

RESTAURANTS



**RUSTIC GETAWAY:** Co-owner Morgan Runyon hangs out on the porch of the Old Place, near Agoura Hills. Photographs by RICARDO DEABATANHA, Los Angeles Times

RESTAURANT REVIEW

# Warm Western welcome

A lively scene and wood-fire-cooked meals make the Old Place a favorite for down-home fun.

**S. IRENE VIRBILA**  
RESTAURANT CRITIC

After dinner, we slip out of the old post office — with its wall of cubbyholes stuffed with faded letters — into the Cornell night. The velvety black sky is spangled with the stars you never see in the city. The night smells of wood fire, pine and horses. It's as if we've slipped through time at the Old Place roadhouse in the folds of the Santa Monica Mountains between Agoura Hills and Malibu.

The food is hearty and good — not always perfect but satisfying. It's all the basics. And the place is so warm and welcoming — and fun — that everyone I've brought has immediately declared it one of their favorite restaurants ever.

Founded by actor Tom Runyon, who bought and converted the rundown Hank's Country Store in Cornell in 1970, the Old Place looks something like a frontier saloon. Walls are decorated with vintage photos of the area and memorabilia, including write-ups of the restaurant in the old days. That would be when the entire menu, written out on a sign at the front, consisted of steamed clams, steak and baked potatoes. Friends who frequented the place then recount how there was sometimes a long, long wait before you got anything to eat. Sometimes Tom and his wife, Barbara, whose paintings hang in the restaurant, ran out of food. But you might see the likes of Steve McQueen or Burgess Meredith making a pit stop there.

Tom Runyon passed away in the summer of 2009. And since then, the Old Place has been run by Runyon's son, Morgan, and Tim Skogstrom, who owns the Cornell Winery and tasting room next door with his wife, Denise. They've brought in chef Oscar Ledesma, most recently executive chef at Pierpont Inn in Ventura. He's expanded the menu while still cooking almost everything over a red oak fire.

The old Cornell post office, which dates from 1884 and was used by the elder Runyon for poker games, is now a private dining room for

**The Old Place** ★½

Rating is based on food, service and ambiance, with price taken into account in relation to quality.

- ★★★★: Outstanding on every level.
- ★★★: Excellent.
- ★★: Very good.
- ★: Good.
- No star: Poor to satisfactory.

**LOCATION**  
29983 Mulholland Highway, Cornell (near Agoura Hills); (818) 706-9001; www.oldplacecornell.com

**PRICE**  
Dinner appetizers, \$6 to \$17; main courses, \$18 to \$42; dessert, \$8. Corkage fee, \$20 (\$5 for wine bought at Cornell Winery next door)

**DETAILS**  
Open for dinner 5 to 10 p.m. (doors close at midnight) Thursday to Sunday and for brunch 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Beer and wine. Parking lot.

nine to 12 guests. Sometimes when you arrive at the Old Place, there's a crowd just inside the door, with everybody who hasn't already reserved a booth or a table angling for a spot at the bar. It's relatively easy if you're two, but for three or four, much tougher. That's when the winery next door comes into play. Leave your name, go over and have a glass of wine there while you wait.

**Local wines**

Cornell Winery is more of a wine shop and tasting room than an actual winery, showcasing local wines in a great barn of a place, all stone and timber, with a long central table lighted with candelabra and chandeliers. It's a friendly place. Any bottle you buy here you can drink at the restaurant for a \$5 corkage fee.

Meanwhile, back at the restaurant, guests are crowding in for their assigned seating. The place takes reservations for just three times a night: 5, 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. That's plenty because the kitchen at this incredibly busy spot gets the food out fast. Waiters are brisk and efficient, with warm smiles and zero attitude. More spoons so everybody can taste the soup? Not a problem. More wineglasses? Of course. Only they



**BIG MEAL:** The bone-in rib-eye can feed two.

Dinner reservations for four or more accepted up to 30 days in advance for 5, 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. Seating at the bar is first-come, first-served.

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**Step inside the Old Place**

Go online for more images of the Old Place near Agoura Hills and some of the dishes on its menu.

are indestructible stemless bistro glasses, practical but not ideal. If you want to drink out of stemmed glasses, you'll have to bring your own.

**Stick to basics**

You might want to start with a bowl of soup. Each night there's a different one, maybe a lovely puree of oak-roasted cauliflower smoothie with cream or an old-fashioned chicken dumpling soup with a rich clear broth and a confetti of vegetables.

The steamed clams are a must and plentiful enough to share, with lots of garlicky broth to scoop up with rafts of bread. Morgan Runyon will tell you he's a big hiker and forages for chanterelles and other mushrooms that appear, usually mixed with some cultivated ones, in the dreamy mushroom gratin, served like so many dishes here from the 6 1/2-inch cast-iron skillet in which it's cooked over the oak-fired grill. Halved Brussels sprouts with cubed apples and swatches of bacon is another standout. They also do a sort of mac 'n' cheese made with wide ribbon noodles, comforting on a cold winter night.

But let's cut to the chase: the steak. Two kinds, either sirloin at \$19 or rib-eye — 18 ounces at \$29 or 27 ounces and bone-in at \$42. The latter is big enough to feed two and is twice as flavorful as the

regular sirloin.

That sirloin is a great deal, though. For that price, I expected a skinny steak, but this one is tall and proud, cooked with the exactitude you'd expect at an expensive steakhouse, but not necessarily at a place like this at these prices.

And either steak comes with potato — either mashed or baked. You want the latter, fully loaded with butter, sour cream, chives and real bacon bits. Occasionally it can be a tad undercooked. The mashed potatoes can be a bit gluey.

Another main course to consider is the oak-grilled chicken braised in pale ale with fresh rosemary. It's half a bird, browned and juicy and falling-off-the-bone tender.

Specials can be hit or miss. A hefty pan-seared veal porterhouse with chanterelles gathered from the hillsides is flat-out delicious. But an elaborate fish dish with two sauces and numerous garnishes is wildly overcooked and not that fresh. Still, grilled mahi mahi another night is perfectly done, wonderful with a load of baby vegetables on top.

The kitchen doesn't have a clue about chicken poeple. I tried it twice — once it was dried-out, the other time the crust was greasy and the interior swimming in gravy. Inedible.

Desserts get the skillet treatment, too. The best is a chocolate chip cookie that covers the entire bottom of the skillet and is served with a ball of whipped cream on top, a fine way to end an evening at the Old Place.

That is, if you don't hang around at the bar or out front, listening to local musicians sing and play the guitar. It's an inviting scene — and just an hour's drive from downtown L.A.

And if you don't fancy making that drive at night, there's always weekend brunch. The sticky-sweet homemade cinnamon buns are obligatory. Steak 'n' eggs too. And definitely the frittatas cooked in the cast-iron skillets, maybe one with sausage and wild mushrooms. Good strong coffee. And "manmosas," 18 ounces of orange juice and sparkling wine.

And after you're done, you can saunter over to Peter Straus Ranch across the street, now a park, before the sweet drive home with the windows open.

Good food. Great place.

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THE FIND

# Humble stews in heavenly tacos

A new Boyle Heights taqueria fills its handmade tortillas with flavorful braises.

MILES CLEMENTS

Ricardo Diaz is on his way to building a culinary empire with Mexican restaurants that innately reflect the attitudes and fluctuations of the Angeleno appetite.

Three years ago, Diaz and his in-laws opened Cook's Tortas in Monterey Park. There, sturdy, rustic rolls are baked on-site, everyone sips pineapple-celery and watermelon-mint *aguas frescas* and dessert brings soft corn cakes and biscuits smeared with loquat marmalade. For every diner who longs for the *torta* of grilled chicken, salsa, avocado and fried sage, another loves grilled skirt steak, dry-aged chorizo, *nopales* and guacamole. The restaurant is the all-inclusive ideal of what a modern Mexican cafe should be in Los Angeles.

Guisados, Diaz and business partner Armando De La Torre's new Boyle Heights taqueria, shares a similar universality. Here, *guisados* achieve ascendancy, these are humble stews and braises that you'd otherwise most likely find simmering atop a home stove.

The restaurant occupies a busy corner of César Chávez Avenue, a prismatic space in which the soot-stained colors of the street refract back into a flood of gleaming white light. The ceiling rises to the sky; paintings capture the neighborhood with impressionistic quickness. Young families and businesswomen spend their lunches here in complete peace, heaving tacos in hand.

As at Cook's, the menu is writ large on an enormous chalkboard. It's a sharply focused selection, each day's *guisados* parceled out into about a dozen different tacos and tamales. But with the restaurant's huge handmade tortillas — glorious, rough-hewn things impeccable in their imperfection — two tacos (and a tamale to go) is all you'll need.

There's always an incentive to dine in. It could be a complimentary cup of vegetable soup, porous pieces of squash soaking up Scoville units of chile heat until they themselves start sweating. Or it might be a cream of mushroom soup, silky as those poured tableside into glistening porcelain.

Guisados' menu is designed to change every other week. But, De La Torre says, there are already some tacos too popular to be replaced. One is the *calabacitas*, a succotash of corn, zucchini, tomato, onions, peppers and a few crumbles of cheese. It's a taco for all times, both a perfect precursor to the similarly sought-after *bistec en salsa roja* (steak bathed in a smoldering salsa) and a meatless rejoinder to the porcine *chi-*

**Guisados**



**POPULAR:** Guisados' bistec en salsa roja.

**LOCATION**  
2100 César Chávez Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 264-7201

**PRICE**  
Tacos, \$2.50; taco sampler, \$6.50; tamales, \$1.50 or 12 for \$18.

**DETAILS**  
Open 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Saturday and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Street parking. Credit cards accepted.

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**Another look**

Go online for more images of Guisados in Boyle Heights and some of the dishes on its menu.

*charrón*, sheets of fried pork skin braised almost to the point of sublimation.

The *tinga* is equally indispensable. Chicken is stewed with onions, cabbage, chorizo and chipotle until its fibers unravel into smoky strands. Pickled red onions and a single slice of avocado rest on top. Try the *steak picado* too, a bed of beans, caramelized onions and peppers supporting a heap of skirt steak streaked with creamy avocado salsa.

There's definite depth to Guisados' *mole poblano*. The mahogany sauce coats swirls of tender chicken and aromas all the necessary senses: barely bitter, subtly sweet and alive with garlic heat. Sesame and pumpkin seeds and a few stray peanuts melting to the mole like glitter to glue.

If your timing is right, you might also luck into tamales stuffed with that same rich mole or, just as happily, others bursting instead with shredded coconut and pineapple. But even those filled simply with chicken are good enough to encourage bulk orders.

Soon, Diaz and De La Torre hope to open a *ceviche* bar in Monterey Park. For now, their attention is on Guisados' daylong stews and braises, some of their most vivid family memories steamed inside delicate sheaths of masa and swaddled in those rugged tortillas.

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**BRIGHT SPACE:** Co-owner Armando De La Torre serves tacos to David Hernandez and Joanne Moore. Photographs by ANNE COVACK, Los Angeles Times

THE DISH

# LAUSD and Oliver

There may have been a little movement in the stand-off between L.A. Unified School District and Jamie Oliver, the British chef who has been angling to get into its cafeterias.

Oliver wants to film parts of his "Food Revolution" reality TV series in the schools but so far has been kept out of them. He's filming the second season of his show in Los Angeles, the first was in Huntington, W.Va.

In a memo Friday, the district's director of food services, Dennis Barrett, asked Oliver to propose three weeks of menus — following federal and local regulations and costing no more than 77 cents a serving. That's how much the district says it has to spend on food, taking into account all the other costs of providing meals at nearly 1,000 sites. The memo doesn't promise access to the cafeterias in return.

"For me, that feels like an amazing move forward," Oliver said Friday afternoon.

Oliver, who has been working with culinary students at West Adams Prep

near downtown, also said he's building a pop-up kitchen nearby and is scouting for a permanent teaching kitchen in that neighborhood. He said he has plans for five kitchens around L.A., including one near UCLA. Oliver has repeatedly said that his plans are not just about reality television, that he wants to help reduce childhood obesity and help people eat better.

LAUSD has declined Oliver's request to film in its kitchens and has suspended all filming of reality shows in the schools. If Oliver wants to make a difference, spokesman Robert Alanis said, he

could volunteer his services without the cameras.

On another front, the Claremont school district said it could not come to a contract agreement to take part in a student chef challenge as part of the show. Rick Cota, director of nutrition services, said he was disappointed but they could not agree on what students and officials could disclose about their experience.

Meanwhile, on Saturday, 32 students from eight area high schools are to take part in a cooking competition on Third Street in Santa Monica organized by "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution."

# Water Grill gets a new chef

Water Grill, the 20-year-old downtown seafood restaurant owned by King's Seafood Co., says it has a new executive chef, Amanda Baumgarten. Baumgarten, who was a "Top Chef" contestant in Season 7, has been promoted from sous chef.

In September, former Water Grill chef David LeFevre announced he was leaving to open a restaurant, and King's Seafood said it would look for a successor. "We conducted a national search, interviewed many

talented chefs ... from New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, and of course Los Angeles," said King's Seafood Chief Operating Officer Jeff Goodman in a news release. "After rounds of interviews and menu tastings, it became crystal clear that the best chef for the job was already in our kitchen."

Baumgarten trained at Le Cordon Bleu in London and has cooked at Patina, Melisse and Ford's Pilling Station.

5443 Grand Ave., Los Angeles; (213) 498-0900; www.watergrill.com

— MARY MACVEAN AND BRYTT HALLOCK