



FOOD & DRINK

The Classics of California Cuisine

These 17 seminal restaurants—some over a century old—have shaped the way we eat and spark new trends.

By **MICHAEL BAUER**

November 11, 2019

California is a hotbed of culinary trends, and it's been that way since the gold rush, when miners patronized saloons that appeared on just about every corner in San Francisco. These businesses started the "free lunch," luring in miners with culinary and carnal pleasures. On the East Coast, Puritan beliefs meant that food was seen as fuel, not fun. But in California, a healthy love for good food, and it's generously mingled with the joy of eating.

However, unlike *Larousse Gastronomique* and *Escoffier*, the bibles of French cuisine, there are no definitive rules for California cuisine. Instead, our chefs made it up as they went along—and they're still doing it that way. Like the 49ers who came to find fortune, California's dining style is freewheeling and adventuresome.

California is made up of immigrants, and from its beginnings, our food wove together elements of various cuisines: Italian, Spanish, and Mexican.

Today our cuisine is defined by the many chefs who draw from their own cultural and ethnic traditions to create new dishes, whether it's mesquite-grilled petrale sole at Tadich Grill in San Francisco, miso-marinated black cod at Miso Burger in San Francisco, or the mile-high banana cream pie that has been on the Chinese menu of Frank Fat's in Sacramento since the 1950s.

While many of the restaurants that shaped our dining culture are now only memories, there remains a strong tradition of classic restaurants to thrive, shepherded by descendants of the original owners. By visiting these classic restaurants, diners can learn about the history that influenced restaurants around the West—and beyond. The oldest has been in business for 170 years and is still considered several lifetimes in the volatile restaurant industry.



Spago

SPAGO

Beverly Hills 1982

Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff invigorated the California dining scene with the opening of Spago, an agency and overlooked Sunset Boulevard. The couple, who have since divorced, were a dynamic duo. Other than the idea of an exhibition kitchen, but Lazaroff took it to new heights. She treated the open kitchen like a theater, with lighting that spotlighted the action.

Like Musso & Frank in its heyday, Spago became *the* celebrity hangout. It was Puck, more than any other

dining. He served pizzas with such unexpected toppings as smoked lamb, eggplant, roasted peppers, and pizza, one with smoked salmon, wasn't on the original menu but was given as a gift to important guests. (included Chinese-style duck breast, grilled whole fish, and tuna sashimi with ponzu. In 1997, the couple c in Beverly Hills. They closed the original location in 2001.

In an earlier, fittingly dramatic move, Puck brought a Spago to Las Vegas's Caesars Palace in 1992. This a scores of other celebrity chefs to take up residence at the high-profile restaurants of big casinos. This Spa; to the Bellagio last year. *176 N. Canon Dr., Beverly Hills, 310-385-0880, wolfgangpuck.com*



Chinois on Main

CHINOIS ON MAIN

Santa Monica 1983

Today no chef would use the word *fusion* to describe their restaurant's cross-cultural blends, because the word has been abused. However, when first coined, it succinctly described Wolfgang Puck's innovative use of French techniques and Asian ingredients and techniques at Chinois. Puck showed many chefs a more creative path to traditional borders, if you will.

The dining room's unique design also suggested new ways forward for California cuisine. It features a wall of cloisonné birds in the middle of the space rising over specially designed scalloped-edge celadon tables. A service hood and dining counter defines the open exhibition kitchen.

Proven classics at Chinois include a Chinese chicken salad, whole sizzling catfish with ponzu and ginger, and a curry sauce with fried spinach, and grilled lamb chops with cilantro vinaigrette. Today the place is as busy as ever, which is a testament to Puck's legacy. 2709 Main St., Santa Monica, 310-392-9025, wolfgangpuck.com



GWYNETH PALTROW ON CHINOIS ON MAIN

Academy Award-winning actor and founder of Goop: *"I have been going to Chinois on Main since I was a foodie, immersed in the early days of the California cuisine food scene, and Chinois was one of our regulars in my own family regularly, and the restaurant remains one of my favorite places in the city."*