I’ve never seen any medical studies to prove it actually is beneficial.

WHAT’S BEHIND YOU?

Answer: Your back. To keep it healthy and strong, consider the following steps (adapted from the Mayo Clinic, www.mayoclinic.com.)

Build muscle strength. Abdominal and back muscles form a corset, of sorts, around the spine; and leg muscles can take much of the burden off the back when lifting heavy items.

Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight puts strain on the back’s muscles. Apart from eating right, exercise with low-impact aerobic activities, like walking and swimming.

Lift smart. Keep the spine properly aligned when moving straight up and down, and let the legs do the work, bending only at the knees.

Stay flexible. Flexibility in the hips and upper legs improves coordinated movement. Some forms of exercise, such as yoga, Pilates, and tai chi, may be especially beneficial.

Maintain good posture. Help prevent muscle strain and pressure on the disks by standing with a neutral pelvic position; choose a chair with lower back support.

Don’t smoke. Smoking diminishes oxygen levels in spinal tissues, which might increase degeneration in the disks.

Social Savvy

By Laura Samuel Meyn

I have a new friend who has begun asking me to watch her pets when she goes out of town. Trouble is, she lives several miles from my house, and she has a long list of instructions that involves multiple trips over there each day. I did it once because she was new to town, but I don't want to add this to my to-do list every time she travels. How do I let her down easily?

A: Wouldn't it be great if someone Spotty already knows and loves would, for free, see to his every need while his doting owner is away? Your friend isn't going to be motivated to research her other options as long as you remain the easiest solution to her pet-care problem. It's time to say no: A sympathetic but firm "I'm sorry, but I can't" will suffice, and then quickly move the conversation on to problem-solving.

Suggest she look into professional pet-sitting services that will come to her home, or kennels that have puppy playtimes, webcams, and all sorts of perks that will keep people who are nutty about their furkids satisfied. While these options come with relatively hefty price tags (relative to free, that is), that fact serves as an important reminder that pet sitting is a pretty big favor to ask of a friend. Since she's newer to town, pointing her toward such resources will be big a favor to you both—and to your friendship, which isn't going to flourish if you start screening calls to avoid doggie duty.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This month we introduce a new column designed to help you navigate awkward social situations—when you're torn between what you'd *like* to do and what you think you *should* do. Send us your quandaries (don't worry, we won't print your name) to edit@805living.com and put "Social Savvy" in the subject line of the e-mail.

Q: I have a Facebook account and want to keep it exclusively for friends and family. How do I handle it when a work associate "friends" me and I don't want to accept? I want to keep my private life private, but don't want to offend.

A: You can counter-invite work associates to LinkedIn.com. Later on, if an explanation seems to be in order, you can tell the person that your Facebook account tends to be dominated by goofy relatives and old friends, and that you prefer to keep up with your important business contacts in a more streamlined setting.

It's also possible to head off such unwanted advances by making use of the often-overlooked privacy settings that Facebook offers. Go to the "settings" menu, scroll down to "privacy," and you have a number of options, including making it hard for would-be friends to find your profile at all: Under "privacy" go to "search" and select "only friends." Then, only the people you're already Facebook friends with will be able to see that you maintain a profile on the site.

Social networkers who do keep up with both personal and professional contacts on Facebook can benefit from familiarizing themselves with the "customize" function in a number of different areas to control who can see what. For instance, if you get tired of doing damage-control deletes in the wake of a friend who writes off-color comments on your wall, you can block them from being able to post without dropping them as a Facebook friend.

Remember that many a high school and college kid has faced a similar problem with unwanted "friends"—especially when their parents' generation (including you, maybe?) started signing up for Facebook. Suddenly what was fun and off-the-cuff now feels as if it needs to be edited for content. But we grown-ups already know that anything you put on the Internet should be edited as if a future employer will read it. So even if you're successful at limiting your circle, it's smart to resist the temptation to complain about your boss (or your hangover) *anywhere* on the Internet.



Q: I have a not-so-close friend who constantly says negative things about her kids in front of them, like "Does anyone want to borrow my kids for a week?" She says it in a joking manner and thinks it's funny, but I find it offensive and hurtful to the children. Since we're not all that close, I don't feel it's my place to interfere, but should I?

A: Sometimes parents erroneously think that belittling their children is more self-effacing than it is antagonistic. And sometimes a frazzled parent whose individual identity is suffering feels the need to let the world know that changing diapers and breaking up fights isn't her idea of a good time. Maybe she's embarrassed that she can't visit with you without her little darlings screaming in the background, or maybe she thinks that calling out their faults makes her less a minivan mama and a little edgier.

When your friend begins insulting her children, you can say, as warmly as possible, that you know she realizes how incredibly lucky she is to have such healthy, smart, sweet children. If humor seems fitting, you can even remind her that someday the kids will probably be taking care of her—so maybe she should go a little easier on them. If they're nearby and little, you can even hug them as you say it, to make your point that these are little human beings who are absorbing every word. It's not a full-blown confrontation, but it will get her thinking. Your reaction might surprise her, and, in fact, it might lead to a more intimate chat, giving you the opportunity to float the thought that with self-esteem being so important, you hope that her kids aren't getting the wrong idea about her feelings for them. You might also acknowledge the hard work it is to raise children—and suggest that a regular girls' night out might be good for *everyone*. ■

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REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

High school mountain biking clubs offer fun and exercise.

RYAN MATTER DOESN'T RECALL exactly how he learned about a new cycling league last year. Most likely, he says, it was from an e-mail or through the grapevine. What he does remember is that his interest was immediately piqued. He'd been into mountain biking for a while and had a few friends who enjoyed it as well. Although he was only 15 at the time, he was excited about the prospect of assembling a team at his high school.

With the help of flyers he distributed to bike shops and announcements made at Royal High School in Simi Valley, where Ryan is now a junior, he succeeded in forming a club for the league's inaugural 2009 season. "When I told my AP history teacher [Brian Dennert] what I was doing, he mentioned that his father [Larry Dennert] might want to get involved, and that's how we got a coach," he says.

In order to solicit sponsors, Ryan created a marketing packet for local businesses. Then he simply "talked to them about the

program." He quickly obtained sponsors whose contributions help pay for team registration fees and coaching clinic costs. "We also use the money to make sure that every rider can participate no matter their financial situation," says Ryan. Plus, his boss at Simi Cycling Center (where he works weekends) designed the team's jerseys.

Now entering his second season, Ryan feels a huge sense of satisfaction from putting so much effort into building the team and seeing the hard work pay off. Membership has increased since last year, but new members are always welcome. "We'd especially like to have more girls come out," he says.

Teammates soon discover that mountain biking can boost endurance and confidence. Ryan says that at the first practice, people were walking their bikes up the hills. However, by the time race season rolled around, the whole team was regularly placing among the top-10 finishers.

Getting Involved

SOCAL INTERSCHOLASTIC CYCLING LEAGUE is a club-based sport built by volunteers for high school boys and girls, grades 9 through 12. Each rider is required to have a serviceable and safe mountain bike, helmet, protective eyewear, and full-fingered gloves.

A RIDER DAY CAMP will be held January 24 at Bonelli Park, LA County

2010 TENTATIVE RACE SCHEDULE (check website for up-to-date information)

RACE 1
Warner Springs, March 14

RACE 2
Vail Lake, March 28

RACE 3
Lake Arrowhead, April 11

RACE 4
Los Olivos, May 2

RACE 5
State Championships,
Monterey, May 16

To find out more about volunteer positions, entering races, or starting a club, contact Matt Gunnell at matt@socaldirt.org or visit www.socaldirt.org.

The governing body for interscholastic mountain biking leagues across the country is National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA). For more information visit www.nationalmtb.org.

To prepare for this year's races (see sidebar), members are currently practicing three times a week for two hours. "I plan our routes; we ride all over the hills and trailheads in Simi Valley," Ryan says.

Ryan's initiative illustrates what the league is all about, says Matt Gunnell, executive director of SoCal Interscholastic Cycling League. "Clubs are put together by students, parents, administrators, or interested community members who want to help grow the sport of mountain biking," he says. "We're implementing the model and culture of our sister league in Northern California, a group that's been successfully operating for 10 years."

The cross-country league, which is distinctly different from downhill or extreme mountain biking, is open to any high school club in Southern California. Students who live in areas where clubs haven't yet been formed can enter races unattached. Local clubs include Royal High School and Channel Islands High School, with new teams taking shape in Camarillo, Ojai, and Santa Barbara. (Gunnell predicts additional clubs will be formed in Thousand Oaks within the next couple years.)

Although there are many objectives to be met, according to Gunnell, safety is first and foremost to the program. He adds that cross-country mountain biking is the safest way for kids to enter cycling. "We want to make our sport as safe as possible. Kids are taught safe riding techniques and coaches are offered rigorous training, including risk management, first aid and CPR, and how to coach youth."

Riders are also taught self-sufficiency. "That's very particular to mountain biking," says Gunnell. "Tools and supplies have to be carried, so riders need to learn the basics of simple mechanical repairs. If they get a flat tire or their chain breaks, they need to fix it. Learning these skills is very empowering for kids."

Gunnell, a former police detective, enjoys watching teens quickly advance and learn a lifelong sport. "Cross-country mountain biking is the most accessible way to get kids on bikes and this program gives me a chance to pass on something I love. When selecting race venues we go to great pains to make sure there aren't a lot of extremely long uphill and downhill portions. We want kids to work hard and be challenged but we don't want to crush their spirits. We want them to be excited about the sport and come back."

Alfredo Salcido, head coach of the mountain biking club at Channel Islands High School, says involvement in the league has a positive effect on kids. "It gives them something to be motivated about, and unlike other sports, anyone can adapt to mountain biking and exceed. Size and height don't matter," says Salcido, who is also a respiratory therapist in Oxnard. "The league does an amazing job with the races. Kids have a blast and can't wait to go back. It's cool to see them pushing themselves."

None of last year's team members had ever ridden mountain bikes, and Salcido says that they went from barely knowing how to shift gears to climbing hills without help. "Now they can go anywhere in Sycamore Canyon. [Their home field.] They've been taught proper body positioning and how to use brakes and gears. As race season progresses, climbing gets tougher, but they embrace it."

Mountain biking is one of those things that adds perspective, says Gunnell: "After a big climb for the first time, kids think, 'Wow, I did that. I'm on top of the world.' A sense of accomplishment is palpable. They see the world at their feet. A lot of kids have never experienced anything like that."

As for Ryan, he equates the challenges of mountain biking to life in general: "You have good days and bad, and on the bad days, you just have to push through." ■

Good Deeds

By Mark Langton Photographs by Judi Burnstead



Sarah Brecht, Bruce Jenner, Melanie Selleck



Mark Elswick



Lori and Terry Schroeder



Lyle Waggoner, Marje and Cal Johnston



Dennis and Terry Gillette

THE KIDS ARE THE STARS

Boys & Girls Clubs of Conejo & Las Virgenes roll out the red carpet for area kids.

THE EVENT: The Boys & Girls Clubs of Conejo & Las Virgenes celebrated its seventh annual gala dinner and auction, "Stand Up for Kids." Held last November at the Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village, the event's keynote speaker and co-host was Olympic champion and Hall of Fame member Bruce Jenner. Entertainment included performances by Westlake High School's chorale group "A Class Act," Boys & Girls Clubs of Conejo & Las Virgenes member Jaime Kaufman, and comedy duo Mack & Jamie.

THE CAUSE: Boys & Girls Clubs provide a nurturing and educational after-school environment offering a variety of programs including leadership, fine arts, computer skills, nutrition, and sports. There are currently five clubs located in Thousand Oaks, Newbury Park, and Calabasas. The most recent is Club Chaparral, which opened last August on the campus of Chaparral Elementary School in Calabasas. *For more information about the Boys & Girls Clubs of Conejo & Las Virgenes call 818-706-0905 or go to www.bgcconejo.org.* ■



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Good Deeds

By Mark Langton Photographs by Kim Byrnes



Sigrid Toye, Starr Siegele



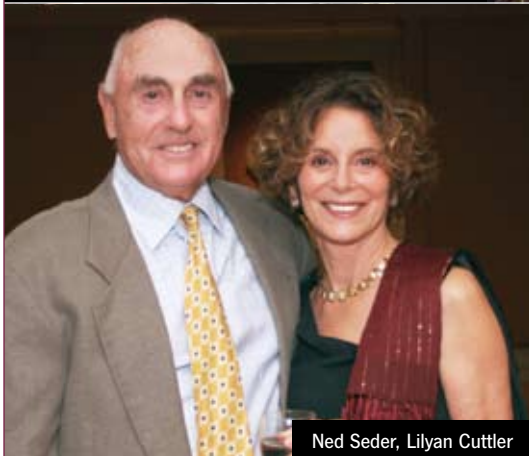
Bill and Lois Rosen



Jim and Linda Armstrong



Alice Willfong, Mary Anne Harrison, Candace White



Ned Seder, Lilyan Cuttler

GETTING A CLUE

Santa Barbara Museum puts mystery into masterpieces.

THE EVENT: Santa Barbara Museum of Art's major fundraiser, "Mysteries in Masterpieces," was held at the museum this past October. An intriguing contest challenged guests to hunt for art clues in the various exhibited art collections; prizes were awarded for the most clues gathered in the shortest amount of time. The event also included a silent auction, cocktails, and a buffet dinner catered by the Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara.

THE CAUSE: The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, a privately funded, not-for-profit institution, features world-class exhibitions from internationally recognized collections. The event was sponsored by the Women's Board of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, a group of more than 40 members dedicated to raising funds for acquisitions, exhibitions, special projects, community outreach, and educational programs for local children. *For more information about the Women's Board of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, call 805-884-6428 or go to www.sbmawb.org. For more information about the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, call 805-963-4364 or visit www.sbma.net.* ■



Amy Hammer, Lil Nelson, Jennifer Larkin



Carol Sysel, Harriet Mosson



Susan Case, Bette Saks

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Upgrades

By Mallory McCreary



TRENDS: 2010

Design inspiration for the year ahead.

Pro Pick:

GOOD-VALUE KITCHENS

"People are remodeling instead of moving," says Kim Norman, a designer with Showcase Kitchens & Baths. "And cabinets are the basis for any good redesign. Remember the abuse that kitchen cabinets take (they are opened and closed dozens of times a day) and buy the best (not always the most expensive) cabinetry you can." Norman likes Wood-Mode solid-wood cabinets with soft-close drawers and doors. She notes that most clients are going back to classic lines as opposed to trendy. "Clients want something that can take them into the next decade with style and grace." For many people, this means a return to a crisp, all-white look for cabinets. "Although the use of very dark woods for cabinets will remain strong, especially in a more contemporary environment," Norman adds.

Norman suggests designing kitchens with different zones for prep, cooking, cleanup, baking, sitting, and eating: "Working with a designer to properly lay out your kitchen helps you achieve optimum efficiency."

Design Group 42 **REGENT RECESSED CABINET DOORS** in the Southampton Design Theme from Wood-Mode (price varies depending on layout and options). Available at Showcase Kitchens & Baths, Westlake Village and Camarillo, www.showcasekitchensandbaths.com.



Our Pick:

LUXE ORGANICS

Inspired by nature doesn't have to mean twigs and bark. Nature goes glam with these gorgeous pieces:

Ceramic **MAGNOLIA WALL FLOWER** (\$399) designed by Rick Janecek for Global Views. Available at Karma Home Accents, Westlake Village, 818-706-0715; and at Neuwie, Agoura Hills and Santa Barbara, www.neuwie.com.

FRAGMENT CORAL LAMP (\$310) from Aidan Gray. Available at Rue de Lillie Antiques, Summerland, 805-695-8180.

NEST FEATHERED WALLCOVERING in Clearwater/Blue Heron (price available by request through interior designers) by Schumacher uses humanely gathered feathers that are arranged by hand on paper-backed panels.



COURTESY OF WOOD-MODE FINE CUSTOM CABINETS

Our Pick: CASUAL METALLICS

Forget special-occasion-only glitz: Metallics are now casual and fun. Add some shine indoors and out with the **GALVANIZED SIDE TABLE** (\$250) and the **METAL ROUND GARDEN TABLE** (\$188) from Aidan Gray. Available at *Rue de Lillie Antiques, Summerland, 805-695-8180*.



Pro Pick: SHADES OF GRAY

Deep gray paired with a warm, rich yellow are the hot new colors for 2010 in both home design and fashion, according to designer Steve Thompson from Cabana Home. "The new gray will be a fresh replacement for the overused taupe, tan, and cream combo, and yellow will be a refreshing accent color," Thompson says.

Look for it in large basics like the **SOFA IN FLANDERS COAL** (\$3,302) from Lee Industries, or in fun accents like Ankasa's **BERMUDA PILLOWS** (\$270 to \$598). Available at *Cabana Home, Santa Barbara and Mill Valley, www.cabanahome.com*.

Our Pick: WATER-WISE PRODUCTS

Good for Southern California's water supply and homeowners' pocketbooks, the **PRO-C SERIES IRRIGATION CONTROL** (from \$175) from Hunter has three programs to meet different water scheduling options, and even has an integrated back-up system in case the power goes out. Available at *John Deere Landscapes, Westlake Village, 818-991-7216; and Oxnard, 805-278-4556*.

Visit www.socalwatersmart.com for a complete list of low-flow toilets, high-efficiency clothes washers, synthetic turf, and irrigation systems that qualify for rebates.



Our Pick:

SHADES OF BLUE IN SURPRISING PLACES

Whether it conjures up the sea or the sky or the startling color of sparkling jewels, blue is always a favorite choice in home design. But new shades of this ever-popular hue have it dusty and muted to serve as a surprising neutral, or bold and saucy to update traditional furniture forms.

PROVENCAL SECRETAIRE DESK (\$2,295) from the Peninsula Home Collection. Available at *Great Rooms, Camarillo, www.greatroomsdesign.com*. **DONOVAN WING CHAIR** (\$2,279). Available at *www.neimanmarcus.com*.

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Located in the sought after Camelot development in Santa Rosa Valley, this two story Mediterranean-inspired villa captures sunlit views across lush lawns on an acre lot with an exquisite courtyard entrance. Exterior features include dazzling palm encircled resort style swimming pool highlighted by a swim slide, waterfall replenished koi pond, fruit orchard, lush landscaping and sports court. For entertaining there is an incredible outdoor kitchen complete with barbecue center with granite counter top. The Gourmet island kitchen features gleaming granite counter-tops, gourmet island and stainless steel appliances including large commercial Wolf range and double ovens. In addition to the master bedroom suite, upstairs, there are 3 spacious secondary bedrooms and large media room/play room. Off the huge family room there is an additional large guest bedroom complete with full bathroom downstairs. Also offered for \$6,000 per month lease. **Offered at \$1,899,000**

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THE FUTURE IS YOURS

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2010

THE BEST YEAR EVER.

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to start anew. So often, people can get so set in their ways that even if they wanted to attempt a new project, they've gotten to the point where asking for help or advice seems like it's harder than the task to be undertaken. January is the best month for making resolutions to improve existing, but not ideal, conditions—because January is *now*, and there is never a better time than the present for self-exploration and self-improvement. Here are some worthwhile goals along with advice on how to take the first steps for achieving them.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

January 1, 2010
Where to begin?

PUTTING YOUR LIFE IN PRINT

You don't have to be a drug-addicted celebrity—telling dark tales of excess and abuse—to write a memoir. More and more ordinary people are turning to this type of writing, some in hopes of publishing, some just looking for fun, and all wanting to give their lives some fresh perspective.

Maureen Murdock, some of whose six nonfiction books have been translated into a dozen languages, teaches classes at her Carpinteria home every Thursday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., helping students learn and polish their memoir-writing skills. "People don't all come thinking they've got something interesting to say, but they want to find out," says Murdock, who also teaches occasional classes and workshops in Los Angeles and San Francisco. "It's really fun when they start to review their lives."

Murdock's current eight weekly regulars, all women, read and discuss excerpts from published memoirs, read and receive feedback on their own work, and do various writing exercises. While she thinks women perhaps relate better to self-reflection, self-revelation, and candor, Murdock says



memoir classes are for anyone who "loves writing, loves reading, and wants to make sense of their lives and give their lives value."

And those lives need not be especially dramatic or sensational. According to Murdock, a memoir, like any book, requires great writing, but the secret is to describe even mundane events in a universal way that speaks to everyone. She says her classes provide the first writing experience for many people: "It gives them an enormous sense of accomplishment and depth in their own life."

For more information visit www.maureenmurdock.com.

— Frank Nelson



LIFE AFTER KIDS (YOURS)

After staying home for five years with her two young children, Karen Pery of West Hills felt she was no longer relevant in the workforce. "It's horrible to view yourself that way, but I'd become immersed in my children's lives and what was important to them," says Pery, who is a trained coach with a graduate degree in counseling. "I didn't know who I was anymore."

But then Pery experienced a wake-up call one day—away from her kids. "I found value separate from them and [I] want other women to feel the same way. It takes a lot of perception-shifting to realize you're still creative, interesting, and smart, but it's possible."

Pery founded Motherhood Reinvented, a life-coaching company that helps women overcome feeling "stuck." She offers individual and group coaching, and conducts workshops for local moms' groups. "We discuss what makes women feel powerful and identify ways to achieve their dreams. The issue usually isn't figuring out what they want to do, but about being ready to make new choices. I help remove obstacles that are holding them back," says Pery.

Bette Alkazian, a licensed marriage and family therapist and founder of Balanced Parenting in Westlake Village, also offers these tips to women attempting to reclaim themselves after having children: 1) Maintain adult interaction, whether it's with other parents, or, for example, with people in line in the grocery store. Be resourceful and creative about reaching out. 2) Don't let your passions take a backseat until the kids are gone; do what you can now to foster your interests. 3) Take time for yourself, even if it means wandering around the bookstore for an hour. "We have so much more to give if we're refreshed. Find whatever the happy place is for you," says Alkazian.

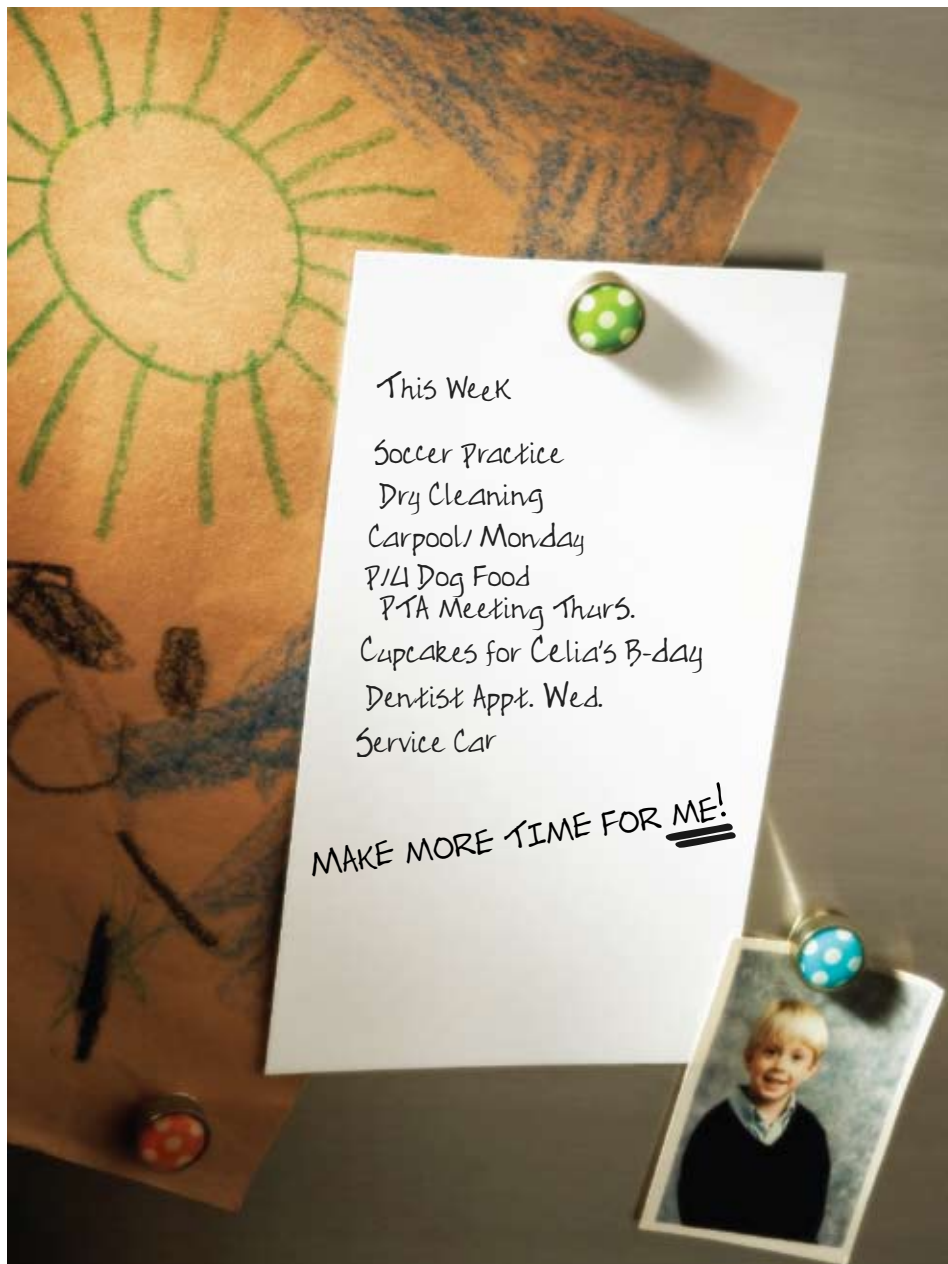
For more information about Motherhood Reinvented, go to www.karenpery.com or e-mail karen@karenpery.com for a complimentary 30-minute phone session.

Join Bette Alkazian for free advice on the first Tuesday of every month, including January 5 from 9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at Chocolatine (2955 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks). To learn more, call 805-230-2464 or go to www.balancedparenting.com.

— Cynthia House Nooney

"FIND WHATEVER
THE HAPPY PLACE
IS FOR YOU!"

—BETTE ALKAZIAN, BALANCED
PARENTING, WESTLAKE VILLAGE





GET SAVVY WITH SOCIAL NETWORKING

When was the last time someone asked if you were on Facebook? If terms like MySpace and Twitter aren't part of your vocabulary, it's time to find out about social networking. No longer the province of preteens procrastinating over homework, these sites are now the major technology used to stay in touch with the rest of the world, for business and fun.

To grasp the basic navigational skills of online networking, the Grant R. Brimhall Library in Thousand Oaks offers free classes throughout the year, taught by a professional librarian. "You won't walk out with a Facebook account," says adult services supervisor Sue Pelman, "but you'll learn the differences between the major online sites, and how they can be used in your personal life and work world."

For in-depth knowledge, sign up for a multimedia department course at Santa Barbara City College entitled Social Networking and Social Media. Participants not only learn about major sites, including Digg, Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, Vimeo, Wikis, and YouTube, they'll progress through a curriculum that covers how to build social networks, maximize usage, and market products. "Social networking is word-of-mouth on steroids," says Guy Smith, dean of the school of media arts. "It's the newest, permanent form of the way people communicate."

For more information call the Grant R. Brimhall Library at 805-449-2660, ext. 204 or visit www.toaks.org/library; call Santa Barbara City College at 805-965-0581 or visit www.sbcc.edu.

—Heidi Dvorak

GIVE YOUR CLOSET A FACE-LIFT

Imagine waking every day to an organized closet. Your clothes are neatly hung; nothing is folded or covered in plastic. Even better: Each piece fits you perfectly and reflects your lifestyle and personality. There's no stress about getting dressed.

"That's our goal," says Amy McMaster from Thousand Oaks, who along with Joanne Levien from Tarzana founded The Closet Stylist in 2007. "We love helping people decide which items they need to part with, which pieces can be reinvented, and what they should consider adding to their wardrobe."

After the organized-obsessed duo cleans out a client's closet, McMaster and Levien select items from local retail stores to fill in wardrobe gaps (including apparel, accessories, and undergarments). "Our motto is 'no more recreational shopping.' We help clients find exactly what they need," says Levien. "All they have to do is try things on. We laugh and joke and have a great time."

While most of their customers are female (ranging in age from 12 to 93), several men have also enjoyed a transformation from the stylists.

"We can make a huge impact no matter the closet size," says McMaster. "It's very fun and rewarding because it's a cleansing process for our clients."

There's a story behind every piece of clothing, adds Levien. "We encourage people to discuss their memories. It helps shed guilt about clothes they overspent on, can no longer fit into, or never wore. Once the pieces are gone, they move on."

Discarded items are sold, repurposed, or donated to charity organizations. "When we leave a job," says McMaster, "clients can go shopping in their own closets and begin every day in an awesome way."

Call 805-727-0705 or go to www.theclosetstylist.com.

— Cynthia House Nooney



Joanne Levien (left) and Amy McMaster from The Closet Stylist put the kibosh on "recreational shopping." Instead, they clean, organize, and reorder closets and help clients shop for necessities—like clothes that actually fit.



YOUTH MONEY MANAGEMENT

The current recession has shaken almost everyone. House prices that always went up have come down; jobs that were secure have melted away; easily available loans are suddenly scarce. But more worrying for many parents is the financial future facing their children. They want their kids to grow up safe and secure financially, but are just not sure how to help them achieve that goal.

Elisabeth Donati, executive director of Santa Barbara-based Creative Wealth International (formerly The Money Camp), knows how these anxious parents feel and has plenty of advice to pass along. So she authored *The Ultimate Allowance* and created Camp Millionaire and numerous other related programs, courses, and games to improve financial literacy. The fun-based camps, held in Santa Barbara and Ventura over two to five days, cater to children aged between 10 and 16; they learn, through role-playing and other exercises, how to make and manage their money, ways of investing, and how to give back to the community.

Donati urges parents to talk to their kids about money and recommends involving them in the family finances. She also says they need to grasp the idea of budgeting: What can they do without in order to afford to do something else, like take a family vacation?

Although not a fan of allowances or paying children for chores, good behavior, or good grades, Donati does think they should be partners in spending money. She says parents buy clothes, toys, and other things for their children, so why not channel some of that money through the kids? Giving children practical money-management experience helps them achieve the goal of becoming fully financially responsible by the time they leave home.

Moorpark College also hosts an annual series of saving and investing seminars as part of a financial literacy program for high school seniors called "Money & Me" (www.moorparkcollege.edu). Around 250 students from five area high schools attended the most recent one-day event. A similar program, organized by Junior Achievement of Southern California, takes place in the spring at Newbury Park High School.

For more information visit www.campmillionaire.org and www.jasocal.org.

— Frank Nelson

PARENTS AND CHILDREN
SHOULD BE **PARTNERS**
IN SPENDING MONEY.

—ELISABETH DONATI, CREATIVE WEALTH
INTERNATIONAL, SANTA BARBARA





LEARNING TO COPE WITH LOSS

As a marriage and family therapist and director of counseling services at Camarillo Hospice, Carole Wadsworth, MFT, bears witness to how the death of a loved one can take its toll over the years. “At first it doesn’t feel real. We’re good at soldiering on, moving on automatic pilot, and planning a funeral,” she says. But months of grieving can easily turn into years. “Family and friends fall away before [the person is] ready. On average, their tolerance is one to three months. They get impatient and say ‘It’s time to move on. Get over it.’”

That’s where a grievance group comes in. Being with others who are suffering from the death of family or a friend can provide appropriate comfort and coping skills. Camarillo Hospice offers a wide range of free, specialized support groups, including young widows and widowers, parents who have lost a child, teen grief, suicide survivors, and pet loss. Each session typically has six to 15 participants and is run by skilled facilitators, such as interns with masters’ degrees in counseling and trained volunteers who have experienced a similar loss. Participants don’t even have to speak if they just feel like listening. (For anyone uncomfortable in group settings, individual and family sessions are also offered.)

“Delayed or unexpressed grief can be manifested as agoraphobia, anxiety, chronic stomachache, or sleeplessness,” says Wadsworth. “It’s important to acknowledge what is real in your life.”

For more information call Camarillo Hospice at 805-389-6870 or visit www.camarillohospice.org.

—Heidi Dvorak

DATING AFTER DIVORCE

Take it from someone who’s been there: Re-entering the dating world after divorce can be about as fun as a tooth extraction. Even if you maintain a positive attitude and sense of humor, it’s still challenging to find a like-minded individual in your spare time. (No, he or she will *not* just appear at your door).

“That’s exactly why we’re in business,” says Nyla Nguyen, who co-founded the matchmaking service Elite Partners in 2009 with Frank Maloney. “Most single professionals have little time to devote to one of the most important areas of their lives, so we make quality introductions for them.”

Elite Partners thoroughly interviews and coaches every client (topics include what to wear and who pays on a first date). “Clients aren’t handed off to anyone else,” says Nguyen. “We get to know them personally.”

Adds Nguyen: “We go out and socialize with our clients so we can learn their tastes and offer guidance. We want them to be the best they can be.”

The service is fully confidential and the majority of customers are divorced. “Unlike other services, we’ll go outside our client base to find the type of person someone is looking for,” says Nguyen. In addition,

the matchmakers provide personal fitness training, image consulting, relationship coaching, and expert guidance in how to boost self-esteem and find life fulfillment.

The best advice for divorced singles heading out on a date? “I tell women to be open-minded and leave their baggage at home,” says Nguyen. “I remind men to take interest in the person sitting across the table,” says Maloney. “And we both emphasize not trying to change in order to please someone else. That always ends up backfiring.”

The company’s biggest hope: “That our clients find love. We want to foster relationships and create families,” says Nguyen. Call 818-857-1657 or visit www.elitepartners.us to join their network for free. Members are guaranteed 12 introductions in 12 months.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *As the magazine went to press, Nyla Nguyen has assumed ownership of Elite Partners and Frank Maloney is now running Intuitive Introductions, which provides similar services (dating and relationship coaching, spiritual readings, and image consulting). Call 805-791-5755 or go to www.intuitiveintroductions.com.*

— Cynthia House Nooney

MAKE YOUR OWN WINE

These days everyone's swirling and spitting cabernets, chardonnays, and every other vino known to man. But the rising popularity of wine goes hand-in-hand with trends like sustainable farming and buying organic produce—all geared toward a newly found respect for our planet. Now you can learn the modern and more earth-friendly ways of making your own wine.

"It puts you in touch with nature," says Becky Zelinski, co-founder of First Crush, an educational winemaking program in Paso Robles. "People spend time in offices or on cell phones. We've lost touch with the simple pleasures," says Zelinski. "Being out in the vineyard has an intrinsic value. You can't put a price tag on it."

Of course, making wine typically takes from 12 to 18 months, but First Crush offers bimonthly "berry to bottle" workshops for the day or weekend (topics vary but they correspond to the growing and winemaking processes). Whenever you visit, prepare to get dirty. First Crush is definitely hands-on, so don your overalls and jump onto the farm truck with professional viticulturists, who teach the art of planting, pruning, picking, stemming, grape stomping, pressing, blending, and racking. On the cleaner side, you'll learn about glass selection, wine and food pairings, sensory evaluation, etiquette, and tasting. "It's like a winemaking safari, kind of like day camp," says Zelinski.

Educational offerings extend beyond the knowledge of First Crush experts. Participants taste different brands and meet guest winemakers; and there are also gourmet vineyard lunches and dinners provided, which help to demonstrate why the journey from berry to bottle is so satisfying.

For more information call 877-822-7874 or visit www.firstcrushwinemaking.com. ■

—Heidi Dvorak



"[WINEMAKING] PUTS
YOU IN TOUCH
WITH NATURE."

—BECKY ZELINSKI, FIRST
CRUSH, PASO ROBLES

THE ROAD TO WHISTLER

Get your Canadian kicks on Highway 99.

Part two of our Winter Olympics travel preview series.
By Anthony Head

It looks peaceful now,
but the village of Whistler
is ready to welcome
the world next month
for the 2010 Winter
Olympic Games.



Along with enjoying the urbane pleasures of Vancouver, Vancouverites (just like their Southern California friends) enjoy the geographical privilege of surfing and skiing in a single day. After catching waves off Vancouver Island, residents (and visitors) will just hop on Highway 99 until they reach Whistler, about 90 minutes to the powdery north.

The same kind of thing happens next month when Vancouver hosts the 2010 Winter Olympics. Indoor events like figure skating, hockey, and curling will be held around town, but for the outdoor events, like Nordic skiing and bobsledding, athletes and visitors will drive the same magnificent stretch of Highway 99—known as the Sea-to-Sky Highway—that I did exactly one year ago to British Columbia's premier alpine destination.

I wanted to experience that trip to get a preview of the journey, so from downtown Vancouver I hit the road to Whistler through Stanley Park, a thousand-acre greenbelt anchoring the city's western edge. Take caution and stay focused on the pristine ski conditions to come, otherwise the road could easily end in Stanley Park. In addition to its majestic forests of Douglas firs and red cedars, there are formal decorative gardens, picnic areas, an aquarium, and enough other diversions to keep a first-time visitor inside Vancouver's city limits.



IT'S

best to keep half an eye on the ski racks—mounted on cars, Jeeps, and limousines—as they pass the great spires of Lions Gate Bridge and continue up the timbered Sea-to-Sky Highway. The road is often winding, and historically treacherous: Occasional bad-weather conditions can be a problem, but staring at the majestic scenery that the road passes by, such as the tiny islands in the slate-gray waters of Horseshoe Bay, can certainly be its own hazard, too. Come February, Highway 99 will have undergone significant upgrades designed to handle the volume of traffic due to the Games.

The road grows more rugged as it passes Britannia Beach and the British Columbia Museum of Mining (which is itself sort of an upgrade to one's expectation of a mining museum. It's interactive and allows the little ones on the trip to get out some energy before hitting the slopes; www.bcmuseumofmining.org). All the while, the distant mountain peaks laced with snow get closer.

The town of Squamash is just about the midway point of the trip, which is a good enough excuse to pull off for a break. After all, it's been nearly 45 minutes. The town stands between forested foothills and Stawamus Chief, which at nearly 2,000 feet, is the world's second-tallest freestanding slab of granite. Naturally, Squamash is a rock-climber's destination, but there's also good food at Howe Sound Brewing Co. (www.howesound.com). This microbrewery includes an inn and family restaurant, but I just relaxed inside the brewpub, which had a warm mix of frontier sensibility and chalet style. Under the soaring wood-beamed ceiling and next to the large stone fireplace, I sampled a home-brewed Devil's Elbow

IPA, and enjoyed it tremendously. So I decided to stick around and pair the nutty brown flavors of the Rail Ale with something from the menu, which included ale and cheddar soup, burgers, a wild salmon sandwich on sourdough with honey-brandy aioli, and pale-ale-beer-battered fish-and-chips with Alaskan haddock.

Back on the road, clumps of hard-packed snow were starting to cover the rocky terrain and the old-growth forests as I drove past such appealingly named spots as Paradise, Daisy Lake, and Brandywine. Perhaps nothing, though, was more enchanting than the Garibaldi Provincial Park. Quite frankly, it's much more beautiful than words can do justice, but it's so gorgeous you just know somewhere out there, eagles are soaring through the skies and salmon are joyously spawning the day away in the waters.

And then the road arrives at Whistler and "Whistler" becomes "Whistler Blackcomb," in deference to the two separate (and separately named) mountain peaks that support the local economy.

Life is invigorating on the mountain: The air is crisp and cool, the sunshine is warm and sparkling off the icicles, and the comforting aroma of wood smoke hangs everywhere. Shops are open, cafés are packed, and ski boots clunking on paved surfaces are the bass notes to a chorus of international voices in the village. Everyone has rosy cheeks and frosty, sun-kissed noses.

My home base for the journey, Four Seasons Resort Whistler (www.fourseasons.com/whistler), sits close enough to the slopes and features typical excellent service. They'll take care of your equipment, and there's great coffee. For all I know, the hotel also arranged for the peaceful silence of falling snow in the trees just

beyond my balcony. I had the cozy feeling that I could throw a snowball and hit some spawning salmon.

Another snowplow growled past and reminded me that this place is taking its hosting duties of the Olympics seriously. In nearby Whistler Olympic Park, I talked to events and range coordinator Colin Bell, who said that 90 percent of the Whistler Blackcomb ski runs would be open to the public *during* the Games.

“We might be having more fun up here than even down in Vancouver. It’s going to be very exciting—33 percent of the total medals will be awarded at this venue,” Bell said while standing in a sugar-white ocean of snow with the 90- and 120-meter ski jumps a few hundred yards away. Ironically, he added, his main challenge for pulling off a successful Winter Olympics is the weather. “We’re hoping for not too much snow. We’re extremely confident we’ll have *enough* snow, but a nice sunny time would be perfect.”

Regardless whether or not those ideal Nordic conditions materialize, Whistler Olympic Park has the honor of the first venue to hold the ski jumping, biathlon, and cross-country skiing events in a single location. Which makes it even more humiliating to have to admit that I’m not a skier. On the mountain, they tend to look at non-skiers with the same expression you might have given that poor kid in elementary school who was allergic to peanut butter (hint: It’s pity). But I still took the Whistler Village gondola up to where the world becomes very white and blustery to board the Peak 2 Peak gondola, a 2.7-mile lift between the twin towers of Whistler and Blackcomb. It’s a thrilling ride across the sky, with fat, wet snowflakes falling like rain, sometimes as far down as 1,427 feet. And when I get out and step foot onto Blackcomb, I don’t need to carve up the mountain with skis stuck to my feet in order to appreciate how truly liberating it feels at 6,100 feet. But it’s far too cold for salmon to be spawning much less for me to be standing up there for too long, so I go back down to the base for a beer at Garibaldi Lift Co.

All talk of powder aside, passing time at this popular bar (commonly known as GLC) was as fun as the rest of the trip. When a funky band began playing some mountain-style rock ‘n’ roll, there were easily as many waitstaffers dancing on the tables as there were mountain-weary skiers. Someone jumped on stage to announce to the crowd—and I kid you not—“Look! It’s snowing!” and you would have thought he’d just said, “Look, it’s Obama!” I mean, those people were clamoring around and carrying on because it was snowing at a ski village. Granted, the snowflakes were the size of doilies, but the whole scene was marvelously unexpected.



Opposite page: Skiers flock to Whistler’s gold-medal setting. This page, top to bottom: The smiles seen all around the village tell the story of Whistler’s charm; the Four Seasons Whistler provides world-class services with chalet comfort; come February, Canadian pride will be on display at the Games.



That's about how the rest of my stay in Whistler went until time came for me to head back down to Vancouver. While driving, I had just decided that the sights were as wonderful in the opposite direction along the Sea-to-Sky Highway when, in Britannia Beach, I saw a familiar image on a sign of a man holding a telescope to his eye, which I'd noticed on the coffee wrappers at the Four Seasons. It was the logo for Galileo Coffee Company (www.galileocoffee.com); this was where it was made.

Inside the cheery shop, I spoke with Lance McClure, the roaster, who said he'd opened the business about four years ago because the area was an untapped market for specialty coffee. "I'm originally from Texas, but my partner and I lived in Seattle, which sparked an interest in coffee culture," said McClure. "Because of the coming Games, we knew the traffic volume on the corridor [what many locals call Highway 99] would be increasing to help with business."

Galileo's historical structure was built in 1905 and was the home of an engineer from the nearby mines. Sitting across from Howe Sound, it has great water views, a menu of sandwiches, and what McClure calls "truth in coffee."

"Specialty coffee is about information. People like the stories of origin, elevation, and heritage, too," McClure says. "We have many organic and fair trade selections to talk about."

Before heading out, I bought a cup of Sea to Sky, a dark blend of French-roasted beans from Brazil and medium-roasted beans from Colombia. The caramel and nut flavors countered each other wonderfully. Along with being satisfying coffee, it was appropriately named for my last few miles on the road back to Vancouver. ■



Top: No matter which direction visitors are driving on the Sea-to-Sky Highway between Vancouver and Whistler, the scenery is always stunning. Bottom: It's hard to beat Whistler for alpine appeal.

Part one of this Winter Olympics travel preview series, "Victorious Vancouver," appeared in the December 2009 issue of 805 Living and can be read online at www.805living.com.

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NATURALLY SWEET

Baking, cooking, and mixing drinks with agave nectar.

THE HEALTH-CONSCIOUS COMMUNITY HAS BEEN ONTO AGAVE NECTAR (or syrup) for some time: This liquid sweetener, produced in Mexico from the agave plant, has traditionally been embraced by vegans as an alternative to honey; while others have been drawn to its low glycemic index (which means it won't cause a sudden blood-sugar spike). Recently, more chefs and home cooks are noticing that agave nectar's good taste and liquid texture lends itself well to a number of culinary uses. It's less processed than sugar, yet sweeter; its flavor is less assertive than honey; it doesn't crystallize; and it dissolves into hot or cold mixtures quickly.

If the agave plant sounds familiar, that's probably because the blue agave that's favored for producing agave nectar (when the juice of the plant is heated and reduced) is the same variety used to produce tequila (when the juice is instead fermented). Make your own margarita mix with agave nectar and fresh lime juice, and you'll have one sweet cocktail (*see www.wholesomesweeteners.com for a recipe*).

California chef Mani Niall, the founder of Mani's Bakery in Los Angeles and now executive chef for Just Desserts in Oakland, has long enjoyed experimenting with various natural sweeteners; you'll find some agave recipes in his book, *Sweet!: From Agave to Turbinado, Home Baking with Every Kind of Natural Sugar and Sweetener* (Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2008). Niall remembers that fruit juice concentrates were popular for naturally sweetening baked goods in the 1990s, but today, he says the wide availability of bottled agave nectar—and its roughly 90-percent fructose content—makes it an attractive option.

Substituting agave for sugar in conventional baked goods might not be quite foolproof, however. "I'd start by looking at other liquid sweetener recipes—those designed to be made with honey or maple syrup," says Niall, pointing out that liquid sweeteners are best used in recipes that aren't supposed to crisp as they bake. Some good candidates? He names gingerbread, snack cake, cupcakes, and fruit desserts. "With sugar you're going to get a crisp, crumbly crust that you're not going to get with agave," he says. "Choose which sweetener helps you achieve your culinary goal; if it's a health thing, use logic in substituting."

Agave nectar also makes a great condiment just as you would use honey: on oatmeal, on pancakes, and in coffee or tea. Another favorite use? Niall says it's the perfect substitute for simple syrup in just about any cocktail recipe (he's partial to mojitos).

On the Town

FOLLOW YOUR HEART MARKET AND CAFÉ in Canoga Park (www.followyourheart.com) is a favorite of 805 Living staffer Carmen Leiva. The market sells agave nectar along with a variety of other natural foods. In the back of the market, customers will find the café—a vegetarian restaurant that offers many vegan options as well—that occasionally uses agave in baked goods for sale.



SIMPLY PIES in Santa Barbara (simplypiessb.blogspot.com) uses agave nectar instead of sugar in its sugar-free pies, including such flavors as apple, blackberry, blueberry, mixed berry, and when the season's right, strawberry-rhubarb and peach. "We've gotten rave reviews from people who order it," says co-owner Nancy Blau. They also offer gluten-free pies, quiches, and cheesecakes.

At **SOJOURNER CAFÉ & RESTAURANT** in Santa Barbara (www.sojournercafe.com), agave is provided as an alternative condiment for customers to use on food and in drinks. Behind the scenes, baker Sara Campbell uses it in many of the restaurant's sweets. "We make our vegan cakes with agave nectar," she says, adding that, in addition to various cookies and pies that come and go on the menu, the carrot cake, banana cake, coconut cake, and chocolate cake are all made with agave. >>

Agave syrup is sweeter than sugar when substituted in baked goods but doesn't work for every recipe—experiment with those that call for honey or maple syrup first.

At the Market

While its color will vary from brand to brand, agave nectar comes in two main guises. Regular agave nectar, which is generally lighter in color and milder in flavor, is great for using in mixed drinks and in a variety of recipes. Raw agave nectar (called “raw” because it’s processed under 118°F) tends to be darker in color with a more pronounced flavor—perfect for using in place of honey or maple syrup. Look for agave nectar locally at Costco (www.costco.com), Gelson's (www.gelsons.com), Lassens (www.lassens.com), Trader Joe's (www.traderjoes.com), and Whole Foods (www.wholefoodsmarket.com), among others.





>>Taste

IN THE KITCHEN

Visit the Wholesome Sweeteners website at www.wholesomesweeteners.com for more recipes using agave nectar, including several from chef Mani Niall, such as salmon teriyaki and pineapple upside-down cake.

From the book Sweet!: From Agave to Turbinado, Home Baking with Every Kind of Natural Sugar and Sweetener by Mani Niall. Excerpted by arrangement with Da Capo Lifelong, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2008.

ORANGE AND FIG SPELT MUFFINS

"These muffins, which use olive oil, figs, and orange zest, have a Mediterranean sensibility. Although, granted, agave syrup is not Italian, it does make these muffins particularly moist," writes Niall. "Therefore, don't line the muffin cups with paper liners, or they will stick mercilessly. As dough with agave syrup will not brown as readily as one with processed sugar, to promote quicker browning, bake the muffins in the top third of the oven, where the heat rises and gathers to form a hot zone."

- Nonstick cooking spray, for the pan
- 2¼ cups whole-grain spelt flour (see Note)
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup low-fat buttermilk
- ⅔ cup agave syrup
- ⅓ cup plus 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 large eggs
- ¾ cup (¼-inch dice) dried figs
- Grated zest of 1 orange

Position a rack in the upper third of the oven and preheat to 350°F. Spray a 12-cup muffin pan with the cooking spray.

Whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in a large bowl. Make a well in the center. Whisk together the buttermilk, agave syrup, oil, and eggs in another bowl, pour into the well, and stir just until blended. Fold in the figs and orange zest, being careful not to over-mix the batter. Divide the batter among the muffin cups, filling them as full as possible.

Bake until the muffins spring back when pressed gently, about 20 minutes. Cool in the pan for 5 minutes. Remove from the pan and serve hot or warm. (The muffins can be cooled and stored in an airtight container for up to 2 days.)

MIX IT UP: For Cranberry and Pecan Spelt Muffins, omit the figs, and use ½ cup of fresh or frozen cranberries (or dried sweetened cranberries) and ½ cup (2 ounces) of coarsely chopped pecans instead.

NOTE: Spelt flour is available at natural food stores and some supermarkets. This recipe was tested with organic whole-grain spelt flour. White or light spelt flour has had much of the bran and germ removed and is similar to unbleached white flour. If you want to use white spelt or unbleached wheat flour, use ¾ cups, as it absorbs the liquid at a different rate than does whole-grain spelt.

Makes 12 muffins.

CHILE-RUBBED AGAVE CHICKEN

"At opposite ends of the taste spectrum, hot and sweet can harmonize together very nicely. In this case, ancho chile already has a sweet note of its own that is accented by the agave syrup," writes Niall. "This simple chicken dish will bring lots of bold flavor to the table, especially when served with a side dish of roasted sweet potatoes."

- 3 tablespoons pure ground ancho chile
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon cayenne
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 4 chicken breast halves, with skin and bone (about 10 ounces each)
- 1½ tablespoons canola oil
- ½ cup chicken stock, preferably homemade, or use low-sodium broth
- 3 tablespoons agave syrup
- Lime wedges, for garnish

Mix together the ground chile, cumin, garlic powder, cayenne, and salt. Using a small paring knife, working with one breast at a time, cut the meat away from the bones in one piece, keeping the skin attached. Place a boned breast between two pieces of plastic wrap, and pound gently with a flat meat pounder until the breast is about ¾-inch thick. Rub the chile mixture all over the breasts.

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat until the oil is hot but not smoking. Place the chicken in the skillet, skin side down. Cook until the underside is well-browned, about 4 minutes. Turn and cook until the other side is browned, about 3 minutes longer. Add the stock and agave syrup, being careful that the liquid doesn't boil over. Lower the heat to medium-low and cover. Cook until the chicken feels firm when pressed in the center, about 3 minutes longer.

Transfer the chicken to dinner plates and pour the juices on top. Serve immediately with the lime wedges.

Makes 4 servings. ■

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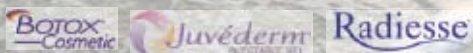
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By Anthony Head

At least once a year, I yell to the heavens about California chardonnay. It's just my thing. I cry about the overoakedness, the impossible heaviness, the lack of subtlety. I invoke the brilliance of the French for allowing the noble chardonnay grape to define itself instead of being beaten into submission with a barrel.



So I thought I'd get all that out of the way now, in January, so that I (and you, too) could enjoy the rest of the year. Which brings me to my wine pick. Although Talley Vineyards, located in the

Arroyo Grande Valley, has produced a typical, big, California-style chard, the 2007 vintage features a subtle tropical essence that flows throughout the wine to the very last of its finish. All the while, only a touch of oak muddles up the nuances and otherwise bright flavors. It's a mediumish wine, but there is plenty of weight for it to be a great winter white. Try it with chicken Alfredo, smoked salmon, and Caribbean cuisine. The cost may be a splurge, but it's well worth shutting me up about Cal chards for another 12 months. ■

Talley Vineyards,
2007 Oliver's Vineyard Chardonnay,
Edna Valley (\$32)
www.talleyvineyards.com

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CLASSIC CONTEMPORARY DRINKS

Vintage cocktails go retro.

FOR WELL OVER A CENTURY, it's been a point of pride for restaurants and bars to be the first place to serve a particular cocktail that catches on and endures. The stories behind such inventions can be the stuff of legends for the tippling class, so despite the sad reality that many grand cocktail recipes have been wiped away by the bar rag of time, there are still dedicated bartenders, mixologists, and even culinary historians digging through bartenders' manuals, history books, and antique restaurant menus to find old recipes.

In today's cocktail culture, there are growing numbers of aficionados who are long on cocktail lore and as rabid in their desire for discovery as any foodie around. However, mixing up a historical drink according to its earliest recipe can be a complicated matter because flavor purists insist on authenticity. Like archeologists, they must go beyond unearthing rare bottles of long-extinct liquors, liqueurs, and other components in order to find the original ingredients, which may no longer be widely available. And finding a few gills of 19th-century artisanal orgeat is not as easy as it sounds. (If you didn't already know, orgeat is an almond syrup that was popular in France in the 1800s and still considered the gold standard to use in a variety of drinks, like Mai Tais.) (By the way, a "gill" of orgeat is about a quarter of a pint, but you don't use that much in one Mai Tai.)

Today's resurgence of Manhattans, martinis, and gimlets from the *Mad Men* years of the 1950s and 60s (although those drinks were created well before then) demonstrates how some cocktails rise above obscurity. It also rivals the resurrection of certain drinks in the late 1970s. Although, creatively speaking, the 70s were considered by many in the mixology field to be about as close to comatose as it ever got in this country. In fact, wine sales topped those of hard liquor for the first time in history by the end of the decade.

Thus, the list of memorable cocktail creations from that time remains quite small. The Cosmopolitan and Lemon Drop (see the recipes that follow) kept martini-style drinks from being put on the endangered list; while powerhouse potions like the Painkiller



(a hurricane glass of dark rum blended with tropical juices) and the Long Island Iced Tea (pour everything in the bar into one glass with ice and then splash with cola) probably accomplished just the reverse for any healthy human livers.

Toward the end of that decade, however, just like what mid-century cool is doing today, a new wave of vintage cocktails had managed to be revived and lifted from obscurity, including the Sidecar (orange, lime, and brandy from Hemingway's post-World War I Paris), the Harvey Wallbanger (a 50s-era fling between vodka and hazelnut liqueur), and the Tequila Sunrise. (The Eagles' quasi-south-of-the-border song was titled after a popular mix of tequila, orange juice, and grenadine; its recipe, however, was based on one from Tijuana's Agua Caliente racetrack in the 1930s, although crème de cassis was used back then instead of OJ.)

Today, the cocktail wave keeps building and certain drinks keep finding their way back to the bar to endure because professionals consider them to be works in progress. The classic recipe is always there to enjoy, but updating an existing drink and putting a signature touch on it keeps the drink contemporary.

The recipes here don't require too much excavating of the local liquor store in order to find the right ingredients, and they're easy enough to make so the night can get started quickly with some 70s style.

Cosmopolitan

The classic martini has so many variations that even the variations have variations, like the Cosmopolitan, which came from a vodka-cranberry drink known as the Cape Codder. First poured in the 1970s (though no one is sure exactly where), the popularity of the Cosmopolitan can be traced across the country from the East Coast to San Francisco in the 1980s before making its way to Southern California and, eventually, Brigitte Guehr, owner of the Mirabelle Inn and Restaurant in Solvang (www.mirabelleinn.com). Instead of vodka in her Mirabelle Cosmo, Guehr uses sparkling wine to make a lighter version with a bubbly New Year's Eve kick.

MIRABELLE COSMO

- 1 ounce cranberry juice
- ½ ounce orange juice
- ½ ounce lime juice
- 1½ ounces sparkling wine

Combine ingredients and pour into a chilled martini glass rimmed with sugar.

Tom Collins

John Rickman says he was just starting out in the bartending business in the late 1970s. Today, as owner of Santa Barbara's Pacific Coast Bartenders School (www.pacificcoastbartendersschool.com), he teaches his students to know the old and new cocktails, including the classic Tom Collins. This gin-based drink was first mixed up in New York in the 1870s, but as Rickman will tell you, it came back into vogue with real energy behind it one hundred years later.

- 1 ounce gin
- 2 ounces sweet-and-sour mix
- Fill with club soda or 7-Up
- Lime slice and cherry


Pour each ingredient in a Collins glass with ice. Garnish with lime and cherry.

Lemon Drop

There were these clubs in the 1970s called "fern bars," which were supposed to provide a social gathering spot without all the tavern or pub attitude. The Lemon Drop, yet another martini derivative, came from Henry Africa's, a very popular fern bar in San Francisco. Brandon Haug, food and beverage assistant manager at the Canary Hotel in Santa Barbara (www.canarysantabarbara.com), has this quick version for the home bartender.

- 2 ounces Charbay Meyer Lemon Vodka
- 2 ounces sweet-and-sour mix
- Sugar
- Lemon wedge

Shake the vodka and sweet-and-sour mix with ice. Strain mixture into a martini glass rimmed with lemon and sugar. ■



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WELCOME BACK, WINE CASK

A beloved restaurant is brought back to life by two of its biggest fans.



THE COMMUNITY OF DINERS WHO FREQUENTED WINE CASK had a long time to bond. For more than 30 years the restaurant inhabited a patio and a few rooms of the 1920s Spanish-Colonial El Paseo building in downtown Santa Barbara. Its well-executed California cuisine and comprehensive wine store attracted a wide audience, which developed a fierce loyalty to the brand. When Wine Cask closed its doors unexpectedly in February of last year, under the leadership of Bernard Rosenson, many in its community felt the loss deeply. Some might say that Santa Barbara had lost its most notable food and wine icon (not counting Julia Child).

What began as a wine shop in the mid-1970s had grown into one of the most respected restaurants and wine purveyors in Southern California. Many critics lauded the store's enormous cellar, which brought oodles of attention to Central Coast vintners and their bottles. So much so that the sale of wine futures became a much-anticipated annual event for oenophiles, not just in Santa Barbara County, but all over the US and the world. Also lost was the opportunity to spend an elegant evening tasting California cuisine at its peak inside a dining room with a beautiful hand-painted wood-beamed ceiling and baronial stone fireplace.

There were two men who didn't just mourn the closing, they ultimately decided to do something about it. Doug Margerum, now the owner of Margerum Wine Company (and who helmed Wine Cask from 1981 to 2007) and Mitchell Sjerven, owner of Bouchon and Seagrass restaurants in Santa Barbara (who worked as the head waiter at Wine Cask in the early nineties) came up with the idea of partnering to reopen Wine Cask.

"The more we talked about it," Sjerven said, "the more we realized it was the right thing to do." So the two headed up to Margerum's estate in Washington to flesh out the plans and see if it could really work. Sjerven agreed to run the restaurant and Margerum decided to helm the wine shop and tasting room, now called The Alliance.

The Alliance showcases wines from 100 to 120 different vintners located in Santa Barbara's wine country (plus more from outside the area) and flights of wine are available every day. The former

Opposite page: Mitchell Sjerven (left) and Doug Margerum couldn't let a Santa Barbara institution disappear. So when Wine Cask unexpectedly closed last year, they decided to take it over. This page: Examples of "American Riviera" dining—a 12-ounce rib eye with a potato puree, sweet and sour greens, grilled torpedo onion, salsa verde, and demi-glace; and oven-roasted chicken with gnocchi, market greens, and heirloom tomatoes.

wine bar with a patio, Intermezzo, has been renamed Wine Cask Bar Cafe and is now a casual eatery serving food designed to go with the wines for sale in The Alliance.

Wine Cask's main dining room has been slightly redecorated in a minimalist style to show off the architecture of the building. Chef David Sundeen hails from Bouchon and Citronelle; he calls his menu "American Riviera cuisine," which falls right in line with Wine Cask's tradition of featuring great California wine-country ingredients from local farmers and fishermen. Sundeen's potato-leek soup with parsley puree and preserved lemon (\$6) is all-out potato flattery, and it's delicious. Salads (\$8 to \$11) include a beet and goat cheese version and a walnut, radicchio, bleu cheese choice. He Americanizes *frisée aux lardons* salad to great effect by using romaine lettuce and house-cured bacon along with the requisite warm poached egg and garlicky vinaigrette. The addition of sardines is a nice touch.

Perfectly cooked lobster, clams, mussels, and squid are piled into a bowl of smoked tomato broth for the cioppino (\$30); a soft piece of grilled bread topped with red pepper jam accompanies. The grilled rib eye with chimichurri sauce (\$32) is tender no matter what temperature is requested. Oven-roasted chicken (\$25) comes with gnocchi. The cassoulet (\$28) combines white beans with duck leg, pork cheeks, and house-made sausage. Desserts are fun, comforting, and all-American. The root beer float (\$7) is nice in its simplicity. The berry oatmeal crisp (\$8) shows off the farmers' market produce splendidly.

Service is friendly and the dress code is more casual now than in days past. The dining room fills up nightly with people who used to be loyal patrons and want to be once again. The community has certainly come out to celebrate the reopening of one of its favorite dining haunts that thankfully didn't close for too long. ■

The Wine Cask is located at 813 Anacapa St. in Santa Barbara. Call 805-966-9463. For more information on The Alliance Tasting Room and the Bar Cafe, visit www.winecask.com.



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DIALED IN

News from the local dining scene.

The Old Place Is New Again

Set along winding Mulholland Highway just off Kanan Road and abutting the Peter Strauss Ranch sits a small ramshackle wooden building. The **Old Place Restaurant** was founded by Tom Runyon and his wife, Barbara, in 1969. Sadly, Tom passed away last year and Old Place limited its opening hours while his son Morgan decided what to make of it. With the help of friend and tenant-next-door Tim Skogstrom, who opened **Cornell Winery & Tasting Room** in 2007, Runyon reopened Old Place a few months ago in the spirit of his father's intentions, but with a couple of needed menu updates. "Nothing has changed but the menu," Runyon said. "We tripled it." For 40 years you could get only steamed clams (now \$17), oak-grilled steak (\$19) with a salad and baked potato, or beef stew (\$14). Now you can have all that plus rosemary-pale-ale chicken (\$18), a nightly fish special (usually \$24), and a grilled vegetable salad (\$12). There are even new side dishes, like the creamy noodle-and-cheese bake (\$8) and the zesty creamed corn (\$4). Plus, Runyon accepts credit cards.

A low wooden ceiling keeps the Old-West ambience feeling cozy. Tchotchkes are stacked all over the upright piano and lanterns hang above the bar, which serves beer and Malibu Valley Vineyard wines. Bring a bottle from Cornell Winery & Tasting Room (next door) and the corkage fee is only \$5; if you bring a bottle from home, it's \$20. There are a few tables up for grabs but folks just mostly slide in atop the wooden diving board that doubles as a bench belled up to the bar. Parties of four or more can reserve rustic booths. Despite the humble surroundings and thrift-store tableware, plenty of expensive cars are parked out front: Film and television industry people mix with locals, bikers, and young hipsters, who all show up for the unique experience.

Old Place Restaurant is open for dinner Thursday through Sunday nights and for breakfast on weekends and is usually quite crowded, so expect to wait a bit if you don't have a reservation. The kitchen wasn't built for speed, so you'll have a leisurely paced meal. Thankfully the waitresses set down huge hunks of sourdough bread and butter for noshing right away. The outsize bread slices are a harbinger of portions to come. As Runyon puts it, "We're not gonna skimp on ya." *Old Place Restaurant* (www.oldplacecornell.com) is located at 29983 Mulholland Highway in Agoura Hills. Call 818-706-9001 to reserve a booth for parties of four or more.

For more dining news, visit our blog, "Angie Eats," at blog.805living.com.

THE WINE BAR OF THE FUTURE

To get a peek at what winery tasting rooms and wine bars might look like in 20 years, head to Buellton. Seriously. The sleepy country hamlet saw the opening in May 2008 of **Terravant Wine Company**, which produces, bottles, and stores wine for the likes of Alma Rosa, Hartley-Ostini, Ken Brown, Summerland, and about 25 other small vintners. Retail manager Nick Morello explained that the need for a tasting room for all of these clients was obvious. "We thought we'd do something new and different," he said. "It evolved into what we have now, which is much more grand than a winery tasting room."

What opened a few months ago on the second floor of Terravant is indeed different. **Avant Tapas & Wine** is a large, modern, tasting room with views of the Santa Ynez River and the mountains beyond. On any given day, there might be one of the client vintners pouring their wares at the bar. Or you can visit one of the many WineStations along the wall, which hold at least 32 different wines at any one time. Napa Technology makes the wine-dispensing systems, which charge from 75 cents to 3 dollars per pour. Chef Jeff Olsson puts together small plates of food to help guests enjoy the wines. Snack on small pizzas (\$6 each), hot or cold crostini (\$6), or assortments of hot and cold tapas (\$4 to \$8 per plate). The staff can put together flights of wine paired with food. Just ask. The wine bar is open Thursday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. *Avant Tapas & Wine* is located at 35 Industrial Way in Buellton. Call 805-686-9400 or visit www.terravant.com for more information. ■

Have a tip for our restaurant news pages? E-mail our dining editor at angela@805living.com.

805 DINING GUIDE

The *Dining Guide* includes restaurants from Santa Barbara to Malibu. Our aim is to inform you of restaurants with great food that you might not have experienced yet. The guide is arranged not by cuisine type, but by style of restaurant. "Fine Dining" choices have an elegant atmosphere and very professional service. Restaurants included under the "Foodie" heading are heralded for their wonderful chef-driven cuisine, regardless of atmosphere. "A Good Bet" listings are just that—solid, casual, and delicious. "The Chain Gang" highlights the best of the national restaurant chains, and the "Fun, Fun, Fun" category brings you spots geared toward a good time. Enjoy!

KEY TO SYMBOLS:

NEW Denotes restaurants new to the *805 Living Dining Guide*.

LOOK Indicates an update to an existing listing.

Restaurant information is subject to change without notice.

We will be adding new listings to the *Dining Guide* each month. Please send any comments and suggestions to angela@805living.com or write to us at 805 Living, 3717 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Westlake Village, CA 91362, attn: Taste of the Town.

FINE DINING

These restaurants have a skilled kitchen team, a lovely dining room, and great service. Some of the spots require elegant attire, but most allow for all styles of dress, from fancy to casual.

71 PALM FRENCH & AMERICAN BRASSERIE

71 N. Palm St.
Ventura, 805-653-7222
www.71palm.com
French-American
Entrées \$8–\$28

Romantic

More casual than it might seem at first, this brasserie-style eatery proves very friendly through and through. For instance, there are bowls of water on the porch of this Craftsman house to welcome pets; and the patios upstairs and down are great for kids. The bar area offers beer, wine, and cocktails with its own happy-hour specials. The French-American menu from chef Didier Poirier offers addicting nibbles, like french fries with garlic aioli, black tiger shrimp cocktail, Alsatian-style pizzas, and warm duck confit salad. Main courses include steaks, a double-cut pork chop, a Kobe burger, Atlantic salmon, and New Zealand rack of lamb. Poirier teaches cooking classes each month that culminate in a three-course meal paired with wines. He also hosts occasional wine-maker dinners featuring wines from the Central Coast, Napa, and Sonoma. 71 Palm is open for lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday.

BOCCACCIO'S

32123 Lindero Canyon Road
Westlake Village, 818-889-8300
Continental
Entrées \$12–\$27

Saturday & Sunday Brunch, Great View

The floor-to-ceiling windows offer great views of the lake from inside the restaurant. The outdoor patio is the most popular spot for dining, however. Either way, it's a perennial favorite for ladies who lunch and the senior set. The seafood is always perfectly cooked in the Mediterranean manner (fried calamari, lobster ravioli, seafood risotto, Dover sole meunière). At lunch, a wide range of salads from Waldorf to Cobb to niçoise really satisfies. Brunch dishes up classics like French toast, omelettes, and eggs Benedict.

BOUCHON

9 W. Victoria St.
Santa Barbara, 805-730-1160
www.bouchonsantabarbara.com
Wine Country
Entrées \$24–\$35

Romantic

The name is French for "wine cork" and this theme carries throughout the restaurant. Wines from the Santa Barbara area (the Santa Ynez and Santa Maria valleys), especially chardonnay, pinot noir, and syrah, are the focus of the wine list. More than 40 varieties are available by the glass. The highly seasonal cuisine is created to pair well with the wines. (In other words, no strong vinegars or sauces that might fight with and kill the flavor of the wine.) Ingredients are mostly secured locally, especially produce and seafood. Some dishes you might see more regularly than others include baby beet and carrot salad with goat cheese; bourbon-and-maple-glazed duck; lightly smoked Pacific ahi tuna; venison loin in a blackberry demi-glace; and apple tarte tatin.

CA' DARIO

37 E. Victoria St.
Santa Barbara, 805-884-9419
www.cadario.net
Italian
Entrées \$15–\$28

Romantic

Chef and owner Dario Furlati features dishes from his native northern Italy at this popular trattoria that gets high marks for service from regulars. His menu features some unusual choices like fusilli pasta with artichokes, shiitake mushrooms, and truffle oil; radicchio and ricotta-cheese crêpes; terra-cotta-baked chicken with a tomato and red-wine sauce; and a classic rib-eye steak with white beans and sage.

CAFÉ PROVENÇAL

2310 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-496-7121
www.cafeprovençal.biz

French

Entrées \$16–\$37

Romantic

This small French bistro run by Serge Bonnet in the Select Conejo Plaza can get you in and out quickly at lunchtime with its "Formule Express" three-course lunch (\$16). Dinner offers a more relaxed experience but there are still bargains to be enjoyed. Come on Monday night for a surf-and-turf special (\$26); on Wednesday and Thursday nights a "Deluxe" five-course dinner is paired with wines (\$45). On the à la carte menu you'll find a few pastas plus fish—like sand dabs, sole, and salmon. Meats include veal, lamb, chicken, and beef prepared in a Continental style. Café Provençal serves lunch Monday through Friday and dinner nightly.

CHAPTER 8 STEAKHOUSE & DANCE LOUNGE

29020 Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-889-2088
www.678dine.com
Steakhouse

Entrées \$17–\$39

Live Music, DJ, Dancing

Chef Michael Carriero has fancied up the menu at this over-the-top dance lounge with a red and black color palette. The pan-seared scallop appetizer gets a kick of flavor from some Spanish chorizo and basil oil. Lobster lollipops are complemented by white-corn sauce. The truffle and Parmesan fries are addictive, but there are plenty of other potato options that go with the à la carte wood-grilled steaks. Fish lovers can enjoy a chilled seafood platter served with tequila cocktail sauce and spicy mustard sauce. For dessert, the warm rockslide brownie comes with chocolate lava, pecans, and a caramel macchiato shot. Live music on Friday and Saturday nights. Dinner Tuesday through Saturday nights.

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LOOK CHARLIE'S MALIBU

22821 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, 310-456-3132
www.charliesmalibu.com
American
Entrées \$16–\$45
Romantic

Across the street from the Malibu Pier, Charlie's feels like a Malibu resident's living room. The bar is usually stocked with locals checking out wines by the glass, taste, or flight via the Enomatic system. Sommelier Caitlin Stansbury focuses on small producers like the vintners in Malibu. In the dining room, beautiful leopard-print chairs and paintings by Jane Seymour lend color to the otherwise minimalist white decor. A few tables dot the raised back patio, which sits behind a pane of glass. The menu is chock-full of steakhouse classics by chef David Linville. Charlie's is open for dinner nightly.

COAST RESTAURANT & BAR

31 W. Carillo St.
Santa Barbara, 805-879-9100
www.canarysantabarbara.com
California Bistro
Entrées \$13–\$28
Romantic, Sunday Brunch

This restaurant sits a bit below street level in the fun Canary Hotel. The main dining room is quiet and comfortable, but most people seem to take dinner in the bar area where it's much livelier. The entire menu is available in either venue. Go for the Santa Barbara mussels with chorizo, the tasty wild mushroom ravioli, the perfectly grilled and juicy pork chop, and the pudding-like chocolate lava cake. Chef Brian Parks keeps things interesting with his farmers' market dinners on Tuesday nights and a Sea Captain's dinner every Friday with fresh seafood from that day's fishing boats. Sunday brunch has live music from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Happy hour has great deals Monday through Friday from 4 to 7 p.m. Coast is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily.

ELEMENTS

129 E. Anapamu St.
Santa Barbara, 805-884-9218
www.elementsrestaurantandbar.com
Eclectic
Entrées \$19–\$36
Romantic, Great View

Soaring ceilings inside plus fresh air on the patio with great views of the Santa Barbara courthouse keep everyone happy. Dishes here are eclectic and imaginative. A panko-lemongrass-crusted sea bass comes in a green coconut-curry sauce. Short ribs get the Szechuan treatment and a ginger-orange gremolata, while a veal burger benefits from caramelized onions and Gruyère cheese. Save room for desserts, like the mini cupcake sampler or the mint-chip ice cream sandwich. The bar scene is lively, especially during happy hour (4:30 to 6:30 p.m., Monday through Friday). Bottles from the wine list can be purchased from the Elements website.

ENOTECA TOSCANA WINE BISTRO

2088 E. Ventura Blvd.
Camarillo, 805-445-1433
www.enotecatoscanawinebistro.com
Mediterranean
Small Plates \$8–\$18; Entrées \$22–\$39
Live Music

The emphasis is on the wine at this intimate space in Camarillo's downtown district. Owner/chef Antonio Anderson personally selects all the bottles to showcase wines from Spain, Italy, and California. Anderson puts together a different flight of wines every day. Every Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. there's a wine-tasting session that includes a cheese plate (\$14). The menu of small plates—like the wine list—skews to Spain and Italy, with dishes like shrimp in olive oil with lemon and garlic, or marinara meatballs. The large plates appear as nightly "Bodega specials." You might see braised short ribs or Tuscan chicken. At lunchtime, panini sandwiches are available. Enoteca Toscana is open for lunch and dinner Tuesday through Sunday.

ERIC'S RESTAURANT & BAR

495 N. Ventu Park Road
Thousand Oaks, 805-716-4100
www.palmgardenhotel.com
Californian
Entrées \$15–\$36

The minimalist decor and the slate water wall lend a peaceful ambience to this large space. A wraparound patio fills up when the weather is nice. The service is polished, making this a fine spot for a business meeting at lunch or dinner. Chef Robin Nishizaki's plates are all well-executed; we haven't found any clunkers on the seasonal menu. Salads, sandwiches, pizzas, and pasta dishes dominate the lunch menu; chicken penne with kalamata olives and a chardonnay sauce is particularly nice. At dinner, there is grilled salmon in a basil sauce as well as steaks and chops. The full bar features a long martini list and its own tantalizing small-plates menu with beef and taters and a lobster quesadilla. Such nibbles can be paired with 20 wines by the glass, many from California vintners. Eric's serves lunch and dinner daily with happy hour specials Monday through Saturday from 4 to 7 p.m. Check the website for weeknight dinner specials on items like prime rib and lobster.

FINS CREEKSIDE

23504 Calabasas Road
Calabasas, 818-223-3467
and FINS SEAFOOD GRILL
982 S. Westlake Blvd.
Westlake Village, 805-494-6494
www.finsinc.com
Seafood
Entrées \$12–\$32
Live Music

The creekside patio is the draw at the Calabasas location. The owner and chef also run Moz Buddha Lounge. The menu features interesting takes on seafood like macadamia-crusted halibut, oven-roasted seafood over yakisoba noodles, and a lazy-man's bouillabaisse in which the shellfish are removed from their homes for you. You can also choose your cut of steak and its preparation.

FLEMING'S PRIME STEAKHOUSE & WINE BAR

6373 Topanga Canyon Blvd.
Woodland Hills, 818-346-1005
www.flemingssteakhouse.com
Steakhouse
Entrées \$24–\$40
Romantic

This snazzy steakhouse keeps the prices relatively low while maintaining high energy levels, especially in the bar, which has its own appetizer menu. Big salads, prime meats, and seafood dishes rule the dining room, though, and sides are meant to be shared (read: big), so order accordingly. Desserts are large and come with a huge bowl of freshly whipped cream. The wine list is encyclopedic and award-winning. Almost every style is represented, from sparkling whites to petite sirahs to deep cabernets. There are also 100 selections by the glass available nightly. Check the website for special-event wine dinners and seasonal prix-fixe menus. Fleming's is open for dinner nightly.

LOOK GEOFFREY'S MALIBU

27400 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, 310-457-1519
www.geoffreysmalibu.com
Cal-Eclectic
Entrées \$25–\$77

Great View, Saturday & Sunday Brunch

The al fresco dining and the panoramic ocean views from every table make this a spectacular dining venue. You can't help but feel like a Malibu socialite when sipping a glass of gewürztraminer with your lobster Cobb salad at lunch or brunch under the umbrellas. For dinner, there's ahi tuna, Chilean sea bass, seasonal oyster selections, and the Kobe New York steak. Service is always polished and polite, beginning and ending with the efficient valet parking.

GIANNFRANCO'S TRATTORIA

666 Linden Ave.
Carpinteria, 805-684-0720
Italian
Entrées \$13–\$28
Great Patio

The family of owners welcomes you here with open arms. In good weather, opt for a seat on the back patio with its garden setting. Some customers always start dinner with a glass of wine and the calamari appetizer, which comes with perfectly grilled baby squid and shrimp next to a crock of slightly spicy dipping sauce. It's a great idea. Salads are also quite nice and take advantage of the local growers. The pastas are lightly sauced and there's a daily fresh risotto. Meats include grass-fed free-range lamb chops and rib-eye steaks as well as farm-raised chicken. Giannfranco's is open for lunch and dinner Wednesday through Monday.

THE GRILL ON THE ALLEY

120 E. Promenade Way
Westlake Village, 805-418-1760
www.thegrill.com
American
Entrées \$19–\$42
Sunday Brunch

The glass-walled kitchen and the low partitions between booths keep the energy level of the room high while the dark wood floors against white walls and the marble-bedecked bar area add a bit of refinement to the mix. Expect to see some TV stars chowing down here, and for good reason. The chicken potpie is one of the best items on the menu. Steaks and lamb chops are popular, especially if you're indulging in an old-fashioned cocktail like a whiskey sour or sidecar martini. The Grill also offers lobster bisque and calf's liver with onion. Open daily for lunch and dinner.

NEW GRISSINI RISTORANTE ITALIANO

30125 Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-735-9711
www.grissiniristoranteitaliano.com
Italian
Entrées \$10–\$32

The name means "breadsticks" in Italian and you'll find one of two kinds on your table: either long and crunchy or rectangular and soft, depending on the day. The pretty rooms are lit by chandelier and candlelight, making it a sweet spot for romance. Host and owner Giuseppe Bellisario works the room like a master, making guests feel special. The large menu offers good versions of Italian standbys plus a few new twists. The salads are fresh with zingy dressings. There are multiple shapes of pasta and ravioli with fillings like mushroom, walnut, and lobster. Mix and match any pasta with sauces like pesto, puttanesca, carbonara, Alfredo, or limoncello with cream. The wine list offers many reasonably priced bottles and glasses.

HAMPTON'S AT THE FOUR SEASONS HOTEL WESTLAKE VILLAGE

2 Dole Drive
Westlake Village, 818-575-3000
www.fourseasons.com/westlakevillage/dining.html
Californian
Entrées \$23–\$50

Romantic, Great View, Sunday Brunch

The view of the rock waterfall is soothing and beautiful, whether you sit outside on the back patio or inside the posh main dining room. Service is Four Seasons spectacular with waitstaff nearby for all the right moments and none of the wrong ones. Chef Jelle Vandembroucke's cooking is well-thought-out. He uses foams intelligently: piquing the palate, not confusing it. Dishes are spa-light on cream and butter but rich with texture and flavor. His cooking technique is magnificent so don't be afraid to order lobster or pork loin. The menu here is seasonal so dishes will change, but all of the ingredients are top-notch. Salads are dressed with interesting vinaigrettes, often employing fine aged balsamic vinegar. Black truffles might show up to wonderful effect in mashed potatoes or under dabs of goat cheese. Meats are organic whenever possible. Desserts follow the fresh and light philosophy, too.

HOLDREN'S STEAKS & SEAFOOD

1714 Newbury Road
Newbury Park, 805-498-1314
and 512 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-965-3363
and 6920 Marketplace Drive
Goleta, 805-685-8900

www.holdrens.com

American

Entrées \$19–\$41 (more for surf-and-turf combos)

Romantic

The decor here is masculine enough for business, while the lighting is low enough for romance. The comfy seating and the friendly servers encourage lingering. The cheese-heavy menu is not for the faint of artery, but the food sure is good. Appetizers—like the cream-cheese-laden spicy crab-and-artichoke dip, and bacon-wrapped prawns stuffed with feta—are hearty enough to be main courses. The grilled Castroville artichoke has a nice smoky flavor to it. Steaks are well-marbled, tender, and seasoned right. The signature Cowboy Cut is huge and sits atop a pile of onion rings. All steaks come with a crock of sauce, a side dish, plus soup or salad. Check the website for dinner specials Monday through Wednesday. Holdren's is open for lunch Monday through Friday, and for dinner nightly. The original Santa Barbara location serves brunch on Sunday.

MASTRO'S STEAKHOUSE

2087 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-418-1811

www.mastrossteakhouse.com

American

Entrées \$26–\$76

Live Music

For an extravagant night out, try this expensive and posh steakhouse. The cocktails are huge and potent. The salads serve at least two (unless you ask for a half-portion) and the seafood tower starter is a showstopper. For your entrée, stick with the meats unless you want to eye your date's dinner with envy. The veal porterhouse is fantastic. All the cuts are thick and outsized. Sides are à la carte, and the list of potatoes and veggies is long but unremarkable. Resist ordering more than one so that you can indulge in a giant dessert, which will be ferried out with a bowl of freshly whipped cream. The wine list features local vintners as well as highly rated wines from France and Italy.

MEDITERRANEO

32037 Agoura Road
Westlake Village, 818-889-9105

www.med-rest.com

Mediterranean

Entrées \$14–\$33

Kid-Friendly, Great View, Sunday Brunch

A marble bar, wrought-iron screens with glowing candles, and jet-black crystal chandeliers lend a luxurious feel to this dining venue on the grounds of the beautiful Westlake Village Inn. Roomy booths and large tables inside and out make for a comfortable night. Chef Alberto Vazquez cooks with style. His dishes will change seasonally but look for a wonderful calamari salad with crispy fried squid tentacles and grilled rings over warm potatoes with a mustard vinaigrette. The shrimp Brindisi appetizer has sautéed shrimp on a square of grilled bread, which soaks up the white-wine-caper sauce. You can always count on fresh fish dishes in zesty sauces with interesting accompaniments. Amongst the pasta dishes, the *orecchiette* (little pig's ears) with sausage and Swiss chard is already a classic. Steaks, pork, lamb, and occasional game dishes round out the menu. Sunday brunch is served buffet-style with lots of wonderful pastries, salads, and egg dishes to choose from.

MOZ BUDDHA LOUNGE

30105 W. Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-735-0091

www.mozbar.com

Pan-Asian

Entrées \$17–\$36

Live Music

The crowds come for the cover-free live music in the lounge, but the large plates of pan-Asian cuisine hold their own in the dining room. Tiger prawns are tossed with *yakisoba*

noodles and a ginger-garlic sauce; mahimahi comes with coconut rice and tropical fruits; chicken is stuffed with crab and asparagus. Though dishes can be ordered in individual portions, the menu suggests family-style servings for sharing, so bring some friends. If your friends are energetic and hip—all the better. In warm weather, the patio with expansive views is a nice place to be.

NOBU

3835 Cross Creek Road
Malibu, 310-317-9140

www.nobumatsuhisa.com

Asian-Fusion

Entrées \$8–\$32 or Omakase menu \$80–\$120

The stars love to come to Nobu Matsuhisa's small sushi bar and Asian fusion restaurant for the *omakase* (chef's choice) menus, the yellowtail with jalapeño, the lobster salad with lemon dressing, and the black cod. The rest of us like to go to see the culinary stars, for the rock shrimp tempura, and for the bento box of desserts (you have to ask for that one), but be prepared to pay the price.

ONYX AT THE FOUR SEASONS HOTEL

WESTLAKE VILLAGE

2 Dole Drive

Westlake Village, 818-575-3000

www.fourseasons.com/westlakevillage/dining.html

Japanese

Entrées \$10–\$45

Romantic, Great View

This lovely Japanese restaurant inside the Four Seasons offers salmon skin rolls and crunchy shrimp with jalapeños as a hand or cut roll. Amber jack, tuna belly, and sea bream are sliced into sashimi. Hot dishes include asparagus tempura, wok-fried Manila clams, and a whole fish of the day. The room is adorned with thinly sliced onyx and other semiprecious stones that are lit from behind, giving it a gorgeous glow. The seats on the patio and some spaces at the main bar and sushi bar overlook an outdoor rock waterfall. Onyx serves dinner nightly.

P6 RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

2809 Agoura Road
Westlake Village, 805-778-0123

www.678dine.com

New American

Entrées \$12–\$35

DJ & Dancing, Sunday Brunch

This mid-century modern nightclub offers music, dancing, and mingling on the ultra-cool patio with a fire pit and water wall. It also offers lots of dining options from brunch to lunch to dinner to bar snacks. The menu changes with the seasons. The dishes are New American and as highly polished as the zebra wood accents on the booths and in the private dining room. A full bar offers cocktails as well as a deep wine list.

PADRI CUCINA ITALIANA & MARTINI BAR

29008 Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-865-3700

www.padrirrestaurant.net

Cal-Italian

Entrées \$11–\$26

Live Music

Chef and owner Saverio Posarelli also shares a partner interest in Cafe Fiore on California Street in Ventura. The spirits flow freely at the Martini Bar's happy hour from 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. The outdoor patio is great for smoking cigars or tucking yourself away in a private cabana and listening to live music Wednesday through Saturday nights. Inside, get cozy with a Cal-Italian menu of beef carpaccio, crab cakes, *burata* cheese with arugula and pine nuts, lobster and leek ravioli, seafood risotto, osso buco (braised veal shank), and coconut crème brûlée with caramelized bananas.

PIATTI RISTORANTE & BAR

101 S. Westlake Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-371-5600

and 516 San Ysidro Road

Montecito, 805-969-7520

www.piatti.com

Italian

Entrées \$11–\$24.50

Kid-Friendly, Sunday Brunch



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>> 805 DINING GUIDE

This pair of easy Italians is part of a chain with locations all over California, but each Piatti has its own chef and personality. Both restaurants offer a nice range of items: salad, soup, pizza, pasta, fish, lamb, chicken, and veal, but each place puts its own stamp on the menu. For instance, where the Thousand Oaks location offers polenta fries with roasted tomato sauce, the Montecito location makes soft polenta with mascarpone cheese. Thousand Oaks also has added a *crema Catalana* to its dessert list along with a caramel-balsamic gelato topped with balsamic-macerated strawberries. Nice patios and fireplaces can be found at both locations.

RIVIERA RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

23683 Calabasas Road
Calabasas, 818-224-2163
www.rivieracalabasas.com
Continental
Entrées \$14–\$39

Beautiful glass doors open into a cozy lounge offering a full range of cocktails and about 30 wines by the glass. At dinner, Chef Maurizio Ronzoni serves Northern Italian dishes with a twist like *fritto misto* with sand dabs, veal parmigiana, or *bucatini* pasta topped with strips of filet mignon. He also adds California dishes like tuna tartare with cucumber, sweet carrot and ginger soup, or Sonoma County rack of lamb in a mustard crust. European classics show up, too. Witness the five-spice crispy duck with port-cherry sauce or the salmon fillet with lobster sauce and a potato crust. At lunch a panini sandwich of lamb and bell pepper and the chopped Cobb salad are standouts.

ROY'S

6363 Topanga Canyon Blvd.
Woodland Hills, 818-888-4801
www.roysrestaurant.com
Hawaiian Fusion
Entrées \$21–\$33
Romantic

Blazing tiki torches greet you as you enter this lovely homage to the islands created by Roy Yamaguchi, the father of Hawaiian-fusion cuisine. It's basically Pacific Rim cooking using products like macadamia nuts, Maui onions, and Kona coffee. The fish is always fresh and the menu is mostly seasonal, but some classics are always available like the Aloha Roll (spicy tuna topped with *hamachi*, salmon, avocado, and a ginger-ponzu sauce), lobster potstickers, Maui Wowie shrimp salad, macadamia-crusted mahimahi, and a hot chocolate soufflé cake. On special occasions, drummers and hula dancers perform in the restaurant.

SCOTCH & SIRLOIN

1510 Anchors Way
Ventura, 805-644-5566
www.scotchventura.com
Steakhouse
Entrées \$15–\$40
Great Views

The Ventura Harbor provides wonderful views through the windows of this venerable place, especially at sunset. Every night chef Rick Myatt grills up prime steaks that go well with the scotch whiskeys and cocktails the bar pours. Myatt also riffs on fresh seafood, creating weekly specials with white sea bass, halibut, scallops, and other piscatorial wonders. Crab cakes, shrimp, and lobster are on the regular menu. Value-seekers can come in during happy hour, nightly from 4 to 6 p.m., or on Sunday through Thursday nights for a \$19 prix-fixe three-course meal.

LOOK SEAGRASS

30 E. Ortega St.
Santa Barbara, 805-963-1012
www.seagrassrestaurant.com
Seafood
Entrées \$25–\$36
Romantic

A charter member of the Sustainable Seafood Program through Santa Barbara's Ty Warner Sea Center, Seagrass serves local seafood without promoting overfishing or taxing the ocean. Owner Mitchell Sjerven and his wife, Amy, also own Bouchon in Santa Barbara, so the atmosphere is classy and the wine list deep. Chef John Pettitt does

everything imaginable to fish and shellfish. On any given evening, his seasonal menu offers appetizers like chilled oysters; and fresh seafood such as sashimi, carpaccio, or in a bisque. Scallops might be seared or suspended in a panna cotta. Santa Barbara halibut, salmon, and sea bass serve as main courses. There are also meat dishes, like the veal duo (rack and belly with sweet potato puree, turnips, pink lady apples, and caramelized shallot jus), a Kobe beef rib eye with a bordelaise sauce, or a rack of lamb with its braised shank in a rosemary sauce.

THE SIDECAR RESTAURANT

3029 E. Main St.
Ventura, 805-653-7433
www.thesidecarrestaurant.com
Continental
Entrées \$10–\$25
Sunday Brunch, Live Music

Set in a 1910 Pullman train car, this restaurant has been around since 1933. The current owners have a devotion to fresh, locally grown produce; artisanal cheeses; and farm-fresh eggs. Chef Tim Kilcoyne turns out beautiful steaks, creamy polenta, and a build-your-own salad with options like organic greens, niçoise olives, roasted butternut squash, English cucumber, Point Reyes blue cheese, smoked salmon, focaccia croutons, and spiced hazelnuts. At brunch, the hollandaise is tangy and the house-made lemon curd is irresistible. Tuesday night is grilled cheese and jazz night. Look for purveyor dinners and murder mystery theatre nights.

SPARK WOODFIRE GRILL

1555 Simi Town Center Way
Simi Valley, 805-823-4756
www.sparkredfish.com
Seafood
Entrées \$14–\$28
Live Music

Value is the unexpected pleasure at this good-looking grill in the Simi Town Center. The open floor plan lets you scan the whole room as well as the kitchen for interesting action. At lunch, one page of the menu is devoted to 10 items under \$10, and they're all high-quality. The pub burger is thick and flavorful; the fish-and-chips moist on the inside and crispy where it counts. At dinner the prime pepper-crusted sirloin steak is only \$14. The smashed new potatoes are creamy and laced with butter and chives. In the lounge (and sometimes on the patio) live music plays Wednesday through Saturday nights. You might hear classic rock, jazz, or blues while noshing on addictive fried artichoke hearts, crispy hot chicken wings, or zingy baby back ribs.

SUZANNE'S CUISINE

502 W. Ojai Ave.
Ojai, 805-640-1961
www.suzannescuisine.com
Cal-Med
Entrées \$15–\$28
Romantic

Travelers to Ojai make Suzanne's a part of their itinerary so they can explore what she's up to in any given season. Relying heavily on the produce around her, Suzanne Roll turns out lunch and dinner dishes that are interesting and handcrafted. Breads for the sandwiches are made by a local bakery; soups change daily. You might see a rainbow trout grilled with rosemary and lemon or a stuffed Cornish game hen with an apricot-marsala sauce. The atmosphere is casual with seats on the back patio next to the garden and a most pleasant gurgling fountain and outdoor fireplace. For cooler weather, there's also an enclosed patio. Note: The restaurant is closed on Tuesdays.

TIERRA SUR RESTAURANT AT HERZOG WINE CELLARS

3201 Camino Del Sol
Oxnard, 805-983-1560
www.herzogwinecellars.com
Kosher Californian
Entrées \$25–\$44

Kosher food is complex and flavorful here at this restaurant inside Herzog Winery. Chef Todd Aarons employs local ingredients for his seasonal dishes. You might see butternut

squash soup with lemon oil, ahi tuna carpaccio with an avocado gelato, or a spicy venison and bison sausage with a potato croquette. Desserts include a flourless Mexican chocolate cake with caramel frozen custard and an orange-almond flan. Aarons puts together three-course menus paired with wines for easy ordering. Reservations are required on Sundays. On Fridays, only lunch is served. The restaurant is closed on Saturdays in observance of the Sabbath.

TRATTORIA FARFALLA

160 Promenade Way
Westlake Village, 805-497-2283
www.farfallawestlakevillage.com
Italian
Entrées \$10–\$20
Romantic

The warm and sexy environs here make this a superb spot for a date. The lighting is flattering at the high pub tables in the lounge, at the brown leather booths running the length of the restaurant along the open kitchen, and on the tented patio. The cooking from chef-owner Santino Coccia is good enough to swoon over. Any selection from the fresh Mozzarella Bar will be wonderful. Add some prosciutto to the cheese selection to create a light meal. The mushroom risotto is scooped out of a giant wheel of Parmesan onto your plate. Flavorful skirt steak comes as a main course or on the Piemontese salad. The popular dessert, Torta della Nonna (grandmother's cake), is a warm and sweet ricotta cake with lemon zest and pine nuts.

TUSCANY IL RISTORANTE

968 S. Westlake Blvd.
Westlake Village, 805-495-2768
Italian
Entrées \$18–\$32
Romantic

Village dwellers pack this beautiful space for its warm, friendly service and top-notch food. The menu is small, but the nightly specials are worth investigating. High rollers and celebs consider this their neighborhood boîte. Others come just for special occasions. The lobster and shrimp martini salad has hearts of palm, avocado, and pink grapefruit segments; the baby greens salad has shaved fennel and toasted pine nuts; the whole Dover sole is topped with a lemon-cheril sauce; and the chicken breast comes under a sun-dried tomato pesto.

NEW VINEYARD HOUSE

3631 Sagunto St.
Santa Ynez, 805-688-2886
www.thevineyardhouse.com
Eclectic
Entrées \$11–\$28
Sunday Brunch, Kid-Friendly

The large, wooden, wraparound deck allows diners to gaze upon the rolling hills of Santa Ynez Valley—whether enjoying the fruits of its vines or teetotaling with the Bleeding Heart spritzer (ginger ale, grape juice, and lime). A wide range of cuisine styles share the menu space. Sandwiches are filled with pesto chicken, Virginia pulled pork, or the catch of the day with wasabi mayonnaise. Burgers, pizzas, and pastas compete for your attention with the spicy venison chili verde with tomatillos and green chiles. The crispy chicken salad and the crab cake spinach salad are also crowd pleasers. At night, choose from a 12-ounce rib eye, rack of lamb, chicken “three ways,” or butternut squash ravioli (among other things). Sweet endings include a warm, chewy, chocolate-walnut brownie topped with McConnell's vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce.

WATERMARK

598 Main St.
Ventura, 805-643-6800
www.watermarkonmain.com
New American
Entrées \$23–\$45
Romantic

Gorgeous Art Deco surroundings make for a “swellegant” evening at this posh downtown Ventura landmark. Large tables and oversized booths plus friendly service keep the atmosphere comfortable and inviting, not stuffy or snooty. Drag out the vintage duds and you'll enjoy the evening even more. The menu isn't inexpensive but the cuts of meat are

excellent, especially the 18-ounce bone-in rib eye and the herb-crusted rack of lamb with mint hollandaise. Most of the items are rich, like the braised short ribs, lobster potpie, and ono drizzled with green curry coconut sauce—so go easy on the appetizers. The Watermark Signature Salad is a refreshing start that won't fill you up. Taking dessert and after-dinner drinks up on the third-floor lounge allows you to cap the night by soaking up the views of downtown Ventura and the ocean.

ZIN BISTRO AMERICANA
32131 Lindero Canyon Road
Westlake Village, 818-865-0095
www.zinbistroamericana.com

American
Entrées \$15–\$35
Great View, Romantic

Right on the lake in Westlake Village, Zin takes advantage of the gorgeous view with floor-to-ceiling windows that double as doors; the small patio is cozy with a fire pit. The tables inside without a water view let you focus on your date in the romantic booths. Executive Chef Roberto Leyva (also of FINS and Moz Buddha Lounge) turns out comfort food like chicken-fried lobster, braised short ribs, an Angus beef hamburger, and the cioppino from FINS. Lots of little starters like fried oysters and cheese fondue make tasting different wines easy.

FOODIE

Restaurants whose cuisine shines—regardless of decor, service, ambiance, or even views—to make food lovers swoon time and time again.

BROOKS

545 E. Thompson Blvd.
Ventura, 805-652-7070
www.restaurantbrooks.com

New American
Entrées \$17–\$28

Part of the upscale dining scene in downtown Ventura, Brooks has a classy vibe without being too fancy. Chef-owner Andy Brooks gets lots of inspiration for his seasonal menu from local farmers. You can depend on seeing plenty of seafood including some form of oysters coated in cornmeal and fried just until crispy on the outside. There's usually a flavorful cut of steak or two. Desserts are fun, including parfaits, chocolate pound cake, crème brûlée, and cinnamon roll bread pudding. Bottles on the deep wine list go for half-price on Wednesdays. Every night Andy offers a three-course menu for a bargain price of around \$35, and his signature five-course menu (for the entire table) for around \$60 (\$90 with wine pairings).

CAFÉ 14

30315 Canwood St.
Agoura Hills, 818-991-9560
www.cafe-14.com

Eclectic
Entrées \$24–\$34

Chefs and co-owners Neil Kramer and Claudine Bernard turn out very nice eclectic cuisine in this small space, tucked in the corner of the Reyes Adobe Plaza. The patio feels a bit more expansive than the main dining room if you like a little elbow room around your table. The menu changes frequently but you'll always be treated to a mélange of flavors and styles from around the world. A steak au poivre might be listed next to short ribs in hoisin sauce with sticky rice; or seasonal fish might vie for your attention with a bouillabaisse or Parisian chicken fricassee. Desserts tend toward hearty American crumbles and dense flourless cakes with ice creams made daily. The full bar mixes cocktails with fresh fruits and herbs. Café 14 is open for dinner Wednesday through Sunday nights.

LOOK CAFÉ FIRENZE

563 W. Los Angeles Ave.
Moorpark, 805-532-0048
www.cafefirenze.net

Italian
Entrées \$15–\$39

Romantic, Live Music

CUPCAKERY

cupcake bakery & boutique



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Westlake Village, 3065 Thousand Oaks Blvd., #3, Westlake Village, CA 91362, 805.777.7070
7 Days a week: 11AM - 6PM www.TheClosetSB.net

Dramatically high ceilings and beautiful chandeliers make this an elegant spot for dinner. Seating is broken up into many different spaces, like the bustling bar area, a main dining room with a long family table, a quieter wine room, and the pretty back patio with a gurgling fountain. Classic Italian dishes rule the menu: There are wonderful pastas, pizza, antipasti, and salads. If that's not enough, check out the main courses like a dry-aged rib eye, chicken marsala, and lamb shanks.

DOWNNEY'S

1305 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-966-5006
www.downneyssb.com
Cal-French
Entrées \$29–\$37
Romantic

Chef and owner John Downey sources ingredients like meat, seafood, and organic vegetables locally and prepares them in imaginative, but not overwrought, ways. His wife Liz runs the front of the house, which is dotted with her own paintings of local scenes. The menu, which changes daily, might include a porcini soup with crème fraîche and chives; squab salad with a garlic-mustard dressing; or a boneless veal chop with chanterelles, marjoram, and fettuccine with spinach.

THE HUNGRY CAT

1134 Chapala St.
Santa Barbara, 805-884-4701
www.thehungrycat.com
Seafood
Entrées \$16–28

A tiny raw bar and seafood house that specializes in New England-style food and cocktails, this Santa Barbara twin of the Hollywood original celebrates the purity of oysters, clams, lobster, Santa Barbara spot prawns, and fresh vegetables. Preparations from chef and owner David Lentz are sometimes simple, sometimes complex, but always spot-on delicious. The Maine lobster roll is smeared with a Meyer-lemon aioli instead of standard mayo. Baltimore crab cakes sit on frisée with pancetta and a coddled quail egg. The space is small and reservations aren't taken, so some waiting may be involved, but an East Coast cocktail with muddled fruit ought to take the edge off. Open for dinner nightly.

LEILA'S RESTAURANT & WINE BAR

752 Lindero Canyon Road
Oak Park, 818-707-6939
www.leilasrestaurant.com
Cal-Eclectic
Entrées \$15–\$30

An exhibition kitchen dominates this little but lovely space so diners can watch chef Richard De Mane turn out his Peking duck confit pancake, port-roasted pear salad, and Moroccan spiced salmon. There's also a communal table up front for more social dining. The adjoining wine bar and patio expand the space nicely for comfortable dining everywhere.

MANDARIN EXPRESS

5015 Kanan Road
Agoura Hills, 818-991-9831
www.mandarinexpressagourahills.com
Chinese Fusion
Entrées \$10–\$27

It's not much to look at (think Formica tables and mirrored walls) but the owners of this tiny storefront are dedicated to keeping Chinese food interesting, fresh, and as organic as possible. Chef Dan Chang creates fusion dishes like filet mignon in a bourbon, basil, and black bean sauce and shrimp with nuts and balsamic vinegar over rice. The food isn't cheap by any stretch, but you've never had Chinese takeout like this before. The choices are almost endless considering the chef will pair just about any sauce you like with any meat, fish, vegetable, or mock meat (made of tofu or seitan) you want. He'll also adjust the heat (as in spice) level to your liking. When you want something different and delicious and delivered, this is definitely the place to get it.

MARCELLO RISTORANTE

140 W. Hillcrest Drive
Thousand Oaks, 805-371-4367
www.marcelloristorante.com
Italian
Entrées \$13–\$29

Whether you're at a table inside or out on the front patio, the service here is snappy and professional. Owner and chef Tino Di Marcello doesn't speak much English (only Italian and Spanish) but what he lacks in words he gives to his customers in flavor. The specials are always interesting and he's not afraid to put salt cod or tripe on the regular menu. The olive oil is first-rate and many of the pasta shapes are handmade. The *cappellacci* sheets, folded around ricotta and spinach then splashed with a tomato-cream sauce, are wonderful. For dessert, don't miss the chocolate crème brûlée with a hint of lemon. The wine list is long with plenty of pinot noir, chianti, and a few barbaresco choices, not to mention a nice assortment of pinot grigio (and friends).

OLIO E LIMONE

11 W. Victoria St.
Santa Barbara, 805-899-2699
www.olioelimone.com
Sicilian
Entrées \$13–\$30
Romantic

Chef Alberto Morello, who hails from Sicily, blends his country's cuisine with dishes from all over Italy. The pear carpaccio topped with Gorgonzola cheese and walnuts is as lovely as it is delicious. Homemade pastas are sauced with lamb *ragù* and pecorino cheese or stuffed with spinach and ricotta. Veal scaloppine comes with artichoke hearts and a lemon sauce. The wine list consistently wins *Wine Spectator's* Award of Excellence.

ROOT 246

420 Alisal Road
Solvang, 805-686-8681
www.root-246.com
New American
Entrées \$14–\$35

Romantic, Sunday Brunch

The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians tapped celebrity chef Bradley Ogden to create this temple to New American dining in downtown Solvang. The decor is modern and whimsical with oversized armchairs in one of the bar areas, lounge furniture on the outdoor patio, flat-screen televisions in a subdued interior lounge, a mixture of sleek booths and tables in the main dining room, and a glass-walled chef's table adjoining the huge kitchen. Executive chef Jonny Hall collaborates with Ogden on the seasonal menu, which changes ever so slightly each day. Fresh vegetables are the stars of the show here, along with artisanal cheeses and sustainably raised meats. The New American creations aren't exotic, but they do bring together familiar tastes in new ways. For example, a Maytag blue cheese soufflé is paired with Bing cherries while ahi tuna gets a companion five-bean salad, olive tapenade, and a quail egg on the plate. Everything from the small collection of breads that hit the table at the start of the meal to the diminutive desserts is top-notch. The entire menu is available in all of the different seating areas. The collection of wines is impressive, with 90 percent coming from California. Every Wednesday night a different local vintner plays guest sommelier. Root 246 is open for dinner nightly, for lunch on Saturday, and for brunch on Sunday.

SADDLE PEAK LODGE

419 Cold Canyon Road
Calabasas, 818-222-3888
www.saddlepeaklodge.com
New American
Entrées \$37–\$47, Tasting Menus \$80–\$200

Romantic, Sunday Brunch

Step through the wooden doors into another world where the elk is delicious and buffalo heads serve as decoration. You'll feel like a 19th-century gourmand dining on a game reserve in Alaska or Africa. Chef Adam Horton creates wonderful seasonal tasting menus with either four or seven courses using produce from the farmers' market and the best game from all over the world. That elk tenderloin grown in New Zealand benefits immensely from the accompaniment of *griottines* (morello cherries macerated in a French liqueur). A warm lobster salad includes matchsticks of green papaya and leaves of sweet basil. At brunch a duck confit hash is plated between a fried egg and rye toast. The wine list has increased dramatically so be sure to ask for suggestions.

SAFIRE

4850 Santa Rosa Road
Camarillo, 805-389-1227
www.safirebistro.com
New American
Entrées \$12–\$40
Romantic

A New American menu by chef and co-owner Michael Muirhead (who worked under chef Lee Hefter at Spago) includes wood-fired pizzas, short ribs with mascarpone polenta, scallops in a red Thai curry sauce, double-cut pork chops with a green-apple slaw, and a roasted Tuscan *branzino*. The classy setting matches the quality of the food, which should bring a smile to Camarillo residents looking for more fine-dining options in their neck of the woods. A glass-walled wine cellar holds a table for eight. Safire is open for lunch and dinner daily.

SLY'S

686 Linden Ave.
Carpinteria, 805-684-6666
www.slysonline.com
American
Entrées \$12–\$55

Saturday & Sunday Brunch

Sort of casual, sort of stylish, this Carpinteria gem is a must-visit. With its Vespa hanging over the bar, glass-wall wine room, and polished wood accents, it's great for formal occasions. But the service is super-friendly and most of the patrons are comfortably dressed, so there's nothing stuffy about an evening here, either. Chef and owner James Sly has been cooking for more than 40 years, and his cuisine tastes like it. You really can't go wrong with anything on this American menu of steaks and seafood, but the abalone is a real treat. Unlike most chophouses, Sly's offers a list of pastas as well as sandwiches and small cuts of steak for those who don't have a huge appetite. Desserts are wonderful, too. Sly's is open for lunch Monday through Friday, dinner nightly, and lunch and brunch on Saturday and Sunday.

A GOOD BET

Not too fancy, not too expensive, and a good experience all around—these are the qualities you'll find at the restaurants in this section.

BELLA TERRAZA RESTAURANT AT THE HYATT WESTLAKE PLAZA

880 S. Westlake Blvd.
Westlake Village, 805-557-4710
www.hyattwestlakeplaza.com
Californian
Entrées \$10–\$28
Kid-Friendly

Open for breakfast and lunch daily, this airy, classy space is great for meeting friends or conducting a business conversation. Try to get a table near the windows or on the patio for a view of the green lawn and waterfall. Breakfast items include smoothies, steel-cut oatmeal with roasted fruits, and the California Benedict with artichokes, avocado, and roasted red pepper. At lunch, a roasted tomato soup comes with crème fraîche and croutons. The Cobb salad gets a light lemon-Dijon dressing. The pressed turkey panini is topped with smoked Gouda and pepperoncini. The half-sandwich, half-salad lunch deal is a steal at \$10.

NEW BODEE'S

3304 Maricopa Highway
Ojai, 805-646-5300
www.bodecs.net
Californian
Entrées \$18–\$34

This small indoor dining room with its dark wood and low-beamed ceiling has been around since the late 1940s; the sprawling patio area with its sculpted stream and waterfall was revamped in 2005. Tables are set up on terraces under trees and a large canopy. In the winter months, a huge stone fireplace keeps everyone warm. The peaceful environs go together with relaxed service, so meals can take a while. Chef Myk Aviles turns out seasonal Cal cuisine like lollipop lamb chops with cherry mint sauce in the spring or spinach salad with strawberries in the summer.

Main dinner courses tend toward the exotic: Aviles stuffs chicken with spinach and sun-dried tomato pesto, then wraps it in prosciutto and serves it over a Gorgonzola-basil risotto. Filet mignon gets wrapped in pepper bacon and topped with a crab butter. Just off the main drag of Ojai, it's a quiet place to while away an evening or weekend.

BRENT'S DELI

2799 Townsgate Road
Westlake Village, 805-557-1882
www.brentsdeli.com

Deli
Entrées \$6–\$20

Kid-Friendly

For amazingly good Reuben sandwiches on rye bread piled high with pastrami or corned beef, sauerkraut, and Thousand Island dressing, you can't beat this slick deli. The booths are cushy and roomy, leaving space for your tummy to expand as you down a four-layer slice of chocolate cake or a plate full of stuffed cabbage rolls. A separate bar also offers the full menu. The patio out back allows for even more seating. A counter up front expedites take-out orders. Brent's Deli is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily.

CHOLADA THAI CUISINE

1282 Newbury Road
Newbury Park, 805-498-7801
www.choladathaicuisine.com

Thai
Entrées \$9–\$17

Kid-Friendly

The Malibu location has been a well-kept secret for years. The second location, in Newbury Park, is equally unassuming; the attention goes into the food. Thick juicy chicken strips are grilled on skewers and served with very tasty peanut sauce and cucumber relish as the satay appetizer. The fried spring rolls are sliced and given a fancy presentation. You can find curries and steamed fish dishes here alongside unusual offerings like roasted duck salad and fried rice with pumpkin and Chinese broccoli. Most entrée prices are around \$10. Beer, wine, and soju cocktails are available.

THE COUNTER

30990 Russell Ranch Road
Westlake Village, 818-889-0080
www.thecounterburger.com

American
Entrées \$7–\$14

Kid-Friendly

It's mod and hip at this burger bar, where you can build your own creation for lunch or dinner. Start with a menu on a clipboard and begin checking off preferences for your patty, cheese, toppings, sauce, and bun. It's a control freak's dream. Those who want a little less decision-making in their life can simply opt for one of the signature burgers (the Old School is quite good). The fried pickle chips are way too tasty, as are the thick milkshakes.

C-STREET RESTAURANT

450 E. Harbor Blvd.
Ventura, 805-652-5151
www.cpventura.com/dining.html

Californian
Entrées \$15–\$45

Kid-Friendly

If you sit close to the windows of this dining room in the Crowne Plaza Ventura Beach hotel, you can just make out the surfers riding the waves here where the ocean meets California Street. Chef Nic Manocchio honors the sea and its bounty along with the local farmers in his seasonal cooking. The fish tacos taste as fresh as Baja. The lobster—in a club sandwich layered with flatbread and bacon at lunchtime or simply served with drawn butter and asparagus at dinner—is perfectly cooked. Entrée salads are ferried out in huge bowls, and any salad can also be made into a wrap using a spinach tortilla (a nice option) upon request. At dinner, salmon is planked on cedar wood and topped with a balsamic reduction. Lamb chops get a pistachio crust and cherry compote. Desserts are presented to you on a tray for optimum choosing conditions.

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1414 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, CA 91362
Garden Café: 805.495.1545
Bookstore: 805.495.5824

A Beverly Hills tradition has come to Westlake Village.

The Grill on the Alley serves Prime Steaks and Chops, Fresh Seafood, Classic Cobb and Caesar Salads, not-to-be-missed Desserts and other traditional favorites. The bar boasts classic Martinis, hand-crafted Cocktails and an extensive wine list. All served in a sophisticated yet comfortable atmosphere.

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NEW DARBAND GRILL

868 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-449-1323
and 19337 Ventura Blvd.
Tarzana, 818-654-9918
Middle Eastern
Entrées \$10–\$19

Live Music

Both locations of this Persian eatery have a slightly lush look thanks to nice fabrics. The service is quick and the patrons are usually large families or groups of friends having a nice time together. If you like crispy rice, the *tadig* won't disappoint. Plenty of delicious soups and stews are made daily, sounding more exotic than they taste—don't be afraid to try them. The kabobs are more straightforward, threaded with fish, chicken, beef, or lamb and set on a bed of basmati rice. Turkish coffee and baklava make a nice finish to a large meal. Look for guitarists and singers on weekends and belly dancers on Friday nights.

ELADIO'S

1 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-963-4466
www.harborviewinn.sb.com
Italian
Entrées \$10–\$20

Great View, Sunday Brunch

The outdoor patio here is wonderful for people-watching since the restaurant is at the beginning of State Street near the beach. Since it's on the ground floor of the Harbor View Inn, a lot of tourists congregate here, but locals love it, especially for breakfast. Sunday brunch offers brioche French toast filled with mascarpone cheese; eggs Florentine over English muffins; and smoked salmon and red onion scrambled with eggs and crème fraîche.

EXOTIC THAI CAFÉ

29045 W. Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-991-8147
and 1145 Lindero Canyon Road
Westlake Village, 818-575-3248
and 2705 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-373-9231
and 2205 Michael Drive
Newbury Park, 805-375-0272
and 2001 Ventura Blvd.
Camarillo, 805-383-7666
and 1145 S. Victoria Ave.
Ventura, 805-658-4861
Thai

Entrées \$9–\$15

Some locations (like the Westlake Village restaurant) are decorated more elaborately than others, but you don't come here for the ambience. You come for interesting Thai food when you're ready to move beyond pad thai and chicken satay (although they serve those, too). The seafood hot pot, exotic catfish, or one of the curries with coconut milk are great choices.

FEAST BISTRO

254 E. Ojai Ave.
Ojai, 805-640-9260
www.feastofojai.com
New American
Entrées \$12–\$20
Romantic

This small bistro in Ojai's arcade has a long open kitchen near the front with counter seating. At it, patrons can partake of espresso and pastries, taste wine or beer, and eat a full lunch or dinner. Tables scattered inside and out back on the patio provide more seating options. Chef and owner Susan Coulter turns out seasonal New American eats like crispy oysters on polenta cakes, shrimp Louis salad, five-spice duck, and flatiron steak with mission fig butter. At lunch there's an organic beef burger, a frittata of the day, and an oyster po'boy. Check the website for occasional winemaker dinners.

GINO'S BISTRO

1620 Newbury Road
Newbury Park, 805-498-3188
www.ginosbistro.net

Italian

Entrées \$13–\$29

Kid-Friendly

Gino DeFelice and his family run this friendly *cucina*. No salt is added to any dish and many options are quite heart-healthy. The pastas are plated in large portions, enough to serve as main courses. The lasagna Bolognese is rich, meaty, and filling. Meat dishes are made from high quality veal, lamb, beef, and chicken. The veal à la Gino is pounded, breaded, pan-fried, and layered with eggplant, tomato, and cheese. (A nice twist on the usual veal Milanese or Parmigiano, which he also serves). For dessert, the cannoli gets a dash of banana liqueur for that extra zing. Gino's bistro is open for lunch Monday through Friday and for dinner nightly. Happy hour runs from 4:30 to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.

KING'S FISH HOUSE

4798 Commons Way
Calabasas, 818-225-1979
Seafood
Entrées \$10–\$39
(and up to \$72 for a 3-pound lobster)

Kid-Friendly

Huge dining room, large menu, well-executed. Part of the King's Seafood Company (Water Grill, I Cugini), so the fish is always fresh. The menu is printed daily; expect the best picks to be sold out by the end of the evening. The fried oysters and the clam chowder are reliable favorites. This place is big enough to handle energetic kids and good enough to satisfy adult tastes.

KUMO SUSHI

860 Hampshire Road
Westlake Village, 805-494-5250
Japanese
Entrées \$13–\$26; Sushi \$3–\$13 per roll

Kid-Friendly

Set downstairs in the Water Court office building, this somewhat secluded sushi bar has a loyal following. Most diners just eye the specials board hoping for live scallop, Japanese snapper, or mackerel, but plenty of options can be found on the printed menu. The owners like to emphasize healthful eating, so any dish with rice can be served with brown rice. Alternately, rolls can be made riceless and wrapped in thin sheets of cucumber for a carb-free experience. Tofu salad and grilled sea bass will also satisfy health-conscious eaters. Full bar with Japanese beer and sake. Open for lunch Tuesday through Friday, dinner Tuesday through Sunday.

THE LANDING GRILL AND SUSHI BAR

32123 W. Lindero Canyon Road
Westlake Village, 818-706-8887
www.thelandinggrill.com
Californian/Sushi
Entrées \$8–\$21; Sushi \$3–\$11 per roll
Great View, Kid-Friendly

The buzzword for The Landing is "flexibility." There's a sushi bar, tables inside for those who prefer milder temperatures, tables outside with great views of the lake, grassy areas for kids to run around on, and a menu so diverse that no one can complain. Choose from sushi, sashimi, Japanese bento boxes, seafood chowder, seared albacore, Greek salad, a burger with bacon and avocado, pasta dishes, or stir-fries. It's all there and all well-executed.

MARMALADE CAFE

4783 Commons Way
Calabasas, 818-225-9092
and 3894 Cross Creek Road
Malibu, 310-317-4242
and 3825 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-682-5246
and 140 Promenade Way
Westlake Village, 805-370-1331
www.marmaladecafe.com
American
Entrées \$8–\$24

If you like Country French decor, this is a cozy lunch spot and a perfect wedding- or baby-shower location. Breakfast and lunch are more popular than dinner due to the great

sandwiches like the Reuben, turkey with cranberry sauce, and New York steak on garlic bread. Portions are big enough for two, so don't be afraid to doggy bag it or order the half-portion of the many pasta dishes.

MI PIACE ITALIAN KITCHEN

4799 Commons Way
Calabasas, 818-591-8822
Italian
Entrées \$8–\$20

Sunday Brunch, Kid-Friendly

We love the pumpkin ravioli in the butter and sage sauce and all of the freshly baked breads. There's also a great chicken piccata and shrimp scampi. Baked goods and sweets are displayed in a glass counter that beckons you as you walk by it to your table. Smart.

MY FLORIST CAFÉ & BAKERY

76 S. Oak St.
Ventura, 805-653-0003
www.myfloristcafe.com
American
Entrées \$10–\$14
Live Music

The name of this chain is confusing, but it hearkens back to the Phoenix location that opened in a historic building originally housing a florist. Here in Ventura there aren't any flowers for sale but there are freshly baked breads and pastries (not on display—only on the menu). The menu is casual with breakfast dishes like baked oatmeal or two poached eggs on ciabatta (available from 8 to 11 a.m. Monday through Friday and until noon on the weekends). The delicious pastries sell out fast. The lunch/dinner menu is served from 11 a.m. to midnight daily. It features an assortment of fresh and large salads like the Caprese with pesto dressing and roasted garlic cloves or The Asparagus with its namesake plus feta cheese and artichoke hearts. Each salad gets its own two slices of toasted bread so carbaholics don't have to be jealous of the sandwiches. On Saturday nights, take advantage of the full bar and live piano music while snacking on a cheese plate or mini tuna melt.

THE NATURAL CAFE

508 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-962-9494
and 361 Hitchcock Way
Santa Barbara, 805-563-1163
and 968-12 Westlake Blvd.
Westlake Village, 805-449-0099
and 840 New Los Angeles Ave.
Moorpark, 805-523-2016
and 1714 Newbury Road
Newbury Park, 805-498-0493
www.thenaturalcafe.com
Healthy
Entrées \$5–\$9
Kid-Friendly

The Santa Barbara State Street location launched all the others. Lots of vegetarian and vegan options make this a magnet for the health-conscious. The same casual menu is available for lunch or dinner with extremely reasonable prices. At night there are soup, pasta, and fish specials. Fresh vegetables abound in the Buddha Burrito wrapped in a whole-wheat chapati. The Zen Burger is a Gardenburger done right. The Ranch Salad is a favorite with grilled chicken breast over baby greens with carrot, jicama, and feta cheese.

PIERRE LAFOND WINE BISTRO

516 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-962-1455
www.pierrelafond.com
Californian
Entrées \$13–\$21

A modernist setting in downtown Santa Barbara with plate-glass windows and exposed ductwork displays bottles from the Lafond Winery in refrigerated cases and on racks. Tourists and locals pop in with their kids for breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. The bistro menu from chef Nathan Heil offers classics like French onion soup, a Kobe beef burger, a half-roasted chicken with crispy fingerling potatoes, and a hanger steak with spoon bread. An artisan cheese plate is available all day with selections changing regularly.

POOKIE'S THAI CUISINE

900 Hampshire Road
Westlake Village, 805-381-0094
Thai

Entrées \$7-\$13

Kid-Friendly

Downstairs in the Water Court Plaza office complex, owner Pookie creates delicious Thai dishes for lunch and dinner daily. Lunch specials are a steal at \$7 to \$8 each. She also has a wide selection of interesting salads like the Outrageous Beef Salad with a spicy lime dressing and the protein-rich Yam Yai salad with shrimp, chicken, egg, and peanuts in a sweet-and-sour dressing. Noodle dishes are generously sized and include the classic pad thai and the interesting Hi Yo Silver with fried noodles, shrimp, and bean sprouts. Curries, vegetarian options, and fish dishes (such as the crispy sole with tamarind and chili sauce) give diners lots of great choices not found elsewhere.

NEW THE RANCH CATERING

30843 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Westlake Village, 818-575-9033
www.theranchwestlake.com

American

Entrées \$4-\$10

Kid-Friendly

A catering company decided to create a small dining room for its biggest fans, who wanted to be able to chow down on amazing sandwiches at lunchtime. This is the result. A few pub tables provide seating. Order at the counter and the staff will bring out your sandwich or burger in a foil carrying case. The buns are a kind of brioche with mondo caps that look silly but taste fabulous. You'll need a fork to get through the Philly with cheese spread. It's juicy with tender meat inside. The staff recommends trying the whole-wheat bun on the chicken salad sandwiches. Sides, like the pasta salad, are quite tasty. So are the homemade sweets. The Ranch is open daily for lunch and early dinners.

STELLA'S RESTAURANT

2385 Michael Drive
Newbury Park, 805-498-0989
American

Entrées \$10-\$21

Kid-Friendly

Stella Scholle has been charming her customers for more than 25 years with eggs with creamed spinach and artichokes over an English muffin, stacks of pancakes, and omelettes. Since breakfast is her most popular meal, she offers it seven days a week, from opening to closing. At lunch, the burgers are named after stars, the sandwich selections are extensive, and the salads move fast. Try stopping in for dinner—served Tuesday through Saturday—when it's less crowded. Look for specials like clam chowder, reasonably priced steaks, chicken with chardonnay-cream sauce, and the amazing apple pie.

LOOK THE SUNSET RESTAURANT

6800 Westward Beach Road
Malibu, 310-589-1007
www.thesunsetrestaurant.com

American Bistro

Entrées \$13-\$20

Great View, Saturday & Sunday Brunch

Sitting on the sands of Zuma Beach, this casual bistro feeds much of Malibu. Start with fresh oysters, shrimp cocktail, bruschetta, baked flatbreads, a cheese plate, or salads made with farm-fresh greens. Main courses run from fish tacos with spicy aioli and Napa cabbage slaw to baked trout with an heirloom tomato, olive, and cucumber *tzatziki* to seasonal specials with fresh ingredients. There's also grilled hanger steak, a chicken BLT, and a burger with caramelized onions that can be customized with bacon and/or aged cheddar cheese. Live music plays in the bar area Tuesday through Friday nights. The upstairs rooms can be booked for private events.

SUSHI AGOURA

5015 Cornell Road
Agoura Hills, 818-991-0245
Japanese

Entrées \$11-\$14

Unusual ingredients like soft-shell crab, lobster, quail eggs, and giant clams (when in season) in their sushi rolls keep diners devoted to this intimate space with an army of sushi chefs. Easy-to-order dinner combinations and reasonable prices also put this spot on the top of most lists.

TERRI'S CAFÉ

30135 Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-707-1934
American-Italian

Entrées \$8-\$15

Huge café lattes, addictive lemon-ricotta pancakes, and delicious eggs Benedict over crab cakes draw fans of breakfast (served until 3 p.m.) to this charming spot. Tables on the patio outside or inside the cheery dining room have equally friendly service. Lunch, also served daily, offers plenty of salads (like tuna), sandwiches (turkey), and wraps (chopped barbecued chicken). Chili, tortilla soup, and a soup of the day can stand on their own or come alongside sandwiches and salads. Dinner, with entrées like meatloaf and grilled vegetable pasta, is served Thursday through Saturday nights.

TRA DI NOI

Malibu Country Mart
3835 Cross Creek Road
Malibu, 310-456-0169

Italian

Entrées \$12-\$29

The patio is the draw in good weather (warm or cold) for this great people-watching scene packed with Malibu locals, which means low-key millionaires, power players, celebrities, and good-looking soccer moms. They're all chowing down on the thin-crust pizzas and creative salads. Try prosciutto and cantaloupe over arugula for an appetizer or add grilled skirt steak to the spinach salad with figs and dates for a healthy main course. Pastas, fish, veal, and chicken complete the menu.

TUTTI'S OFF MAIN

34 N. Palm St.
Ventura, 805-643-0880
www.tuttisoffmain.com

Mediterranean

Entrées \$13-\$33

Kid-Friendly, Saturday & Sunday Brunch

About a half-block off of Main Street in downtown Ventura, this bustling restaurant has a courtyard covered with a vine-laced pergola. The eats are solid, if a bit on the mild side. Pizzas are blistered in a wood-burning oven, which makes for a chewy crust. The mushroom pizza is topped with cremini, shiitake, and portobello 'shrooms plus Gorgonzola cheese, then drizzled with balsamic vinegar. At lunch, salads and sandwiches (open-faced or deli-style) both get plated with crunchy house-made potato chips. At dinner, large plates offer seafood choices (cioppino, grilled ahi tuna), pasta (penne with mushrooms and asparagus, capellini with shrimp and tomatoes), and meat (pork chop with whipped sweet potatoes, grilled rib-eye steak, braised lamb shank). A full bar offers plenty of local wines.

VIVOLI CAFÉ & TRATTORIA

3825 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Westlake Village, 805-373-6060
www.vivolicafe.com

Italian

Entrées \$10-\$24

Kid-Friendly

A cute, casual little spot for lunch and dinner any day of the week, Vivoli Café makes its own pastas, daily breads from scratch, and desserts (tiramisu, cannoli). The healthy salads (19 of them for lunch, seven for dinner) made with low-fat dressings and grilled fish are hugely popular. Pastas like the spaghetti in a veal and mushroom sauce can be ordered as appetizer or half-portions at lunch. The main meat dishes are plentiful, ranging from chicken breast with artichoke hearts and white wine to pork medallions in a strawberry-balsamic vinegar sauce to veal parmigiana. The small area off of the bar is great for private parties or business gatherings. Look for live entertainment on the weekends in the future.

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THE WHALE'S TAIL

3950 Bluefin Circle
Oxnard, 805-985-2511
www.thewhalestail.com
Seafood
Entrées \$10–\$43

Great View, Sunday Brunch

Set in the Channel Islands Harbor in Oxnard, this wooden seafooder affords fantastic views of the harbor with its boats and surrounding mountains. Sit in the Shellfish Bar upstairs for drinks and live entertainment (although in the afternoons it's a quiet spot to watch the water). The main dining room downstairs also has great views, so don't fret over where to sit. The bar mixes up martinis, mojitos, and mai tais. Lunch and dinner is served daily; brunch on Sunday. The owners are dedicated to natural foods, buying organic when possible, and only using sustainably raised or wild-caught fish. The menu lists the origin of each fish whether it swam in local waters (swordfish, red snapper, halibut), Alaskan waters (cod), or Scottish seas (salmon). Lunch has lots of sandwich and salad options while dinner has more pasta and steak choices.

WILLY'S SMOKEHOUSE

28434 Roadside Drive
Agoura Hills, 818-991-7227
Barbecue
Entrées \$9–\$24

Kid-Friendly

The meat is smoked for hours and hours over hardwoods using a formula from a former USO chef named Willy, who served this authentic 'cue to Bob Hope, among others. The pulled pork is very popular, but the tri-tip is great, too, as are the baby back ribs. If you want to venture outside the world of barbecue, you could opt for the prime rib, Atlantic salmon fillet, ahi-tuna-topped salad, shrimp scampi, or New York strip steak.

WOLFGANG PUCK L.A. BISTRO

30990 Russell Ranch Road West
Westlake Village, 818-597-1902
www.wolfgangpuck.com/bistro
Californian
Entrées \$9–\$15

Kid-Friendly, Sunday Brunch

This hot restaurant has streamlined service during the day (order at the counter for table delivery) and table service by night and on Sundays. Delicious pizzas, focaccia sandwiches, and fresh salads hit your table less than 10 minutes after ordering. Heartier dishes include meatloaf, rotisserie chicken, and teriyaki salmon. Some menu items change seasonally (with Puck himself vetting every dish). The look is smart and sleek with indoor dining plus two outdoor patios. Wine bottles hanging on the wall suggest good drinking options; by day there are GuS sparkling sodas. Brunch gets the addition of egg dishes and waffles. It's tasty; it's fast; it's crowded; so go at off-peak hours if possible. Curbside pickup is a handy alternative to dining in.

THE CHAIN GANG

Chain restaurants run the gamut from casual to very elegant, but the main component of any chain is consistency. You know what you're getting when you walk into a chain. There are no star chefs, but if you find the listing here, you will get good food, good service, and clean environs. We've left out those places with interminable waits and mediocre fare.

CALIFORNIA PIZZA KITCHEN

2200 Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-777-1778
and in Westfield Topanga
6606 Topanga Canyon Blvd.
Canoga Park, 818-884-8858
www.cpk.com
Cal-Italian
Entrées \$9–\$15

CPK has so much more than pizza these days. Take the sautéed salmon, for instance, which comes with

asparagus and pasta in a lemon-caper sauce. Or the Thai Linguini with a spicy peanut-ginger sauce to which you can add shrimp or chicken. Even the surroundings have changed dramatically since this chain's beginnings. The Lakes location features a large dining room decorated nicely with stone walls and wine displays plus a separate bar and lounge area. You can still get huge salads like the original chopped version that helped propel this restaurant to fame. And there are definitely pizzas—more than 30 of them with interesting toppings like pear and Gorgonzola, BBQ chicken, steak and chiles, and goat cheese and roasted red peppers. A call-ahead seating list plus curbside service makes the Westfield Topanga location a bit more user-friendly.

CHAMPAGNE FRENCH BAKERY CAFÉ

180 Promenade Way
Westlake Village, 805-379-5911
www.champagnebakery.com
French
Entrées \$7–\$9

A quaint bakery that hearkens back to France with chalkboard menus and large mirrors, this outpost of the chain is a welcoming place. Nice sandwiches, quiches, crêpes, and salads vie for your attention with an array of delicious baked goods including croissants, madeleines, custard brioche, and crispy *palmier* cookies.

THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY

442 W. Hillcrest Drive
Thousand Oaks, 805-371-9705
www.thecheesecakefactory.com
American
Entrées \$9–\$32

Kid-Friendly, Sunday Brunch

Still going strong after all these years, The Cheesecake Factory excels in offering generous portions of stylish food in a casual setting. This branch of the chain that began in 1978, set in The Oaks, has a slightly Egyptian-movie-set look. On the encyclopedic menu you'll find everything from a Kobe hamburger to Cajun Jambalaya Pasta to orange chicken to chicken marsala. Really, there's a bit of every cuisine imaginable. Most folks come here with one dish in mind: cheesecake. Look for flavors like Godiva chocolate, Kahlua-cocoa-coffee, chocolate-chip cookie dough, lemon-raspberry cream, key lime, Oreo, low-carb cheesecake made with Splenda, or The Original cheesecake topped with fresh strawberries.

CLAIM JUMPER

2150 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-494-9656
www.claimjumper.com
American
Entrées \$10–\$31

Kid-Friendly

You would never know this casual dining spot with Craftsman-inspired architecture (stone walls, fireplaces) began life as a gold-miner-themed chain restaurant. There are still huge portions of ribs, steaks, and rotisserie chicken, but there are also daintier dishes like cedar plank grilled salmon, personal pizzas, and a veggie burger. The adjoining saloon celebrates happy hour (Monday to Friday, 3 to 7 p.m.) with small bites of food and deals on cocktails, craft beers, and wine. Open for lunch and dinner daily.

DAMON & PYTHIAS

4719 Commons Way
Calabasas, 818-224-1555
www.damonandpythias.com
American
Entrées \$8–\$13

Create your own salad or sandwich using their gourmet ingredients or choose from the regular menu, which features items like Cuban black bean soup and smoked turkey and chicken habañero sausage. A long list of salads includes Southwest Steak Salad and a spinach and bacon salad. Sandwiches can be healthy like the California Garden Sandwich. Dinners include teriyaki salmon or turkey with all the trimmings. Beer and wine help make this an upscale quick-food experience.

P.F. CHANG'S CHINA BISTRO

2250 Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-277-5915
www.pfchangs.com
Chinese-American
Entrées \$6-\$18

Two huge Ming horses guard the entrance to this Chinese-American temple at The Lakes where you can sip up-to-date cocktails and down large portions of minced chicken in lettuce cups, double-pan-fried noodles, Cantonese roasted duck, salmon steamed with ginger, wok-seared lamb, and New York-style cheesecake or the The Great Wall of Chocolate (cake). Big round tables make gathering in groups a treat.

WOOD RANCH BBQ & GRILL

5050 Cornell Road
Agoura Hills, 818-597-8900
and 540 New Los Angeles Ave.
Moorpark, 805-523-7253
and 1101 E. Daily Drive
Camarillo, 805-482-1202
and 3449 E. Main St.
Ventura, 805-620-4500
www.woodranch.com
Barbecue
Entrées \$11-\$27

Kid-Friendly

Many find it worth waiting in line for the slowly roasted meats and grilled steaks at this beloved local chain. The barbecue-sauced ribs, chicken, and tri-tip are tender and flavorful. The Original BBQ Chopped Salad with black beans, crunchy tortilla strips, and ranch dressing is perfect when topped with tri-tip. The turkey sliders on the appetizer menu make a satisfying meal for a low price, especially at happy hour when the full bar offers drink specials (except in the Ventura location, which offers half-priced appetizers). They will soon add Illy coffee to the dessert menu to make the end of your meal even more satisfying.

FUN, FUN, FUN

Whether they have crazy food, a festive atmosphere, or high-energy servers, these are the places to go if you're looking for a good time.

ADOBE CANTINA

29100 W. Agoura Road
Agoura Hills, 818-991-3474
Mexican
Entrées \$9-\$17

Kid-Friendly

This wide-open cantina has all-outdoor seating for a festive atmosphere. Don't worry, there are heaters on the many patios for the winter months. Choose from 40 premium tequilas to wash down achote pork fajitas, crab enchiladas, shrimp in a tequila-cream sauce, fish tacos, or even baby back ribs or a pulled-pork plate.

ALOHA STEAKHOUSE

5800 Santa Rosa Road
Camarillo, 805-484-1422
www.alohasteakhouse.com
Steakhouse
Entrées \$8-\$29

Kid-Friendly

The surf theme is displayed on the walls and in the attitude of the owners, who would love it if all diners wore deck shoes and floral shirts. The food is mainly American with lots of burgers, steaks that come with potatoes and salad, and seafood like macadamia-crusted mahimahi or Coco-Nutty Shrimp. Desserts are eye-popping. Hot chocolatey goodness flows from the Volcano Soufflé, topped with McConnell's ice cream. The Hula Pie is stuffed with macadamia-nut ice cream, hot fudge, and whipped cream.

AZU

457 E. Ojai Ave.
Ojai, 805-640-7987
www.azuojai.com

Mediterranean

Tapas \$6-\$17; Entrées \$24-\$31

A long, dark-wooden bar is the focal point of this popular lunch, dinner, and tapas spot. Happy hour stretches from 4 to 7 p.m. nightly. A long list of cold and hot tapas are offered, like olives, a cheese plate, stuffed dates, lamb kebabs, and fried calamari. Larger entrées cast a wider Mediterranean net and might include Moroccan chicken cooked in a tagine, veggie paella, or filet mignon with a cabernet reduction sauce. Eat in the lounge area or at one of the many tables inside or on the sidewalk out front. Cocktails and homemade gelato help keep everyone happy.

BANDITS' GRILL & BAR

589 N. Moorpark Road
Thousand Oaks, 805-497-7427
and 1980 Ventura Blvd.
Camarillo, 805-445-4742
www.banditsbbq.com
American
Entrées \$10-\$20

Kid-Friendly

Barbecue goes high-tech here, where the meat is slow-cooked in gleaming stainless steel smokers and slow cookers kept at the perfect temperature for 24 hours at a time. The decor is Frank Lloyd Wright meets the Old West and it works. The bar is hopping and so is lunch, so come early if you have limited time. The potato skins topped with ranch-style beans and cheese are a meal in themselves. Jalapeños stuffed with crab and cream cheese are a unique touch. But the real draw is the barbecue, of course. The tri-tip sandwich and the beef ribs move fast. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights go for the prime rib. The burgers and salads are satisfying lunch options.

THE BEACHCOMBER MALIBU PIER

23000 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, 310-456-9800
www.thebeachcombercafe.com

American

Entrées \$19-\$45

Great View, Kid-Friendly

The fantastic decor here celebrates seaside life in the 1940s when tiki bars were first trendy. Waiters deliver old-fashioned wide-mouthed bottles of purified water to set the tone. Wooden tables keep things casual. Jazz and swing music on the sound system is low enough to hear the waves crashing below. Food here, like in the forties, is decadent—rich with flavor and calories but new in style and ingredients. Clam chowder is creamy. The velvety mac and cheese has flecks of black truffle along with a touch of white truffle oil. The lobster potpie has chunks of tender seafood in a fantastic brandy sauce with a slice of crust sticking out. The s'mores dessert is brilliant: scoops of vanilla ice cream pierced with graham crackers and drenched in hardening chocolate and a torched marshmallow. It's hard not to have fun here, and a walk on the pier or the beach after a meal makes it even better.

BELLA VICTORIAN VINEYARD WINERY & BISTRO

2135 Ventura Blvd.
Camarillo, 805-383-8800
www.bellavictorianvineyard.com
California

Entrées \$9-\$12; Specials \$17-\$35

Part tasting room for the Bella Victorian Winery, part lingerie boutique (tastefully done), and part bistro. Chef Gael Lecolley works the tiny open kitchen to create small plates like sushi and thin-crust pizzas to go with flights of wine. If you stop by at lunchtime, there are a few tables on the sidewalk out front to settle into for dishes like Chinese chicken salad and roasted leg of lamb sandwich topped with caramelized onions and feta cheese. The bistro is open Wednesday through Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Tuesday and Sunday from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

BOGIES NIGHTCLUB AND LOUNGE

32001 Agoura Road
Westlake Village, 818-889-2394
www.bogies-bar.com
American

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3815 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd
Westlake Village (805)496-0686

Small plates \$8–\$15

Live Music

This mostly outdoor bar is a beautiful place to relax—with all the surrounding greenery and water. Grab a cabana or a spot on one of the couches near the outside fireplace. Entertainment in the form of bands or DJs happens Thursday through Saturday nights. On Friday and Saturday nights there is a cover charge. Nibble on small bites of food like chicken lettuce cups, flatbread pizzas, Southern fried chicken, or a cheese plate.

LOOK BROPHY BROS. CLAM BAR & RESTAURANT

119 Harbor Way
Santa Barbara, 805-966-4418
and 1559 Spinnaker Drive
Ventura, 805-693-0865
www.brophybros.com
Seafood
Entrées \$10–\$21

Great View

Both locations are strategically located on harbors with wonderful views of water and sailboats. The outdoor tables are the most sought-after, but the indoor seating near the bar can be just as fun. Lacquered wood tables hold bottles of Heinz malt vinegar (a must for fish). The seafood is always fresh and simply prepared. Main courses include classics like shrimp scampi, blackened mahimahi, and seafood pasta. Daily specials might include local thresher shark marinated in olive oil and citrus juices, or local swordfish with a mango-papaya salsa. All meals come with coleslaw, clam chowder, and fries or rice. A clam bar menu has seafood nibbles that go well with beer and cocktails.

CAFÉ FIORE RESTAURANT & MARTINI LOUNGE

66 S. California St.
Ventura, 805-653-1266
www.fiorerestaurant.net
Italian
Entrées \$14–\$28

Romantic, Live Music

Lively and loud, this martini bar and restaurant is beautifully decorated. A tall, dark-wood bar dominates the room in which it stands and showcases the bartenders mixing up cucumber martinis and blueberry cosmos. Booths and tables are usually crowded with friends enjoying themselves either indoors or out on the patio. The kitchen turns out many flavorful Italian dishes like pizza with pesto sauce, grilled chicken, mozzarella, and sun-dried tomatoes; or ravioli filled with lobster and braised leeks then doused in a tomato-cream sauce. A classic osso buco is served over saffron risotto, as it should be. Whole-wheat pasta makes an appearance on the spa menu, which is geared towards lighter fare. The dessert list offers plenty to smile about including a chocolate trio with molten-chocolate cake, bittersweet chocolate pot de crème, and a frozen custard with pistachios and white chocolate. Live music plays in the lounge area Tuesday through Saturday nights.

CHAR FASL

5843 Kanan Road
Agoura Hills, 818-889-9495

Persian

Entrées \$13–\$20

A handmade Persian backgammon set beckons patrons to linger over tea and a friendly game. Kabobs of filet mignon, lamb, chicken breast, or ground beef are served over heaps of fluffy basmati rice. The *tahdig* appetizer is the crispy crust of the rice from the bottom of the pan topped with your choice of stew. It's crunchy and addictive. Try the pomegranate juice; it's a great source of antioxidants. On Friday and Saturday nights there's singing and belly dancing after 8 p.m.

COSMOS GRILL

23663 Calabasas Road
Calabasas, 818-591-2211
www.cosmosgrill.com
Eclectic

Entrées \$10–\$20

Cozy and cute, this neighborhood café is packed on the weekends. The casual menu has lots of salads like the warm spinach chicken version, a Cobb, spicy Thai chicken,

and seared ahi salad. Sandwiches run the gamut from a triple-decker club to a turkey meatball sub, to burgers, wraps, and even a po'boy made with ahi tuna. Pastas include heart-healthy options like the asparagus and mushrooms in pesto or the whole-wheat fettuccine with artichokes and sun-dried tomatoes. There's also fish-and-chips, liver and onions, and roasted rosemary chicken. Open for lunch and dinner daily.

DON CUCO MEXICAN RESTAURANT

254 W. Los Angeles Ave.
Moorpark, 805-523-2261
www.doncucorestaurants.com
Mexican

Entrées \$8–\$19

Kid-Friendly, Sunday Brunch

The Yucatan style of cooking prevails in this appealing Mexican restaurant with stained-glass depictions of what look like Aztec pyramids. Inside, booths are styled in tan-and-green striped fabric while lanterns and an iron candelabra hang from the ceiling. On the covered patio, wooden tables and chairs are comfortably spaced. The food enlivens your palate with zesty flavors, starting with the spicy salsa. An intense mole sauce blankets a chicken enchilada. The long bar pours plenty of tequilas and mixes large margaritas.



LOOK DUKE'S MALIBU

21150 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, 310-317-0777

www.dukesmalibu.com

Hawaiian/Seafood

Entrées \$17–\$30

Great View

The gorgeous ocean views are maximized in the dining rooms and bars of this large Hawaiian-themed seafood and steak house. Every staff member sports a laid-back smile and friendly demeanor. Skip the starters and go straight for the main courses. The seasonal fish choices are prepared six different ways—the Parmesan-crusting version with macadamia nuts and a lemon-caper sauce rules. For dessert, the Mile-High Hula Pie is stuffed with macadamia-nut ice cream and topped with fudge. Check the website for happy-hour specials and hula dance performances on the patio.

FIAMME

3731 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-497-9444

www.fiammerestaurant.com

Italian/American

Entrées \$12–\$26

Live Music

Red is a major accent of this restaurant, whose name means “flames” in Italian. The fire theme carries through to some of the grilled menu items, like the baby back ribs and the spicy heat of the *peperonata* sauce on the pork chops. Along with those American dishes, you'll find Italian specialties like thin-crust pizzas, pastas, veal marsala, and tiramisu. The large and attractive space, complete with its own bar/lounge area and tented patio, can handle a crowd. A small stage in the main dining room offers live music and there are plans for other forms of entertainment. If that's not enough, rides in a Simcraft racing car simulator can be had for \$5 a pop (about five laps). Fiamme is open for

lunch and dinner daily with a short breakfast menu available until 4 p.m. Happy hour in the lounge runs from 4 to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday.

NEW FOX SPORTS GRILL

30970 Russell Ranch Road
Westlake Village, 818-338-7080
www.foxsportsgrill.com/westlake

American

Entrées \$6–\$27

Sports on 20 screens

Say hello to the modern sports bar: a sophisticated environment with more than 20 plasma and projection televisions, which all broadcast different channels. A full bar mixes up martinis, frozen drinks, margaritas, beer, and wine—even beer cocktails. The most fun way to eat is to grab on all the appetizers while your eyes are glued to the tennis match or football game. The spinach-artichoke dip comes with toasty crostini for dipping; the bleu cheese-covered potato chips are absolutely addictive. Jumbo lump crab cakes have a bit of a Cajun kick; the build-your-own pizzas have a nice chewy crust.

GALLETTO BAR & GRILL

982 S. Westlake Blvd.
Westlake Village, 805-449-4300
www.gallettobarandgrill.com

Italian/Brazilian

Entrées \$10–\$17

Live Music

During the week a live guitarist keeps things interesting while on the weekends the crowd can dance to bands playing bossa nova, rhythm and blues, classic rock, and jazz. Nibbles of an Italian or Brazilian bent go well with the mixed drinks like the caipirinha (lime and Brazilian rum). Apps include cheese plates, fried calamari, crab cakes, chicken empanadas, and quesadillas. Light eaters can stick with the Italian pasta dishes for their main course or fish prepared with Brazilian sauces. Heartier appetites will want steak, chicken, or sausage from the grill.

GINO'S TRATTORIA

720 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-494-7743
Italian

Entrées \$10–\$17

Kid-Friendly

Owner Gino Setola likes to be very personal with his patrons. Instead of writing menu specials on a board, he prefers to give them out to the whole room verbally. It's casual, it's friendly, and the menu has classic Italian dishes like veal piccata, fettuccine Bolognese, pizza, and Caprese salad. Don't miss the gelato truffles for dessert.

KABUKI JAPANESE RESTAURANT

20940 Ventura Blvd.
Woodland Hills, 818-704-8700
www.kabukirestaurants.com

Japanese

Entrées \$10–\$18

Kid-Friendly

Groups of coworkers and friends gather here for reasonably priced sushi and cocktails, delivered with a smile in a boisterous room. Some of the special rolls are a bit unusual but tasty, like the Ana-Kyu Garlic Roll with sea eel tempura and cucumber with garlic chips on top. Most of the rolls and cooked dishes are more traditional. There's tempura, teriyaki, ramen, and miso-marinated black cod. The hot appetizers are fun to explore and share, especially the ginger shrimp on crispy rice, the fried soft-shell crab with ponzu, and the garlicky but mild grilled *shisito* peppers. Non-alcoholic drinks—like the green-tea smoothie and the “Karate Punch” with cranberry, peach nectar, and cherry syrup—should satisfy any designated driver. Open for lunch and dinner daily; happy hour 3 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

LAZY DOG CAFÉ

172 W. Hillcrest Drive
Thousand Oaks, 805-449-5206
www.lazydogcafe.com

American

Entrées \$8–\$24

Saturday & Sunday Brunch

Who loves puppies? Everyone, right? So a café decorated with fire hydrants, puppy photos, paw-print fabrics, and bone-shaped door handles has to be fun. The inexpensive eats represent what Americans love, from pizza and pasta to burgers and grilled cheese. Salads are topped with items like roasted veggies, the fish of the day, or even chicken tenders. Bigger meals include meatloaf, flatiron steak, chicken potpie with a cap of puff pastry, and Idaho trout baked in a cast-iron skillet. For dessert, a hot fudge sundae comes to the table in a porcelain dog bowl. Lazy Dog Cafe, located at The Oaks mall, is open for lunch and dinner daily.

LIMÓN LATIN GRILL

1555 Simi Town Center Way
Simi Valley, 805-955-9277
www.limongrill.com

Pan-Latin

Entrées \$8–\$20 (some steaks up to \$40)

Live Music

The flat-screen TVs above the bar make this a great spot to catch a sporting event, while the area around the fireplace on the patio near the cabanas is great for listening to live music. Chef Ron Tavakoli features flavors from all over Central and South America as well as Cuba and Puerto Rico. His preparation of yucca (sliced, fried, and drizzled with a garlicky mojo sauce) makes you actually yearn for this normally bland root vegetable. The chicken *alcaparado* with olives and capers is sensational. At lunchtime there are American-style sandwiches like a California wrap and a hamburger. If you see the pulled-pork special, go for it. The servers are knowledgeable about the cuisine and can help you deconstruct the long menu, which also offers salads, pastas, seafood, and steaks. Limón Latin Grill is open for lunch and dinner daily. Musicians play on Sundays from 2 to 9 p.m. and at different times during the rest of the week (except Mondays). Call for the schedule of artists. There's also a DJ spinning tunes late in the evening on Friday and Saturday nights.

THE MELTING POT

3685 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd.
Thousand Oaks, 805-370-8802
www.meltingpot.com

Fondue

Entrées \$18–\$23 individually or \$59 for two

Kid-Friendly

Swirl, swish, and dip your way through cheese fondue, hot broth fondue, and chocolate fondue for an interactive meal that will keep even your kids interested. For the adults, a full bar and a large wine list make the night fun. The sauces, salads, and sides round out the meal nicely.

MOONSHADOWS

20356 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, 310-456-3010
www.moonshadowsmalibu.com

Cal-Asian

Entrées \$19–\$30

Great View, Saturday & Sunday Brunch

The owners got serious about this former surfer hangout a couple of years ago when they remodeled a bit and hired chef Joachim Weritz to create a menu worthy of destination dining. He flies in sweet quahog hard-shell clams for his chowder and buys American Kobe beef for his braised short ribs. His menu changes four times a year to follow the seasons, but you can always count on really fresh seafood with Asian touches, a pasta or risotto, homemade fruit cobbler, and a cheese plate. Views of the Pacific are great from every table, indoors or on the party deck outside. Brunch is always crowded.

NEW SCHECK & SHAY'S ROCKIN' DINER

3907 Cochran St.
Simi Valley, 805-306-9566
www.simidiner.com

American

Entrées \$7–\$12

Kid-Friendly

Styled like a 1950s diner with plenty of chrome, formica, and vinyl, this homage to car-hop culture offers vintage foods with updated flare. Don't miss the Rednecks and Rings appetizer (fried pickles and onion rings) on a cute cast-iron stand with three good dipping sauces. Burgers

go from big (Just a Burger with a half-pound of meat) to generous (Da Bomb piled with avocado, bacon, onion rings, and double the cheese). The chicken-fried steak gets homemade country gravy. The premium sides include fire-roasted creamed corn, or pasta salad loaded with artichoke hearts and kalamata olives. Shakes, malts, and floats ensure you won't leave hungry.

LOOK SHEILA'S PLACE WINE BAR & RESTAURANT

330 N. Lantana St.
Camarillo, 805-987-9800
www.sheilawinebar.com

Californian

Entrées \$10–\$24

Live Music

It's a long wine bar with quite a few cozy tables available next to the wine racks lining the walls. The lighting is low and romantic, the music is mostly acoustic and jazzy. Plenty of small plates are on offer, the better to snack on with a bottle or two of wine. The Boursin cheese ravioli comes with a scattering of sweet-vermouth-soaked mushrooms. The combination is delightful. The Mediterranean olive pizza utilizes both green and black olives to nice effect. The angel hair pasta with tomatoes and basil could be a primer on how to make this ubiquitous Italian dish.

TAVERNA TONY

23410 Civic Center Way
Malibu, 310-317-9667
www.tavernatony.com

Greek

Entrées \$11–\$29

Live Music

Owner Tony Koursaris is a solicitous host, overseeing your good time either inside by the fireplace or outside on the patio. Weekends bring live Greek music, dancing waiters, and belly dancers. Eat your flaming cheese, moussaka, and grilled lamb family-style if in a big party (which is the best way to experience the fun here). If you can't save room for the baklava (and you probably can't due to the huge portions), take it home.

TUPELO JUNCTION CAFE

1218 State St.
Santa Barbara, 805-899-3100
www.tupelojunction.com

Southern

Entrées \$14–\$33

Kid-Friendly, Live Music

It's always crowded at this friendly brick-walled café where the cute waitresses don white T-shirts and jeans and the drinks arrive in mason jars. Chef Amy Scott lets loose with bacon in her Southern-inflected dishes. It's in the spinach and Gouda scramble on the breakfast menu (served until 2 p.m. every day); cooked in with the collard greens accompanying the rich mac and cheese; and scattered on top of the slightly sweet coleslaw that sits next to two pan-fried crab cakes made from fresh Dungeness. The fried green tomatoes will remind any Southerner of home, although they're elevated by a dill-and-lemon dipping sauce that mom (probably) never made (at lunch) or stacked between rounds of goat cheese (at dinner). Even the seafood sticks to your ribs here. The shrimp and scallops come with cheddar jalapeño grits and Creole lobster butter. On Thursday nights, stop in for live music and happy hour specials from 5 to 7 p.m.

YAMATO RESTAURANT

28700 Roadside Drive
Agoura Hills, 818-706-7711
and 1901 E. Daily Drive
Camarillo, 805-383-9000
www.yamatorestaurants.com

Japanese

Entrées \$10–\$23

Kid-Friendly

The Agoura Hills location with its cocktail lounge, sushi bar, and teppanyaki tables was the first in this small chain. With locations in Camarillo, Encino, Valencia, Westwood, and Orange County, its popularity is growing. Yamato offers reasonably priced sushi (less than \$5 per roll) and teppanyaki dinners (\$13) stir-fried in front of the tables. You'll also find tempura dishes, teriyaki, halibut steak, and black cod. ■

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YOUR YEAR AHEAD

♑ CAPRICORN

(December 23–January 20)

As the world emerges from recession, Capricorns are born leaders and must lead the way. Set the tone this year by naming your car—something bold, like the “Starship Outtamyway.” That being said, be careful while driving with friends: Gastric complaints are troubling on occasion.

Outlook for finding love: Favorable.

♒ AQUARIUS

(January 21–February 19)

Whoever said change is good hasn't seen your wardrobe. Deep inside, Aquarians want to dress nicely, but they tend to jump at bargain sales on anything. Don't be bashful about asking for sartorial help, and take my word for it: When Mercury is in retrograde, stay out of T.J. Maxx.

Outlook for finding love: Favorable.

♓ PISCES

(February 20–March 20)

The year 2010 adds up to the number 3. Pisces, because of their conspiratorial nature, will know exactly what to do with this information. But their indecisiveness ultimately proves disastrous. Plus, they're typically paranoid. Everyone knows that. (By the way: The Librans are laughing at you behind your back.)

Outlook for finding love: Favorable.

♈ ARIES

(March 21–April 20)

Honestly, I don't know any Aries. So, um, the best periods for travel are March and December, and your lucky colors are puce and yellow. (Nah, I just made that stuff up. If anyone claims to be able to tell an Aries' future, he's lying.)

Outlook for finding love: Favorable?

♉ TAURUS

(April 21–May 21)

Those Tauruses are not fond of change. In fact, when change becomes imminent, their bullheadedness gets in the way of progress. Listen up: Change is coming, so just get used to it. If you avoid change today, you'll pay the price tomorrow.

Outlook for finding love:

Favorable, unless you blow it.

♊ GEMINI

(May 22–June 21)

Most of you are consumed by a burning desire to change the patterns around you. The rest of you will be just fine as is. That's typical Gemini duality in action. Sigh. Who knows what you people want.

Outlook for finding love: ???

♋ CANCER

(June 22–July 22)

“Why Cancer?” you ask yourself. “Who came up with the Cancer sign to guide one's life by?” Once you get past that, you discover your zodiac mascot is a crab. It's all starting to make sense now, isn't it?

Outlook for finding love: Favorable.

♌ LEO

(July 23–August 21)

The planet Jupiter rules the workplace for astrological lions, so make it an everyday policy to give praise and bonuses until mid-April. Later this summer, watch out for hyenas in the conference room.

Outlook for finding love: Favorable.

♍ VIRGO

(August 22–September 23)

Virgos will be confused about love in 2010 because they got no game whatsoever. Even when they're at a singles bar and asked for their sign, they can't answer with a straight face. Amateurs.

Outlook for finding love: Not so favorable.

♎ LIBRA

(September 24–October 23)

Oh, you snooty Libras. You think you're so special with your scales. Well, la-di-da. Keep your smug expressions through May and see what happens.

Outlook for finding love: Favorable.

(Just stay away from Virgos.)

♏ SCORPIO

(October 24–November 22)

“Loyal,” “resourceful,” and “dynamic” all describe Scorpio blah, blah, blah. Are we almost done here?

Outlook for finding love: Whatever.

♐ SAGITTARIUS

(November 23–December 22)

Because of positive planetary influences, you will enjoy excellent luck this year. But possessions don't make you who you are. Except that PlayStation 3 you got for Christmas. That's pretty rad, dude. I'll be over in an hour, so fire it up and order some pizza. Seriously.

Outlook for finding love: Favorable. ■

Happy New Year!

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