

THE

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**BEST  
CITIES ON EARTH  
(TO EAT IN)**



BE HONEST: HALF THE REASON YOU GO ON VACATION IS TO EAT. ALL THE OTHER STUFF—MUSEUMS, VISTAS, BROWSING OVERPRICED INDIGENOUS TRINKETS—IS WHAT YOU DO BETWEEN MEALS. FOUR WRITERS CREATE A GUIDEBOOK FOR THE MAN WITH AN APPETITE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOBBY FISHER

**PIEDMONT**

**BANGKOK**

**LOS  
ANGELES**

**MADRID**





↑ **GUELAGUETZA**  
3337½ WEST 8TH STREET

You can order plenty of other great dishes at Daikokuya: tuna wrapped in *shiso*, fried tempura-style and served with lemon and salt; sweet, salty, and lightly spicy pickles (*tsukemono*) made from turnip, cucumber, and seaweed; classic crisp-and-puffy tempura; tiny hot dog-like sausage, served with mustard and marinated onions. And four people at Daikokuya can eat enough for six and drink well for less than a hundred bucks.

#### KOREAN

Korean communities are everywhere in Southern California, and their restaurants are in every town. But L.A.'s Koreatown, just west of downtown, is an astonishing concentration, as big as the downtown of a small city, and you need go no farther. You have not left America when you come here—the L.A. culture is so amoeba-like that it can absorb just about anything—but you are in a place where the dominant whiteness of the country has disappeared.

Korean food is Japanese food with balls. It's meat and garlic and chilies (it's also tofu and garlic and chilies), and you often get to play with it, because a high percentage of L.A.'s Korean restaurants feature at-your-table barbecue grills. Authentic Koreatown barbecue



restaurants, like **Soot Bull Jeep** (213-387-3865) and **Sa Rit Gol** (213-387-0909), have become well-known destinations, and barbecue has also gone upscale at the unforgivably haughty **Woo Lae Oak** (310-652-4187), just down the street from Tony Roma's in Beverly Hills, as well as at the admirable **Chosun Galbee** (323-734-3330), in Koreatown. But L.A. Korean food is far more than just barbecue. It's spicy, vinegary kimchi and tender, salty *bul go gi*. Occasionally, this chili-fired cuisine even takes on subtle tones as elegant as those of a pricey French restaurant—more elegant, in fact, than those of the widely praised soulless restaurants of Beverly Hills. Take **Yongsusan** (213-388-3042), whose decor is anything but subtle—you'll love the pink tablecloths—but that is overall one of the most romantic restaurants I know, especially if you reserve one of the small private dining rooms. Their prix fixes (one offers eighteen courses for \$50) are tasting menus of the highest, most balanced order—from the eye-popping whole-cabbage kimchi to tiny hand-rolled multicolored crepes filled with delicately seasoned root vegetables and pork. Celebrity chefs who pride themselves on their \$150 tasting menus should come here and take notes.

#### ← CLEMENTINE 1751 ENSLEY AVENUE

#### BREAKFAST

More so than in any other city in America, breakfast matters in L.A. Probably because it's a city where no one seems to work—at least not nine-to-five jobs. Walk into the city's best breakfast joints at 10 A.M. on a Tuesday and they're packed—places like the **Original Pantry Café** (213-972-9279), in downtown L.A. This old-school lunch counter, owned by ex-mayor Richard Riordan, is the kind of place you could imagine being in L.A. *Confidential*. It's been open twenty-four hours a day since 1924, serving steak and eggs and flapjacks the size of Frisbees. Or you could wait for a table at **Marston's** (626-796-2459) and order the cornflake-crusted French toast or smoked-salmon omelet. Or you could line up at the **Giddle Cafe** (323-874-0377), on Sunset Boulevard, and admire Hollywood's cool, young, beautiful, and hungover set as they dig into hefty, delicious meals.

But for a classic breakfast, one that focuses on eggs, butter, and meat, you can do no better than **Clementine** (310-552-1080). Located in Century City, this homey, rustic restaurant knows how to poach an egg, and its house-cured gravlax is first-rate—a welcome change from the now ubiquitous and insipid West Coast lox. And Minnesota expat Annie Miler has created a ham-and-egg roll on a moist, flaky buttermilk biscuit; for this alone, the place should be famous.

#### MEXICAN

Mexican food in L.A. is so common, so omnipresent, and so damned detailed (really, one should consider it by region: Oaxacan food, Yucatecan food, Michoacan food, and so on) that it's hard to get a grip on. You can wander East L.A., downtown, or Boyle Heights to your heart's content and still get the idea there's more to discover.

When I'm with newcomers to the city, I like to take them to

**Yuca's** (323-662-1214), in Los Feliz, a tiny place that attracts an out-the-door crowd of locals, construction workers, visiting hipsters, and Hollywood types. It is, as they would say in Italy, the "death" of the burrito. It's plump with carne asada, beans, and perfect salsa, made from fresh cilantro, onions, and tomatoes, and I can't imagine one getting any better. In the same neighborhood, **Mexico City** (323-661-7227) does Mexican food for the hip vegetarian crowd (don't worry—they serve meat, too) and makes killer margaritas. A mile and a half south of downtown, in a no-name kind of semi-industrial neighborhood that you are unlikely to find yourself in by accident, is a place called **Chichen-Itza** (213-741-1075), which specializes in Yucatecan food. Located in a small indoor market (Mercado la Paloma), it's little more than a stand with some tables, but the turkey *salbutes* are fantastic: small fluffy tortillas piled with pickled red onions, habanero salsa, and moist shredded turkey that, unlike the genetic experiments we eat at delis, is packed with flavor. You'll need about four for a complete meal.

But if I had time for only one Mexican meal in L.A., I'd head to the Oaxacan restaurant in Koreatown called **Guelaguetza** (213-427-0601) for one reason: the chicken mole. The chicken itself, a roasted leg and thigh, is good; the mole, however, is stupendous—black, thick, and smelling like burning wood. It's just about as complex and delicious a sauce as I've ever tasted. The rest of the menu is damned good, too. For a starter, get the *clayuda*, a kind of Oaxacan pizza made of a tortilla-like crust and spread with a paste made from black beans and pork fat, then topped with shredded cabbage, crumbled *queso blanco*, and—if you insist—thin-sliced pork. It's the kind of place that plugs you into the feeling that many Angelinos share, a feeling that L.A. is the most sensibly diverse city in America and the rest of the country is playing cultural catch-up.

#### THAI

The first cuisine that blew me away in L.A. was Thai: The rest of the food in the country seems downright tame by comparison. There's **Renu Nakorn** (562-921-2124), in Norwalk—a town you'd never go to for any reason other than to eat at Renu Nakorn—which is widely proclaimed the best Thai restaurant in the United States, with its fiery, distinctive Isaan food. Everyone should experience **Palm Thai** (323-462-5073), just down the street from Hollywood Boulevard's blinding concentration of fluorescent-lit Thai restaurants (it's called Thai Town). The food is great here, probably (*continued on page 178*)

## THE PARISO FARKANSAS

### ↓ DE VALLS BLUFF

De Valls Bluff, Arkansas (population 783), is per capita the best eating destination in the United States. Located on the old Bankhead Highway, nearabout equidistant from Memphis and

Little Rock, De Valls has two main attractions: **Craig's Barbecue** (870-998-2616) and, located across the street, the **Family Pie Shop** (870-998-2279). Lawrence Craig, who passed

away in November, earned his rep by smoking pork butts over local oak, gilding his sandwiches with a singeing hot sauce, and chopping a queer slaw from apples, green peppers, and cabbage. His inheritors do right by the legacy. Mary Thomas still bakes her pies in an old

bike-repair shop. She's humble; the only sign is spray-painted on the side of the building. The pies—coconut, lemon, Karo-nut—are knock-your-dick-in-the-dirt good. Down the road, in what you might as well call the suburbs, is **George's Fish and Seafood** (870-829-2604), a combo fish

market and caviar supplier. George pulls paddlefish from the White River and sells to the likes of Petrossian. A few meals on the bluff will remind you that regardless of the view from the interstate, chain restaurants have not goose-stepped across every inch of America.—JOHN T. EDGE