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BRAD A. JOHNSON’S 75 BEST PLACES TO EAT

EVERY MEAL, every glass of wine, every taco, every tasting menu, every extra mile added to the odometer (always more than 10,000 for this pursuit) ... everything I do all year adds up to this.

Through all the highs and lows of an incessant dining routine, my mission is always clear: Provide a roadmap to the best places to eat in Orange County. These are the pins on that map.

If you’ve been following along over the years, you will notice a new name at the top. Stonehill Tavern became Bourbon Steak, and in that transformation the restaurant discovered its truer self. Marché Moderne is back, of course. Meanwhile, Il Barone has gone missing. The always high-ranking Italian restaurant was set to close just as this story was going to press, and its new location had not yet opened. Others have moved up or down based on my most recent visits.

You might notice a larger than usual number of steakhouses among the new rankings. This has less to do with my love of great steak — and let’s be honest, there is nothing in life more grotesquely perfect than a 32-ounce ribeye still smoldering from the grill — than the fact that truly great beef is more popular than ever but also more expensive than it’s ever been, a trend with no end in sight. And when a restaurant commits to serving such an expensive product, it makes sense that it would also then strive for higher standards of quality in other areas as well (service, wine, atmosphere, overall comfort) to help justify that splurge. Certainly not every steakhouse made the list.

Certainly not every steakhouse made the list. Some of the finest things I’ve eaten this year were ramen noodles and pizzas. But I’ve also come across extraordinary enchiladas, pan-fried dumplings and green mango salads.

So, from the quiet serenity of Studio in Laguna Beach to the utter chaos and full sensory overload of Garlic & Chives in Garden Grove, these are the 75 best places to eat in Orange County in 2018.

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(Bourbon Steak, Dana Point)

Ramos House Café • San Juan Capistrano
Hendrix • Laguna Niguel
Anapalo on Chapman • Orange
Sushi Roku • Newport Beach
Hanna’s • Rancho Santa Margarita

Del Frisco’s Grille • Irvine
Mr. G’s • Newport Beach
Wreckless • Fullerton
Kang Ho-Dong Baejyegong • Buena Park
The Blind Pig • Rancho Santa Margarita

Fleming’s • Newport Beach
Watermarc • Laguna Beach
Sapori Ristorante • Newport Beach
Harvest • Laguna Beach
Selanne Steak Tavern • Laguna Beach

2145 Pizza • Costa Mesa
Tupelo Junction • Newport Beach
Pour Vida • Anaheim
Leatherby’s Café Rouge • Costa Mesa
HiroNori • Irvine

Chada Thai • Garden Grove
Ironwood • Laguna Hills
Garlic & Chives • Garden Grove
Los Sanchez • Garden Grove
Hue Oi • Fountain Valley

Adya • Anaheim
Peking Restaurant • Westminster
El Farolito • Placentia
J Zhou Oriental Cuisine • Tustin
The Quiet Woman • Corona del Mar

Cha Cha’s Latin Kitchen • Irvine
The Cellar • San Clemente
American Dream • Huntington Beach
Kabob Republic • Costa Mesa
Haidilao Hot Pot • Irvine

Who’s in, who’s out • PAGE 21
Top ramen • PAGE 22
Amazing Marys • PAGE 24
Bourbon Steak

Celebrity chef Michael Mina recently flipped his one-of-a-kind Stonehill Tavern into yet another branch of his Bourbon Steak chain. The menu now includes a greater emphasis on steak — something Stonehill was already doing over the past couple of years — though many of the tavern’s hallmark dishes remain, such as the whole chicken fried in duck fat, the famous tuna tartare and the lobster pot pie. They’ve made a few minor tweaks to designer Tony Chi’s gorgeous interior decor, which has resulted in a bar that isn’t quite as sexy as it used to be, but in the process Mina has put his finger on something big. The result is not merely another Bourbon Steak or just another steakhouse. It is essentially the same Stonehill Tavern we’ve always known, only fresher, more alive, more current, more important and more essential than ever. The service, the food, the elegance and, of course, that view of the sunset over the Pacific — everything about this place is stunning.

1 MONARCH BEACH RESORT
DANA POINT, 949-234-3900
BOURBONSTEAK.COM

Vaca • The paella de carne is made with duck confit, chorizo, beef cheek, pork belly and blood sausage.

2 Although huge American-style steaks really aren’t a thing in Spain, this Spanish steakhouse from Amar Santana and Ahmed Labbate has nonetheless become the undisputed king of Spanish cuisine in Southern California. The house specialty is the 50-day dry-aged ribeyes that weigh upward of 2 pounds. The Spanish hams are superb, too, as are the paellas and tapas, especially the bikini sandwich and the chicken canelon. What to drink: The Vaca tonic is sublime, but you’ll also want to consider a bottle of Spanish wine.

* 695 TOWN CENTER DRIVE
COSTA MESA, 714-463-6060
VACARESTAURANT.COM

Arc

Chef Noah Blöm is largely responsible for kindling the wood-fire revolution that has swept America, but unlike most restaurants that have followed in his footsteps, Blöm’s kitchen at Arc is fueled exclusively by wood. No gas. No electric appliances. Everything cooked here is touched by wood fire and smoke: mushrooms with a free-range egg, chicken and broccoli casserole, crab cakes, meatballs, lobster and a burger like you’ve never seen. The sirloin steak with duck-fat potatoes is easily the best steak you will find for $24, but if you dare to splurge, there’s a whole other world of fancier cuts.

* 3321 HYLAND AVE., COSTA MESA
949-500-5561, ARCRESTAURANT.COM

Marché Moderne

Chef Atsushi Yokoyama welcomes merely 10 diners at a time to his intimate sushi counter that’s hidden behind The Lab in Costa Mesa. Inspired by Japanese kaiseki, the chef offers several different tasting menus, or omakase, with intricate creations such as shima aji with grapefruit and plum-wine foam; corn custard with snow crab and baby okra; seared foie over rice; steamed akamutsu with morel mushrooms; hairy crab with fiddlehead fern; Miyazaki A5 Wagyu on a sizzling hot lava stone … and, yes, sushi: grunt fish, wild sea bream, blue stripe snapper, cockle clams, goose barnacles, flying houbou and more.

* 2930 BRISTOL ST., COSTA MESA
714-545-2800, HANARESUSHI.COM

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* 2930 BRISTOL ST., COSTA MESA
714-545-2800, HANARESUSHI.COM
Water Grill

6 This Los Angeles-based seafood palace across the street from South Coast Plaza has settled into a smooth, luxurious groove. The indoor/outdoor ambience is as stunning as some of the fish being served. The whole, wild-caught Dover sole is simply perfection, bathed in butter and filleted tableside. Whatever you do, start with the uni toast, and maybe a round of stone crab claws. The seafood selection is beyond vast.

• 3300 BRISTOL ST., COSTA MESA 949-208-7060, WATERGRILL.COM

Taco María

• Chilaquiles from the brunch menu, which also includes buttermilk pancakes and huevos pescador.

Brick

7 Chef David Pratt recently upgraded his Italian kitchen with the installation of a wood-fired grill to complement his already legendary wood-fired oven. The lamb chops from that grill are spectacular. The wood-fired pizzas are better than ever, especially the carne, which is crafted with four different house-made pork sausages. Pratt is a master of whole-hog cookery, so when you see porchetta on the menu, don’t think twice — just get it. The Caesar salad is still the best you’ll find. And the Italian wines are not just great but remarkably affordable. Much to everyone’s dismay, the chef recently removed from the menu his famous chitarra spaghetti carbonara, but it is still sometimes (but not always) available off-menu if you just ask.

• 216 N. EL CAMINO REAL, SAN CLEMENTE, 949-429-1199, BRICKPIZZERIA.COM

The Ranch Restaurant

8 Cowboy hospitality thrives at The Ranch, and it’s not merely schtick. This Western-themed restaurant and country music dance hall is a serious chophouse led by chefs Michael and David Rossi. The massive bone-in ribeye is straight out of “The Flintstones.” That same hunk of the steer also makes a great prime rib, an off-menu secret. But don’t overdo it because you’ll need room for dessert, like the Milky Way chocolate bar or the deconstruction of peanut butter and jelly. The bar pours more than 60 wines by the glass.

• 1025 E. BALL ROAD, ANAHEIM 714-817-4200, THERANCH.COM

The Capital Grille

9 Professional waiters wear white jackets and trade business cards with high-powered customers at this old-school steakhouse at South Coast Plaza, which seems to have gotten better and better over the past couple of years. The dry-aged, bone-in New York strip is as good as it gets, and it gets even better with a stiff Manhattan. For dessert: coconut cream pie.

• 3333 BRISTOL ST., COSTA MESA 714-432-1140, THECAPITALGRILLE.COM

Taco María

10 Chef Carlos Salgado’s reinvention of Mexican cuisine is one of the most important things to happen to the California food scene this decade. No one else is doing what Salgado does with tortillas and beans, or for that matter with wood-fired arrachera or tongue-searing scallop aquachile. Chorizo, mole, carnitas...the menu (prix fixe most nights) might sound familiar, but the flavors and presentations will have you second-guessing everything you thought you knew about Mexican food. At lunchtime, and on Tuesday nights, Taco María goes à la carte and actually serves tacos, albeit not your typical idea of tacos.

• 3313 HYLAND AVE., COSTA MESA 714-538-8444, TACOMARIA.COM
Irenia

Chef Ryan Garlitos continues to reinvent and elevate Filipino cuisine better than anyone else in this genre. Don’t believe me? Order the chicken sa Gata. The chicken is cooked like duck confit and served in an adobo of lemongrass, coconut milk and chili oil. Still not convinced? Then you’re just nuts. The pork belly adobo is brilliant, as is the seafood sinigang. At lunchtime it’s mostly rice bowls topped with those same incredible flavors. Terrific cocktails and desserts, too.

• 400 N. BROADWAY, SANTA ANA, 657-245-3466, IRENIARESTAURANT.COM

370 Common

If you like fried chicken — which of course you do — you’ll want to mark your calendar for the last Sunday of the month. That’s when you gather a group of friends for family-style fried chicken night at this Laguna Beach gastropub. Chef Ryan Adams has a way of turning the mundane into the extraordinary. On normal nights, a grilled cheese sandwich becomes an unlikely star, served one bite at a time. Poutine becomes not merely a heap of fries smothered in a glop of short rib chili, but also a strangely refined culinary masterpiece. Meatloaf encased in a crisp layer of bacon awakens as an individual work of art.

• 370 GLENNEYRE ST., LAGUNA BEACH 949-494-8686, 370COMMON.COM

Mastro’s Steakhouse

Great steaks are expensive. Period. There’s no way around it. If you want a truly special steak, you’re going to have to pay dearly for it. The chef’s cut 30-ounce ribeye is as hedonistic as it gets, but this is also the finest USDA Prime beef available. The chilled seafood towers are the envy of seafood towers everywhere. Fair warning: Bathroom attendants assist you in the john, even though nobody needs or wants that.

• 633 ANTON BLVD., COSTA MESA 714-546-7405 MASTROSRESTAURANTS.COM

Javier’s

The very first question servers always ask after saying hello is, “Can I bring you a margarita?” The proper answer is “Yes, please. And make it a Cadillac.” From the moment you step across the threshold, you feel like you’ve arrived at a luxury resort in Cabo or Punta Mita. The carnitas are exquisite, a mound of tender, fat-laden meat topped with a single, hulking pork rib. Crab enchiladas are as luxurious as they are soulful. The cheese enchilada, the crispy beef taco, shrimp quesadilla, octopus ceviche and Acapulco-style shrimp cocktail ... all excellent. Plus the best margaritas, period.

• CRYSTAL COVE PROMENADE, 7832 E. PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY NEWPORT BEACH, 949-494-1239 JAVIERS-CANTINA.COM

Vine

The original of Russ Bendel’s restaurant trifecta is still his best, even though it might appear from a distance to be the least polished. The bar scene sometimes gets rambunctious (because the bartenders are so good, and the lights are dimmed so low), but the adjoining dining room is always low-key and comfortable. Chef Jared Cook makes an unusually delicious salad using citrus and endive accented with celery leaves, pistachios and goat cheese. The schnitzel is fantastic. So is the bone marrow. So is the burger. So is the braised pork shoulder tossed with ribbons of freshly made pasta. So is ... should I keep going?

• 211 N. EL CAMINO REAL SAN CLEMENTE, 949-361-2079 VINESANCLEMENTE.COM
Chef Amar Santana’s Broadway is a festive restaurant that walks a fine line between proper upscale dining and a casual, boisterous gastropub. The kitchen is on display in the center of the restaurant, and some of the best seats in the house are the six stools at the chef’s counter, directly in front of the action where flames lick up from the grill, steam billows from stockpots and pans clank against the stove. Wine lovers alert: This place has one of the best pinot noir selections in the country.

**Broadway**

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**EnoSteak**

EnoSteak is one of the best-kept secrets in O.C. With fewer than 40 seats tucked into what used to be the wine cellar at the Ritz-Carlton, Eno defies the classic steakhouse stereotype. The experience is intimate and romantic, especially if you nab that coveted table next to the fireplace. Nobody comes here to see and be seen but for precisely the opposite. Most importantly, the beef and the wine are consistently superb.

**A Restaurant**

Steaks are served on cast-iron skillets, and the martinis are ice cold at this old-school steakhouse across the road from the harbor. The red leatherette booths, polished wood paneling and series of black-and-white photographs pay homage to the 1920s, when this place first opened. People-watching in the bar is priceless.

**Solita**

The sign above the door says “tacos,” and the options for those are extensive: carne asada, shredded beef braised in red chilies, classic carnitas, ancho-braised chicken...
Juliette

Three things to keep in mind about this rustic American bistro. One: The burger is perfect, as are the housemade potato chips that come with it. Two: If it’s on the menu at dinner, you seriously must order the braised pork shank. It’s as big as your head, and you won’t be able to finish it, but you’ll be glad you tried. Three: This is a great place to drink. The wine list is smartly curated, and the bar program is almost legendary. Beyond that, save plenty of room for dessert, like beignets or the salted caramel pudding.

• 1000 BRISTOL ST., NEWPORT BEACH
949-752-5854, JULIETTENB.COM

North Italia

North Italia is relentlessly one of the busiest restaurants in Orange County. Even at 9:30 on a weeknight it’s wise to make a reservation. And that’s not surprising. North occupies a beautiful glass box with high ceilings, hardwood floors and a wraparound bar that opens onto the patio, creating a relaxing indoor/outdoor vibe. The pizzas are very good. The pastas are even better, especially the strozzapreti, a sort of loosely twisted macaroni tossed with grilled chicken and mushrooms.

• 2957 MICHELSON DRIVE, IRVINE
949-629-7060, NORTHITALIARESTAURANT.COM

The Loft

Is it silly that I get more excited about the bread basket than I do that spectacular ocean view from this dining room overlooking the Pacific from atop Montage Laguna Beach? Similarly, if you like cheese, you’ll be so giddy over the cheese board that you’ll completely miss the whales swimming past the rocks below. Most importantly, though, pay attention to the rotisserie. Chef Michael Campbell cranks up the rotisserie only for dinner, not lunch, so keep that in mind. Sometimes there’s a rack of lamb on the spit. Sometimes it’s loaded with chickens, or even a suckling pig. Whatever it is, get it. And save room for apple pie.

• 30801 S. COAST HIGHWAY
LAGUNA BEACH, 949-715-6420
MONTAGEHOTELS.COM

LSXO

To find LSXO at Pacific City, first locate Bluegold. LSXO is hidden inside, behind the wine room. With only 28 seats, this “secret” parlor is a throwback to colonial Saigon, with mismatched rattan and leather chairs, area rugs and vintage photographs. The menu pulls together flavors from throughout Southeast Asia, like a Thai-style green papaya salad with beef jerky and chilies, or veal sweetbreads in a broth meant to evoke the flavors of Vietnam’s bun bo Hue.

• 21016 PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY
HUNTINGTON BEACH, 714-374-0038
DINEBLUEGOLD.COM/LSXO

The Cannery

The owners of The Cannery have been slowly remodeling this upscale seafood house that occupies one of the oldest buildings on the harbor. They’ve added a bar in the middle of the dining room and opened the place up, giving it a lighter, fresher aura that seems to have had an invigorating influence on the staff, both inside the kitchen and out. The oysters are always a great bet here. Or if you like spicy things, start with the grilled Hawaiian shrimp, which will be far spicier than you imagined for such an old-fashioned fish restaurant. And there’s nothing old-fashioned about the octopus, either, served with a very Filipino-esque aji-amarillo coconut sauce, pickled green papaya and pears. Although most diners are here for fish, don’t underestimate the wood-grilled steaks.

• 3010 LAFAYETTE AVE,
NEWPORT BEACH, 949-566-0060
CANNERYNEWPORT.COM
Forget salmon and tuna. And don’t trouble the chefs for a hand roll. Those things are great here, of course, but you can get those anywhere. Look for the chalkboard menu at the edge of the bar. It’ll be scribbled with names like ishi dai, kin mei, ho-bo, umeiro, tachiuo, akamutsu, tobiuo, mejina, higesori. Order the omakase (i.e., let the chefs decide). Then sit back and enjoy a highly nuanced procession of fish with names you can’t pronounce. You won’t find a more extensive selection of fish at any other sushi bar in California.

**Shunka Sushi**

26

The pizzas are superb, but if you’ve never eaten here, you should know that the crust is unlike any other, borrowing its crunchy character and pungent flavor from the sourdough that celebrity chef/owner Nancy Silverton made famous at La Brea Bakery. The caprese salad is extraordinary, made with roasted tomatoes on the vine, although the more famous of her salads is the chef’s chopped salad. The Italian wine list is deliciously affordable.

**Pizzeria Mozza**

27

Like its sister restaurants Vine in San Clemente and Ironwood in Laguna Hills, Olea is inspired by the California wine country. Just inside the entrance is a bustling bar, and just behind that an open kitchen, from which you’ll smell the intoxicating aromas of steaks sizzling on the grill and chicken schnitzel frying on the stove. The roasted sea bass with raisins, capers and market vegetables is the best thing on the menu. Scratch that. Best thing on the menu: the hand-cut fries.

**Olea**

28

This is the fanciest Thai restaurant in the region, and word has gotten out, so it’s best to call ahead and reserve a table. The kitchen doesn’t follow the usual script. Most notably, they make three different types of Thai sausage. Get all three, but watch out for the green chilies in the Isan-style pork sausage. If you bite into one, it’ll blow your tongue off. The green papaya salad is great, but what’s even better is the green mango salad.

**Bangkok Avenue**

29

Taiwan’s most prestigious dumpling chain has several California locations but none swankier than the South Coast Plaza branch. Everyone is here for its famous Shanghai-style xiao long bao, also known as soup dumplings. But the menu goes so much deeper than that. The deeper you dig, the more you will be rewarded. The wait can stretch upward of two hours, so put your name down and go shopping. They’ll text you when your table is almost ready.

**Din Tai Fung**

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**Din Tai Fung**

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When the Montage opened 15 years ago on a seaside cliff in Laguna Beach, the resort’s restaurants raised the culinary bar to heights previously unseen in Orange County and forever changed the trajectory of fine dining in the region. Studio remains the poshest, most luxurious dining room on the coast. Every waiter on staff (clad in beautifully tailored suits) has passed at least the Level 1 sommelier exam. You’ll be offered three types of butter with your bread. And the wine list grows mind-bogglingly deeper every year. Fittingly for a special occasion restaurant such as this, desserts are always spectacular.

**Studio**

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**Jimmy’s Famous American Tavern**

Jimmy is fictitious, and this tavern has been calling itself famous before it really was. But it worked, and this still-young American grill feels like it’s been around forever. The dining room unfolds in a series of unique vignettes and seating arrangements that offer a surprising amount of privacy for a restaurant with 200-plus seats. Burgers are epic, and the beer-battered onion rings are cut decadently thick. Don’t let your mom order the fried chicken; it’ll just make her mad because it’s way better than hers.

**TJ’s Woodfire Pizza**

Everything you need to know about TJ’s is what comes from the humongous wood-fired pizza oven or any of the 16 beer taps, which are mostly local. The pizza lineup includes authentic Neapolitan, New York, Sicilian and cracker-thin styles. Each is good in its own way, but you’ll want to focus on the Margherita, which is one of the best Neapolitan-style pies you’ll find outside of Naples — and it’s even better when you add a few slices of prosciutto.

**Maro Wood Grill**

This is an Argentine steakhouse done in miniature. The menu is extremely limited, which makes sense for a restaurant so tiny it can accommodate only about eight people inside, at stools surrounding the kitchen counter. They squeeze another 20 seats onto an outside deck. The basic premise here is steak: simple, uncomplicated, grass-fed, wood-grilled steak. That wood-burning grill also produces an incredible burger.

**Ootoro Sushi**

Gone are the days when you can just walk into Ootoro and nab a table. Reservations are now essential. You’re here, of course, for the omakase. I prefer the traditional nigiri omakase, which offers about 28 pieces of sushi plus dessert for $160. Twenty-eight pieces sounds like a lot of sushi, but it is not an overwhelming amount when properly cut, as it is here. Each piece is a small, civilized bite. Depending on the season, the menu might include live abalone, live scallop and Santa Barbara uni, or maybe fresh octopus, seared halibut fin and bluefin tuna cheek. The quality of fish is strictly first-rate.
BRAD A. JOHNSON’S 75 BEST PLACES TO EAT

Craft House

Did someone say breakfast tacos?! I can’t think of a better way to start the week than with Sunday brunch at Craft House. Every neighborhood needs a great chef-driven gastropub like this, where chef Blake Mellgren serves terrific pork ragu with housemade pasta or deconstructed chicken pot pie. The fish is always fresh off the boat. And if you like whiskey, see the bartender ASAP.

• 34094 PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY
  DANA POINT, 949-481-7734
  EATATCRAFTHOUSE.COM

Meizhou Dongpo

The menu at this beautiful Sichuan restaurant in Irvine looks almost like a children’s book. A dozen oversized pages are filled with big, beautiful photos. Nearly every dish on the menu is illustrated — and the good news is that the food actually comes out looking exactly like the pictures. If you like playing with radioactive materials, order the royal hot pot — a boiling cauldron of shrimp, beef, mushrooms, quail eggs, lotus root and Spam. Otherwise, consider the dan dan noodles, the best example of Sichuan street-style noodles you’ll find in O.C.

• 15363 CULVER DRIVE, IRVINE
  949-433-5686

Farmhouse at Roger’s Gardens

Chef Rich Mead made a triumphant return to the local scene with this upscale outdoor cafe set within the lush grounds of Roger’s Gardens, a sprawling luxury plant nursery near Fashion Island. The kitchen serves farm-fresh salads, house-cured salmon and steak frites. Bank on a difficult reservation when the weather is nice, especially at lunchtime.

• 2301 SAN JOAQUIN HILLS ROAD
  CORONA DEL MAR, 949-640-1415
  FARMHOUSERG.COM

Reunion Kitchen

There aren’t many non-chain options in this area, so Reunion is an especially refreshing choice. But it’s more than that. It is hands-down the best restaurant in the hills. But don’t worry. It’s an everyman’s restaurant serving a gamut of comfort foods, including great burgers, but also Southern-fried chicken, meatloaf and prime rib, even a few 1980s fern bar throwbacks like spinach dip and potato skins. The Bloody Mary is monstrous. And the hot finger towels provide an elegant touch.

• 5775 E. SANTA ANA CANYON ROAD
  ANAHEIM HILLS, 714-283-1062
  REUNIONKITCHEN.NET

Bandera

Consistency is the holy grail of restaurant kitchens, and I don’t know of another that is more consistent than this branch of Hillstone’s Bandera. The best-kept secret here is the off-menu prime rib, but just know that they often sell out early on. Alternatively, consider the spice-rubbed ribeye. The little cucumber salad is unnervingly brilliant. And the skillet cornbread is always comforting. Service is super attentive and the martinis always extra cold.

• 3201 E. PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY
  CORONA DEL MAR, 949-673-3524
  BANDERARESTAURANTS.COM
Ramos House Cafe

41 No matter the day or season, it’s always brunchtime at this charming outdoor cafe next to the train tracks. A historical landmark, The Ramos House is a wooden prairie-style cabin that dates to 1881. The kitchen is indoors. The entire dining room exists outside. They serve brunch every day of the week, things like house-cured salmon, scrambled eggs with crab hash and huevos rancheros. They don’t take reservations, and there’s always a long line.

• 31752 LOS RIOS ST., SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO, 949-443-1342
RAMOSHOUSE.COM

Hendrix

42 Chef Rainer Schwarz borrows ideas from around the world, pulling equally from Europe, America and Asia. The theme that ties everything together is a lust for big flavors. And the rotisserie. Everything that comes from that contraption is superb, especially the chicken and the porchetta. Rotisserie lamb makes a very impressive sandwich.

• 32431 STREET OF THE GOLDEN LANTERN, LAGUNA NIGUEL
949-248-1912, HENDRIXOC.COM

Anepalco on Chapman

43 Chef Daniel Godinez completely revamped his restaurant inside the ALO Hotel in Orange last year, and it’s exactly what this place needed. The kitchen artfully bridges the divide between Mexico City’s swanky Polanco neighborhood and the barrios of Southern California. The barbacoa short rib tacos are sublime. The chilaquiles, justifiably legendary. But if you get only one dish, make it the pork pibil enchiladas.

• 3737 W. CHAPMAN AVE., ORANGE
714-456-9642, ANEPALCO.COM

Hanna’s

45 Think of Hanna’s as a suburban fern bar crossed with a big-city steakhouse. They serve comfort and familiarity. The deviled eggs are just like your aunt Betty’s. The fries are real. And the steaks are excellent, especially the 14-ounce bone-in filet. The also serve one heck of a burger.

• 22195 EL PASEO, RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA, 949-709-2300
HANNASPRIMESTEAK.COM

Sushi Roku

44 You say you don’t like tofu, but that’s only because you’ve never tried the tofu sampler here. It’ll blow your mind. And for American-style sushi rolls, it doesn’t get any better than the tuna-jalapeño roll here. If straight-up raw fish is more your thing, you’ll love the new-style sashimi. They also do a supremely elegant twist on ramen noodles.

• 327 NEWPORT CENTER DRIVE
NEWPORT BEACH (FASHION ISLAND),
949-706-3622
INNOVATIVEDINING.COM

STAFF FILE PHOTO

HENDRIX • Chef Rainer Schwarz brushes up his rotisserie skills at the Laguna Niguel restaurant.
There are four things everyone should taste at this casual Texas steakhouse, which by the way is hands-down the best overall restaurant at the Irvine Spectrum. The steaks, particularly the New York strip, are outstanding. The bone-in prime rib (Friday and Saturday only) is one of the best in the county. The double cheeseburger is a monster. And if you’ve made it through any of those, you probably won’t have room for coconut cream pie, which would be a shame.

772 SPECTRUM CENTER DRIVE
IRVINE, 949-341-0376
DELFRISCOSGRILLE.COM

The always affable and impeccably dressed Giuseppe Accardi operates this Italian-inspired bistro, the fanciest place to eat on Newport’s Balboa Island. Most customers are regulars who live within walking distance. Pay attention to the pastas, as that’s where this kitchen truly excels.

305 MARINE AVE., NEWPORT BEACH
949-675-6193, MRGSBISTRO.COM

How do you feel about snails? If you’ve eaten the escargot here, there’s really only one acceptable answer. They’re amazing. Chef Cody Storts leads the kitchen at this boisterous American gastropub. And how do you feel about beef that smells like blue cheese? Storts serves a ribeye that he’s dry-aged for four months—and it is absolutely exhilarating.

136 W. COMMONWEALTH AVE.
FULLERTON, 714-519-3179
WRECKLESS.US

Two things make this Korean barbecue house the best in O.C. First: It’s the quality of the meat, which is exponentially better than what most Korean barbecue joints serve. Second: It’s the charcoal. Most Korean grills rely strictly on gas, but this place boosts its tabletop cookers with binchotan charcoal, giving the barbecue a distinctly smokier edge. Rarely are two restaurants with the same name exactly alike, and it’s important to note that service at the Buena Park location is far superior to that of the Irvine branch.

5171 BEACH BLVD., BUENA PARK
714-739-9678; 14160 CULVER DRIVE
IRVINE, 949-559-9678, 678USA.COM

The sexiest gastropub in south county often hires a live band to play in the corner, unnecessarily amplified, which sounds great but makes conversation at the dinner table impossible. But, if you’ve ordered the duck risotto or the steamed mussels with soy broth, you might be too busy stuffing your face to talk. So just order another cocktail and deal with it. The Bloody Marys are the best you’ll find for miles.

31431 SANTA MARGARITA PARKWAY
RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA
949-888-0072, THEBLINDPIGOC.COM
Fleming’s

The original location of the now-nationwide Fleming’s steakhouse chain was looking a bit long in the tooth for a few too many years, which had begun to overshadow the quality of food coming from the kitchen. But not any more. Recently emerged from a beautiful makeover, this Fashion Island restaurant is back with a vengeance. The steaks, the hand-cut fries, the burgers, the Martinis … all as good as ever. Plus, they’re still pouring 100 wines by the glass.

1080 BAYSDIE DRIVE, NEWPORT BEACH, 949-644-4220, SAPORINB.COM

Watermarc

Most afternoons and weekend nights, every seat in the dining room is filled. While it’s ground zero for chaotic tourist traffic in downtown Laguna, Watermarc always seems to be packed with locals. Chef Marc Cohen does a modern riff on salade Nicoise that’s not a salad at all but rather a beautiful entree of grilled salmon with haricots verts and fingerling potatoes. Anything seafood is good here, especially the watermelon and tuna skewers. For dessert: Ding Dongs!

Sapori Ristorante

Chef Sal Maniaci’s Sapori is two Italian restaurants in one — with one of the prettiest patios in Newport beach. On the left is an authentic Neapolitan-style pizzeria with a massive, wood-fired oven built by craftsmen from Naples. On the right is the more formal dining room, where you can order the secret off-menu veal chop. The two spaces are connected by a central bar, and they also share the same core kitchen.

Selanne Steak Tavern

The true measure of any golf course restaurant is its Cobb salad. And the Cobb at Harvest is insanely good these days. The dining room at The Ranch resort got off to a rough start but now that new head chef Kyle St. John has settled in, it’s time everyone finally took notice. The whole branzino is superb, as are the mussels. The secluded canyon locale is magical, so you’ll want to ask for a table by the window.

1080 BAYSIDE DRIVE, NEWPORT BEACH, 949-644-4220, SAPORINB.COM
2145 Pizza

The building that houses this wood-fire pizza joint used to be an auto repair garage. The bay doors are rolled up most days to create a cozy indoor/outdoor ambience with tons of natural light and a comfortable breeze. Most of the dining room is actually outside in the backyard. The marinara pizza is perfection. So, too, the pizza topped with blue cheese and honey. You’re just going to have to trust me on that one.

- 2145 PLACENTIA AVE., COSTA MESA
- 949-873-5853, 2145EAT.COM

Tupelo Junction

Santa Barbara’s popular Southern-inspired Tupelo Junction Cafe — fried green tomatoes, chicken and waffles, biscuits and jam — recently relocated to Newport’s Balboa Peninsula, setting up shop in the drafty old house that formerly operated as The Porch and Aubergine. You’ll want to come for breakfast, and you’ll need to order the pumpkin oatmeal waffles with caramelized bananas. Or come for dinner and get the trout. Santa Barbara must be reeling.

- 508 29TH ST., NEWPORT BEACH
- 949-877-0280, TUPELOJUNCTION.COM

HiroNori

The dining room accommodates only about 35 people at a time, crammed in like sardines. The menu is short and simple with a tight focus on ramen. The tonkotsu broth is ultra-fatty and delicious, filled with slow-roasted pork belly that’s heavily charred around the edges, as if it had caught fire and smoldered for a few minutes before coming out of the oven. This is the best ramen in Orange County.

- 2222 MICHELSON DRIVE
- IRVINE, 949-536-5800
- HIRONORICRAFTRAMEN.COM

Pour Vida

Anaheim’s Center Street Promenade has seen a lot of businesses come and go in short order, but the one constant is chef Jimmy Martinez’s charming taqueria. The flavors tend toward froufrou, but I’ve never found a single taco here that I didn’t genuinely love, including the vanilla-scented short rib and even the odd-sounding burger taco.

- 185 W. CENTER ST. PROMENADE
- ANAHEIM, 657-208-3889
- POURVIDALATINFLAVOR.COM

Leatherby’s Cafe Rouge

The glam pre-theater restaurant inside the Segerstrom Concert Hall has been retooled as an intimate steakhouse. The steaks are excellent but not particularly large because most people who eat here don’t want to have to carry a doggy bag into the theater after dinner, which makes sense. Great wines. Terrific foie gras torchon.

- 615 TOWN CENTER DRIVE
- COSTA MESA, 714-429-7640
- PATINAGROUP.COM
Chada Thai

Nobody makes a better Thai fishcake than Chada Thai. Also great is the crispy rice salad with fermented sausage. Look up at the TV screen and watch the slideshow of the menu. You’ll find yourself drooling over familiar classics like spicy beef salad, crab fried rice, papaya salad, pad Thai and rad nah … all of which are excellent.

📍 9872 WESTMINSTER AVE. (BACKSIDE OF MALL OF FORTUNE), GARDEN GROVE
📞 714-858-1693, CHADATHAIGG.COM

Ironwood

One of life’s toughest decisions is whether to order the Snozzberry or the Flaming Buffalo. The cocktails here are serious. This is the middle child of Russ Bendel and chef Jared Cook’s restaurant family, which also includes Vine and Olea. Order the duck wings, which are fried and tossed with a glaze of honey and Meyer lemon. The chicken schnitzel is easily one of the best things on the menu.

📍 25250 LA PAZ ROAD, LAGUNA HILLS, 949-446-8772
IRONWOODLAGUNAHILLS.COM

Garlic & Chives

You can smell the garlic cooking for miles. The house specialty at this Little Saigon favorite is wok-fried crab with handfuls of garlic, fresh jalapeños and dried chilies. And while you’re getting your hands dirty, go ahead and get the sloppy, messy, spicy, amazing chicken wings. Also stellar: the pomelo salad with pork belly, shrimp and bird’s eye chilies. Expect nothing short of chaos.

📍 9892 WESTMINSTER AVE.
GARDEN GROVE, 714-591-5196
GARLICANDCHIVES.COM

Los Sanchez

People write me all the time to lament the closing of the legendary Los Sanchez, and I write back explaining, “They didn’t close. They just moved. And almost nothing has changed.” The carne asada quesadilla is the size of a large pizza. The nachos are insanely simple – and perfect. Barbacoa, carnitas, flautas, enchiladas, tacos, burritos, chile rellenos … the choices are overwhelming.

📍 11906 GARDEN GROVE BLVD.
GARDEN GROVE, 714-590-9300
LOSESANchez.COM

Hue Oi

Year after year, this is consistently one of the best all-around restaurants in Little Saigon. The kitchen here is the standard bearer for Hue-style banh beo chen, those poker chip-sized pancakes made of rice flour topped with a relish of dried shrimp, green onion, fried shallot, crispy pork skin and bird’s eye chili. For dessert: a tall glass of che Thai with jelly cubes.

📍 16537 BROOKHURST ST.
FOUNTAIN VALLEY, 714-531-1305
HUEOIRESTAURANT.COM
El Farolito

When the craving hits for an old-fashioned combination plate with refried beans, an enchilada and yellow cheese, make a beeline for El Farolito. For more than 40 years, they’ve been serving the same crispy ground-beef tacos with those almost-crispy corn tortillas cooked halfway between fried and steamed. The frozen margaritas aren’t really frozen but rather somewhat wet and slushy because they come from a worn-out blender, which is exactly as it should be.

• 201 S. BRADFORD AVE., PLACENTIA
  714-993-7880, ELFAROLITOMEX.COM

J Zhou Oriental Cuisine

Yelpers hate this place because it’s not cheap, but this is easily the best dim sum in O.C. All the usual stuff is here: shrimp siu mai, barbecue pork bao, chicken feet, sticky rice in lotus leaves ... the beef cheung fun (steamed rice paper roll) is superb. This is also the nicest place to enjoy whole Peking duck. You might want to wear sunglasses; the decor is dizzyingly splashy.

• 2601 PARK AVE., TUSTIN, 714-258-8833, JZHOUORIENTALCUISINE.COM

Adya

This fast-casual food stall inside the Anaheim Packing House is easily the best Indian restaurant in O.C. Order at the counter, then find someplace to sit if you can. How is it possible that the chicken tikka masala is this soulful and rich without being heavy? And how can chicken kebabs be this remarkably tender and luscious? The best thing of all might be the keema pav, which is sort of like a sloppy Joe made with lamb, tomato gravy and handfuls of spice.

• 440 S. ANAHEIM BLVD., ANAHEIM
  714-533-2392, ADYAOC.COM

The Quiet Woman

Keeping it simple with wood-fired steaks for more than half a century, this place still feels like a secret hideaway.

• 201 S. BRADFORD AVE., PLACENTIA
  714-993-7880, ELFAROLITOMEX.COM

Peking Restaurant

Owner Lili Shen will greet you at the door with a curt, “Chopstick or fork?” Expect the service to be bossy but sweet, like when Shen changes your order because she knows better than you. The Beijing-inspired food comes out fast and hot. Co-owner/chef Jerry Chen makes the best beef-and-scallion pancake for miles. Also worth ordering: pan-fried dumplings, stir-fried eggplant with basil, and the green beans with minced pork — or whatever the owners think you can handle.

• 8566 WESTMINSTER BLVD., WESTMINSTER, 714-893-3020

The Quiet Woman

I don’t know what the owners are doing with the money they’ve been making at this upscale pub for the past 53 years, but it doesn’t appear that they have ever invested a single dime into refreshing the decor. Still, it’s hard to resist the allure of a great USDA Prime steak grilled over a raging wood fire. The salad on the Lazy Susan is as classic as the cougars at the bar drinking dirty martinis.

• 3224 PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY
  CORONA DEL MAR, 949-640-7440
  QUIETWOMAN.COM
Cha Cha’s Latin Kitchen

One entire outer wall of this contemporary Mexican restaurant slides out of the way to create an indoor/outdoor ambience that turns the entire dining room into a year-round patio. This is the best place for miles to get a great margarita. The tequila selection is superb. And the open-face short-rib enchiladas are the mother of all enchiladas.

• 13126 JAMBOREE ROAD, IRVINE, 714-408-7819, CHACHASLATINKITCHEN.COM

The Cellar

Few, if any, restaurants do live music as well as The Cellar in San Clemente. The volume is always nicely calibrated at this dark and moody wine bar where the kitchen cranks out delicious curried clams and steak au poivre paired with flights of wine. Breakfast/brunch is great, too, with housemade pastries and strong coffee.

• 156 AVENIDA DEL MAR, SAN CLEMENTE 949-492-3663, THECELLARSITE.COM

American Dream

Burgers and beer. At the beach. What more could you want? OK, how about the perfect french fries, too? Bartenders pour more than 50 beers on tap. The french fries are made from scratch. And the burgers are all excellent, but none more so than the one that’s topped with fried pastrami (think extra-wide bacon).

• 21058 PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY HUNTINGTON BEACH, 714-374-1330 THEAMERICANDREAMHB.COM

Kabob Republic

Chef Ekrem Ozturk’s tri-tip beef döner is easily the best kabob you’ll eat this year. Nothing else comes close. Kabob Republic is the first place I’ve found that actually reminds me of the flavors I originally fell in love with in Athens and Istanbul. This place is tiny but very pretty, a blue and white jewel box straight out of the Aegean islands.

• 1781 NEWPORT BLVD., COSTA MESA 949-764-1778, KABOBREPUBLIC.COM

Haidilao Hot Pot

If you’re not familiar with Chinese hot pot, here’s all you need to know: Pick a broth, pick a meat, pick some vegetables. You’ll be hard-pressed to screw it up, especially if you choose the spicy red chili broth and the Wagyu beef belly. Hand-pulled and stretched at your table, the “dancing noodles” are also a must.

• 2710 ALTON PARKWAY, IRVINE 949-566-1766, HAIDILAO.US
WHO’S IN
• 2145 PIZZA
• AMERICAN DREAM
• ANEPALCO ON CHAPMAN
• BOURBON STEAK
• CHA CHA’S LATIN KITCHEN
• THE CELLAR
• DEL FRISCO’S GRILLE
• FLEMING’S
• HAIDILAO HOT POT
• HARVEST
• HENDRIX
• HIRONORI
• THE LOFT
• J ZHOU ORIENTAL CUISINE
• KABOB REPUBLIC
• LEATHERBY’S CAFE ROUGE
• MARCHÉ MODERNE
• MEIZHOU DONGPO
• OLEA
• THE QUIET WOMAN
• SELANNE STEAK TAVERN
• TUPELO JUNCTION
• WRECKLESS

WHO’S OUT
• ANEPALCO ON MAIN
• ANGELINA’S PIZZERIA
• NAPOLETANA
• BASILIC
• BISTANGO
• BISTRO PAPILLOTE
• BORDARD
• DORY DELI
• FILOMENA’S ITALIAN KITCHEN
• GABBI’S MEXICAN KITCHEN
• IL BARONE RISTORANTE
• MRK PUBLIC
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Nobody Beats Our Coverage
Top ramen

UPDATE: Since this article was originally published in December 2016, the ramen landscape in Orange County has grown even more fiercely competitive — and there’s now a new name atop the leaderboard. Here’s how the Top 10 stack up in 2018:

Orange County is ramen paradise. We have it good here. Really, really good.

No two bowls of ramen noodle soup are alike. Even when two competing restaurants claim lineage to the exact same Japanese village known for a specific type of tonkotsu or shoyu or shio or whatever, each kitchen ultimately prides itself on its own unique marriage of broth, noodles and fillings (namely pork).

While one restaurant’s pork-bone soup is as light and clear as a French consommé, another’s will be thick, creamy and viscous. One restaurant’s noodles might be thin and straight while others’ are thick and squiggly. The possibilities are genuinely infinite.

To be clear, this article is not meant to serve as a primer to the wide variety of regional vernaculars of ramen. It is simply an opinionated guide to the best bowls of Japanese soup in Orange County, in 10 locations throughout Southern California. They make an ultra-creamy tonkotsu (pork-bone) broth that is boiled for 10 hours. My favorite selection is the tonkotsu black, which gets its color and intense flavor from a heavy glug of black garlic oil. The chashu (braised pork belly) is incredible. The pork is heavily charred around the edges, as if it had caught fire and smoldered for a few minutes before coming out of the oven.

2. **Yoshiharu Ramen**

Since I originally fell in love with this fantastic noodle shop in Orange, it has multiplied like rabbits. There are now several locations throughout Southern California. They make an ultra-creamy tonkotsu (pork-bone) broth that is boiled for 10 hours. My favorite selection is the tonkotsu black, which gets its color and intense flavor from a heavy glug of black garlic oil. The chashu (braised pork belly) is superb, so you might want to order extra meat.

1. **HirNori**

Opened last year by one of the original chefs from Silverlake Ramen in Los Angeles, this place has rocked the local ramen scene. The dining room is small, with seating for only about 35 people crammed in like sardines. The wait for a table can sometimes be untenable, but if you stick it out your patience will be rewarded. You can slurp a pork-bone tonkotsu or a soy-based shoyu broth here (or even a vegan version), but the true star is the former. This is an ultra-fatty broth infused with so much pork knuckle collagen that the soup is almost white, like cream. And the chashu (slow-roasted pork belly) is incredible. The pork is heavily charred around the edges, as if it had caught fire and smoldered for a few minutes before coming out of the oven.

4. **Ramen Yamadaya**

Yamadaya (a Torrance-based chain) still dominates Costa Mesa’s fiercely competitive ramen belt. Its signature soup is a tonkotsu shoyu (pork-bone broth, soy seasoned) cooked for more than 20 hours. This is easily the most complex, intricately layered base of any Japanese soup in O.C. The chashu is very good, but not quite the best. What’s better is the kakuni, an inch-thick slab of bacon braised in soy, mirin and a little bit of sugar.

5. **Hokkaido Ramen Santouka**

Santouka is a prolific chain based in Asahikawa, on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. It’s got dozens of units around the world, with eight California branches partnered with Mitsuwa Markets. My favorite bowl here is the spicy miso ramen, which is a white (aka clear) tonkotsu shio (salt-based) broth blended with miso paste and three types of dried chilies.

The chashu is fantastic. The noodles are semi-thick, semi-soft and heavily crimped. Don’t wear white when you slurp these; the exaggerated crimp causes juice to fly all over the place.

6. **Kitakata Ramen Ban Nai**

The original Ban Nai opened in Kitakata, Japan, in 1958. There are now about 60 locations, including two in O.C. The Costa
Mesa branch has the longest lines, day or night, of any noodle shop in the county. The highly refined pork broth is uniquely light and refreshing. It also serves a green chili shio version that gets a boost from fresh green peppers, giving it a wonderfully floral yet tongue-searing kick. The noodles are extra thick, hand-crimped and slightly softer than usual.

8. Butaton
The owners of a nearby shabu restaurant opened this ramen shop in March. Their tonkotsu broth is straightforward and simple, but when mixed with their spicy miso paste, it becomes special. The real reason you’re here, though, is for the chashu, which is cut thicker than anyone else’s. They sear it with a blowtorch right before serving. The noodles are extra thin and perfectly toothsome.

9. Aoki No Chuuka
This quirky cafe serves more than a dozen ramen (some a bit wacky), plus all sorts of Japanese comfort food. The ramen that really stands out is the yuzu koshu shio. It’s a salt-based broth made with a mix of pork and chicken bones. Poultry gives it a lighter, softer profile than normal, and the yuzu koshu infuses it with a spicy, citrusy zing. The chashu here is admirable, too.

10. Shin-Sen-Gumi Hakata Ramen
Founded in Los Angeles, this chain has two ramen shops in O.C. The gritty Fountain Valley branch feels more like vintage back-alley Japan, while the sparkling new Irvine branch comes across as rather sterile. The soup is delicious either way. The Hakata-style tonkotsu is made from Berkshire pork cooked for more than 15 hours. They let you control the firmness of the noodles as well as the thickness of the sauce. The chashu is fine but upstaged every time by uniquely thin noodles. Consider adding a Thai chili butter bomb.
Amazing Marys

These are the Top 5 Bloody Marys in Orange County

1. Arc
   The first thing you’ll notice about the Bloody Mary at Arc is the homemade tomato juice. It doesn’t have that sweet, tomato-paste essence of commercially processed juice or mix. It’s thinner and more savory than most, with just a hint of smoke. The next thing you’ll notice is the size. It’s kind of small, which allows the vodka to shine through.
   - 3321 HYLAND AVE., COSTA MESA
   - 949-500-5561, ARCRESTAURANT.COM

2. Tupelo Junction
   Here’s another mix that’s made completely from scratch. It’s a light, pale tomato concoction that involves a hint of chipotle. They garnish it with a crab claw and a slice of cucumber. This is brunch in a glass, and it is incredible.
   - 508 29TH ST., NEWPORT BEACH
   - 949-877-0280, TUPELOJUNCTION.COM
3. **Reunion**
   This Bloody Mary comes with a Slim Jim protruding from the glass, along with a bacon-wrapped jalapeño. Take a bite of Slim Jim. Take another sip. Mmm, spicy. Take a bite of the jalapeño. Take a sip. Mmm, Ketel One. Repeat.
   • 5775 E. SANTA ANA CANYON ROAD, ANAHEIM, 714-283-1062
   REUNIONKITCHEN.NET

4. **Del Frisco’s Grille**
   At weekend brunch, Del Frisco’s offers Bloody Marys by the carafe. The pitcher holds enough to fill about six glasses. Or two, depending on how you like to pour. It comes with a tray of garnishes to ensure that no two drinks are created exactly the same: bacon, pickled okra, limes, beans, pickled peppers and celery, plus Tabasco, salt and pepper.
   • 620 SPECTRUM CENTER DRIVE
   IRVINE, 949-341-0376
   DELFRISCOSGRILLE.COM/IRVINE

5. **The Beachcomber at Crystal Cove**
   You have two options here: regular or Big Bad Bloody Mary. Go with the latter. It is huge, served in a large Mason jar with a floral arrangement sprouting from the top: a crab claw, a large grilled shrimp, plus a garden’s worth of vegetables and pickles. The juice is thick and spicy with a discernible whiff of Tito’s vodka. This is not a drink for amateurs.
   • 15 CRYSTAL COVE, NEWPORT COAST, 949-376-6900
   THEBEACHCOMBERCAFE.COM

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