

FORK IN THE ROAD

Carless, hungry in downtown LA

The area is a work in progress, but the dining has arrived

STORY AND PHOTOS
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LOS ANGELES — “Only a nobody walks in LA,” taunted a brash Dale Bozzio from the group Missing Persons in the early 1980s. I couldn’t help but hear her voice for the better part of a weekend recently as I tried to do what most people here would deem crazy (if not impossible): skip driving. Granted, I wasn’t planning on window-shopping along Melrose or chasing down food trucks in Westwood, but rather concentrating a full 48 hours downtown, which for decades has been like a hairy, unkempt contestant on “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy”: lots of potential but in need of a serious make-over.

In the 1920s, several large theaters proudly lit up their marquee along Broadway. But after World War II, they either closed or moved into Hollywood, stripping an entertainment district of its lifeblood. Over the last two decades, those theaters have been turned into gold shops, arcades or mega-churches, most of which cater to Mexican immigrants looking for inexpensive shops to patronize on the weekends. The restaurant and nightlife scenes? Nonexistent.

After dropping my car at the hotel (fast, efficient train service from LAX is still elusive), I planned on leaving it in the garage all weekend. Sidewalks would become my new off-ramps.

While there are a handful of hotels tucked within the downtown’s core, the 3-year-old JW Marriott, on the edge of downtown, is a good place to start. A linchpin in the LA Live complex, the hotel is adjacent to a Ritz-Carlton and overlooks the Staples Center, home to the Kings, Lakers and Clippers as well as dozens of concerts throughout the year. The surrounding restaurants and movie theaters give off a corporate, touristy vibe (there’s also a Grammy Museum here), yet the development has been the catalyst for renewed investment. Sitting in the lounge at Wolfgang Puck’s 24th-floor lounge inside the Ritz, WP24, nibbling on potstickers and drinking a perfectly made Old-Fashioned, you can see the construction cranes tucked among the glass-and-steel office towers.

“It’s a thousand times better than it was three years ago,” said Stacey Sun, DineLA director for Los Angeles’ tourism arm. She’s referring, of course, to the food options downtown, but that’s not all: The Orpheum Theatre is undergoing a massive renovation, while the old United Artists building — now sheathed in scaffolding — will soon become an Ace Hotel, where the uber-cool kids can use Wi-Fi while watching live bands.

Progress, however, has been spotty. Walk along almost any block down-



At the Grand Central Market in the heart of the Los Angeles historic district, you can eat in or do your grocery shopping.



A Marugame Monzo cook, at back, makes udon noodles.

town, and you’re bound to encounter as many boarded-up storefronts (and the occasional homeless guy) as you are a trendy restaurant or cocktail lounge.

“There’s a distinction you have to make,” said Bruce Horwitz, co-owner of The Parish, a casual gastropub that opened about a year ago. “It still is gritty ... but people are realizing there’s a lot of hidden beauty down there.”

Located across the street from a large, surface parking lot (there are plenty) and a building with a vertical, neon sign reading “Dancing Girls” on it, The Parish is a two-story, triangle-shaped wedge. With Cold War Kids and Weezer blasting on the speakers, you peruse a menu with

boldly flavored dishes of homemade rini, a kind of flat spaghetti embedded with briny clams and chili, or a Frisbee of fatty-rich porchetta, with its teeth-shatteringly crispy skin and juicy pork shoulder, showered in English peas.

I decide to have lunch in Little Tokyo, at the opposite edge of downtown from my hotel. As I take the 25-minute walk, I’m struck by how the buildings downtown look nothing like the LA I’ve become accustomed to. These are structures with heft and history. The cool art deco grandeur of the turquoise Eastern Columbia Building; the limestone, vertical facades near the corner of Seventh and Grand, looking like they’ve been airlifted

If you go

Higher-end

- Wolfgang Puck’s WP24 (in the Ritz-Carlton), 213-743-8824, wolfgangpuck.com/restaurants/fine-dining/57129
- Alma, 952 S. Broadway Ave.; 213-244-1422; alma-la.com
- The Spice Table, 114 S. Central Ave.; 213-620-1840; thespiceatable.com
- Bestia, 2121 E. Seventh Place; 213-514-5724; bestiala.com

Casual

- Marugame Monzo, 329 E. First St.; 213-346-9762
- Mo-Chica, 514 W. Seventh St.; 213-622-3744; mo-chica.com
- The Parish, 840 S. Spring St.; 213-225-2400; theparishla.com
- Wurstkuche (gourmet sausages,

- craft beers and live DJs) 800 E. Third St.; 213-687-4444; wurstkuche.com
- baco mercat, 408 S. Main St.; 213-687-8808; bacomercat.com
- Grand Central Market, 317 S. Broadway; 213-624-2378; grandcentralsquare.com

Breakfast/coffee/sweets

- Bottega Louie, 700 S. Grand Ave.; 213-802-1470; bottegalouie.com
- Handsome Coffee Roasters, 582 Mateo St.; 213-621-4194; handsomecoffee.com

Drinks

- The Varnish, 118 E. Sixth St.; 213-622-9999; 213nightlife.com/thevarnish
- Perch, 448 S. Hill St.; 213-802-1770; perchla.com
- Villains Tavern, 1356 Palmetto St.; 213-613-0766; villainstavern.com

from Chicago.

The pretty people inside Bottega Louie probably don’t pause long enough to look up from their wood-fired, blistered pizzas and delicate macarons to notice, but downtown actually has good bones. One of the most impressive hidden beauties sits across from the bustling Grand Central Market, where I had a Salvadoran breakfast of cheese-stuffed pupusas for \$3). It is the Bradbury Building, an architectural landmark from 1893, featuring glazed brick and ornamental cast iron; the interior is capped by a skylight flooding the space in natural light. If the cage elevators, wrapped in wrought iron, look familiar, that’s because the final scenes from “Blade Runner” were shot here.

For lunch, I get a seat at the counter at Marugame Monzo, a narrow spot in Little Tokyo known for homemade udon noodles. The cooks make them

throughout the day, kneading, rolling and cutting them directly in front of diners. I shift into Peruvian mode for dinner along Seventh Street, this time at Mo-Chica. It’s lively, with a mix of families (and their strollers) as well as young women just getting a bite before hitting the clubs. They all come for the same thing: creative, Latin-inspired cocktails and citrus-spiked ceviches embedded with Peruvian corn.

The next morning I jump on the subway at the Metro/Seventh stop (for \$1.50) and ride it 15 minutes to Thai Town for a delicious and inexpensive lunch at Ganda. Had I wanted to, I could have taken the train to Universal Studios or Hollywood and Vine. But I opt to return downtown after lunch, take a dip in the hotel’s pool, then have dinner at baco mercat, a Mediterranean-influenced small-plates haunt with some of the best vegetable dishes I’ve had.

I finish quickly, because I’m meeting a friend at The Varnish, an industry-favorite cocktail lounge that truly is a speak-easy, hidden behind Cole’s, a 100-year-old family diner. Entering through an unmarked door in the back of the main dining room, it’s as if I’ve stepped back in time. It’s a “Sinful Sunday” night, which means live jazz and naughty lyrics.

The antique sconces, wooden tables and tile floors push it into pre-Prohibition mode. “Do you want something refreshing or aromatic?” my nattily dressed barman asks. I opt for “bartender’s choice” from the compact menu. After a few rounds, I’m wiped out. It’s chilly, so my friend offers me a ride; it takes all of five minutes. I sleep like a baby, dreaming of rini, snap peas and rum, confident walking here no longer carries the stigma it did so many years ago.

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Michigan cherries right on time for festival

The cherries are cooperating this year and should be coming into their scarlet glory to coincide with the 87th National Cherry Festival in Traverse City, Mich., June 29-July 6.

The festival is about a week earlier than usual to overlap with the Fourth of July holiday, said festival executive director Trevor Tkach.

The only thing missing this year? The Navy’s Blue

Angels air show. They’ve been grounded due to federal sequester budget cuts.

Instead, expect two daredevil air shows June 29 over Grand Traverse Bay, including a nighttime illuminated aerobatic display, featuring skills of Team AeroShell, Team Aerodynamix, and pilots Matt Younkin and Kevin Copeland.

The cherry festival is

one of the most popular events in Michigan. Featuring everything from cherry-pit spits to cherry pancakes, it also will have a cherry queen, two parades, races, an arts and crafts show and more. Musical acts include Styx, Foreigner, Aaron Tippin, a Beatles tribute band and a Simon & Garfunkel tribute band.

Last year, 80 to 90 percent of the cherry crop was

lost due to bad weather, and the festival had to import cherries from Washington state. This year, sweet and tart cherries are doing well so far, according to a report by the Michigan State University extension service. For a festival schedule and details, see cherryfestival.org or call 231-947-4230.

—Ellen Creager,
Detroit Free Press



DETROIT FREE PRESS PHOTO

Michigan’s sweet and tart cherries are doing well this year.