

Commissary, the glasshouse restaurant on the roof of LA's The Line hotel.

FOR THE FUN OF IT

In a city full of novelty factor, LA's culinary scene is no exception – whimsy, creativity, and the weird and wonderful are all celebrated on the plate. Catherine McGregor eats her way through this beautifully chaotic land of la la.

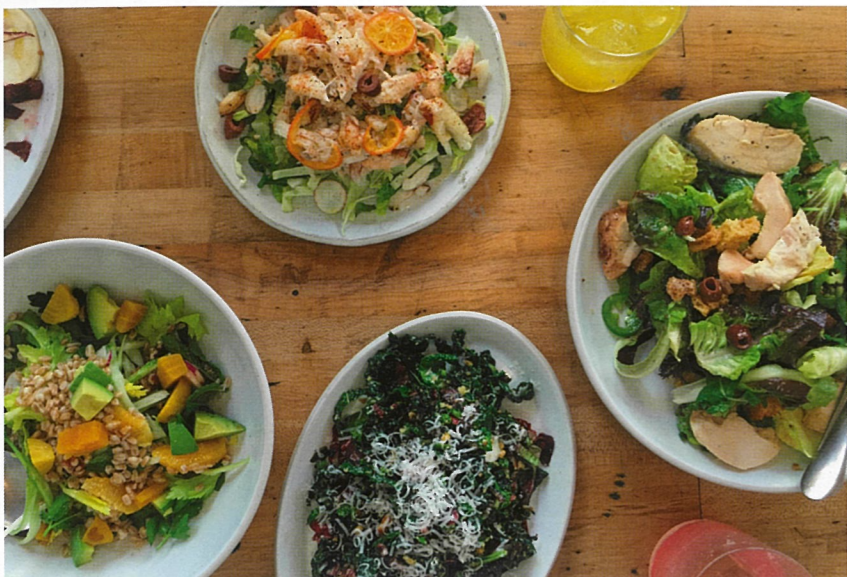
Story and photography — CATHERINE MCGREGOR

There's the problem with Los Angeles: it's too big. The streets are too wide and far too long. Meeting someone on Sepulveda Boulevard?

Whether you mean the beach or the San Fernando Valley, it's kilometres away. City blocks are small; what looks from the map like a short walk turns out to be a 30-minute drive. Blazing Californian heat. Traffic is slow about the traffic.

So let's start small, at a restaurant that represents so much of what makes Los Angeles eating interesting. Tucked into a corner of the historic Hotel Normandie in Koreatown, Le Comptoir is truly pint-sized: think of the coolest little bar you know, then think smaller. There's a stove-less kitchen (all the cooking is done on hot plates), one long counter – Le Comptoir means “the counter” in French – and 10 stools. That's it. Given the limitations, or perhaps because of them, the food at Le Comptoir is extraordinary.

Over eight exquisite courses, chef/owner Gary Denes showcases the best of local produce, much of it grown on his own organic farm in Long Beach, south Los Angeles. There's a meat course on offer, for a supplement, but vegetables take pride of place here. The “veggie and fruit plate” (when it comes to naming dishes, Denes is something of a minimalist) includes around 15 different ingredients, some cooked, some raw, some fermented. The flavours are bright and clear, each element tasting utterly of itself.



THESE PAGES: (Far left, middle and top right) Manuela restaurant's menu is inspired by chef Wes Whitsall's Texas childhood and the produce of his adopted Californian home – many of its salads and platters of house-pickled vegetables come straight from the on-site garden; (bottom right) the Lopez family have run Mexican restaurant Guelaguetza for 24 years.



... I couldn't leave without trying the *chapulines* tiny grasshoppers, stir-fried with salt and pepper. I admit I took some convincing ...

restaurant on the roof of The Line hotel, for seasonal modern American cooking in one of the most beautiful settings around.

Head straight down Normandie Avenue from The Line and you come to Guelaguetza, the widely lauded restaurant which celebrates the food of Oaxaca, Mexico's culinary capital. Founded 24 years ago by the Lopez family, Guelaguetza (say it "gela-getza") is now run by the second generation who have given the restaurant a cool makeover without sacrificing its hard-fought culinary reputation.

The meat-heavy menu includes housemade chorizo; *cecina*, or chilli-marinated pork; and a semi-dried beef dish known as *tesajo*. But the star of the show is undoubtedly their *mole*, that unctuous, spicy sauce for chicken or pork. Don't go past the tar-black, cinnamon and chocolate-infused *mole negro*, which is so good they sell it to take away.

I couldn't leave without a jar, nor without trying the *chapulines*, tiny grasshoppers stir-fried with salt and pepper. I admit I took some convincing. The perfect bar snack, they told me; a taste of pre-Hispanic Mexico that doubles as the world's most sustainable protein source, they said. Down the hatch.

And it was there, in a cosy family restaurant somewhere inside this vast and unknowable metropolis, that I realised that small really is beautiful. And very, very crunchy. o

Next day I'm still thinking about the food at Le Comptoir. Many of the dishes – watermelon radishes, albino tongue beans – had been totally new. And that's not unusual.

In this creative, freewheeling city, the quest for novelty seems never-ending. Suddenly familiar ingredients everywhere I look: kombis, the pioneering gourmet ice cream in East Hollywood, their banana flour is made with *makgeolli*, a traditional rice wine. At Providence, a locally acclaimed and unabashedly food restaurant, the salmon is served *sutake* (a sought-after Japanese mushroom), calamansi (a Filipino citrus). And at the Walker Inn, a semi-legendary cocktail bar around the corner from Le Comptoir, the "Big Sur" cocktail tastes like a pine forest overlooking that stretch of coastline, thanks to a base note of juniper-infused eau de vie.

Los Angeles is the most cosmopolitan city in the world, with around 40 per cent of its population born overseas, so the proliferation of international ingredients make sense. But what about all those curious vegetables? The city is as its roots (no pun intended) in the earth and love.

Los Angeles still has a very hippy-esque attitude. A lot of farmers here – they're happy to grow things for you on a small scale," the home-grown, LA-based celebrity chef Gwyneth Paltrow tells me. What's more, "California has incredible growing conditions because of the microclimates that exist here". The produce you can buy in Los Angeles is amazing. It's the best in the world." That's a better way to declare your love for local produce than a restaurant where a vegetable or fruit is the focus. At Maude, the first Los Angeles restaurant – he's opened another, Gwen, where meat

is the focus – he takes one hero ingredient and designs a tasting menu around it. At the end of the month, he starts all over again with a different one. When we speak he is in the midst of developing walnut recipes; the current month is all about beetroot.

With a 10-course menu, he needs to be creative – simply grating a beetroot, juicing it, or turning it into a sorbet won't do. One dish uses wafer thin slices of golden beet to wrap up tiny packages of Marcona almonds, saffron, and 'nduja, the spicy Calabrian sausage. Another features dehydrated beet "leather" enclosing a dollop of horseradish ice cream and Siberian caviar.

Intimate and intensely personal, Maude couldn't be further from the glitzy seen-and-be-seen restaurants many of us assume to be the Los Angeles norm. But what about that other LA cliché – the gluten-free, dairy-free, off-menu-ordering fussy budget?

"My experience has been quite the opposite," says Stone. "I find LA diners to be really open. I mean, we have a restaurant where you don't even get to see the menu before you sit down, and we've been booked out for three and a half years."

That's not to suggest the picky, health-obsessed Angeleno stereotype doesn't have some basis in reality. Here in the perpetually sunny birthplace of the body beautiful, salads of all kinds are a city-wide fixation (try the justly famous Chinese chicken salad at West Hollywood celeb hangout Joan's on Third), and vegan, vegetarian and macrobiotic restaurants abound.

For the full upscale-hippy experience, check out Cafe Gratitude, where dishes are named things like "Open-hearted" – buckwheat pancakes with cashew coconut whipped butter – and "Liberated", a raw pad Thai made with kelp noodles and almond sauce. There are five Cafe Gratitudes in Los Angeles, including

In this creative, freewheeling city, the quest for novelty seems never-ending. Suddenly I see unfamiliar ingredients everywhere I look.

the Arts District, the rapidly regenerating neighbourhood just south of downtown.

Once known mainly for cheap studio space and homeless tent encampments, the Arts District today boasts an array of craft breweries, gourmet coffee shops and small-scale stores. While it's more walkable than many parts of LA, the distances between the interesting bits can be large, with lots of trekking past featureless factories to get there. The solution: two wheels.

I joined a tour organised by cafe and bicycle store The Wheelhouse, highlighting some of the many bars that have sprung up in the neighbourhood in recent years.

At Resident, a backyard-style bar where food is served from a classically Californian Airstream trailer, I tried a House Mule, made with Our Los Angeles Vodka (yes, that's the name) and locally produced Liquid Alchemist ginger syrup. At the Arts District Brewing Company, a brew bar/community hub with ping-pong tables and free movie nights, I slaked my thirst with an ice-cold glass of Dandy Lion, one of their in-house, saison-style beers. Fritzi Coop, purveyors of superb fried and rotisserie chicken, do the bar snacks.

Tempting as those wings looked, I couldn't risk spoiling my appetite. We were on our way to the Hauser Wirth gallery, not to take in the contemporary art – though that's well worth it – but to eat at its restaurant, Manuela. Here the menu is inspired equally by chef Wes Whitsall's Texas childhood and the superb produce of his adopted Californian home.

Dishes like hushpuppies and devilled eggs are classics of Southern cooking, but at Manuela their richness is balanced by abundant salads and platters of house-pickled vegetables, many of them straight from the on-site garden. Another selling point: Manuela serves both elk and antelope, if those are meats on your bucket list.

Home base for my stay was Koreatown, Los Angeles' most densely populated district and one that has only recently become a tourist draw. It might not be the loveliest part of the city, but what it lacks in aesthetics it makes up for in brilliant places to eat. It goes without saying that Koreatown boasts a plethora of excellent Korean restaurants, plus cute cafes offering everything from *patbingsu* (shaved ice, often served with a sweet red bean topping) to Dragon's Breath, candy-coloured cereal puffs snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen.

But there's more to Koreatown cuisine than Korean food. Apart from the aforementioned La Comptoir, try historic Cassell's for fantastic hamburgers, and Commissary, the glasshouse