



Los Angeles



**S**mall purple artichoke buds sit prettily in cardboard trays beside a row of bright yellow artichoke flowers. Squares of blueberries, yellow raspberries and blackberries form an eye-catching colour block. Buckets of fresh crisp leaves call to be tossed into a beautiful salad. A truck parked in front of a brown stucco building unloads sackfuls of oranges, steps away from a tent holding pails of fresh flowers that look like a cross between onion blooms and soft corals.

It's a lot to take in for a first-time visitor but the **Santa Monica Farmers Market** (Arizona Avenue and 2nd Opens 8.30am-1.30pm, Wed) has featured firmly on the Angelenos' fresh produce radar for years. "There's a farmers' market in nearly every neighbourhood in LA," says Chef Joseph Gillard of **Napa Valley Grille** (1100 Glendon Avenue, Suite 100 [www.napavalleygrille.com](http://www.napavalleygrille.com)) as he leads me on a tour of the outdoor bazaar, "but this is the biggest and the best for variety and freshness." The market tour is, according to Chef Joseph, one way to encourage the consumption of local food and highlight the importance of knowing where ingredients come from. His restaurant also backs the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative which enables consumers to support local farms by helping to cover operation costs and farmers' salaries in return for a box of fresh produce every week.

**Market discoveries**

In between stall-hopping, Chef Joseph dishes out cooking tips, offers some food sampling (the sweetest spring peas I have ever tasted, freshly shelled on the spot) and introduces me to stevia, a sweet herb that's used in artificial sweeteners. We shop for lunch, which the chef will personally cook back at his restaurant. At the end of the one-hour tour, our

bounty includes spring peas, sunchokes, purple potatoes, baby parsnips and radishes. We head to his restaurant where I am told there is a chance I may meet Bruce Willis. The actor lunches there every Wednesday, "at the same table, and orders the same salad every time".

In the kitchen, Chef Joseph quickly transforms the fresh ingredients into gastronomic wonders, and as he works, tantalising aromas waft from the woodfire oven and stovetops. The spring peas are mashed into a hummus, spread over flatbread and topped with Portobello mushrooms to make a savoury pizza, then garnished with curly pea tendrils. The green garlic goes onto the Drake Farm Goat Cheese pizza, complemented by a garlic cream base. Baby parsnips join spade spinach, spring onion and spring garlic, all dressed in a lemon vinaigrette, to make a light but flavourful salad. My favourite ingredients of the day, sunchokes and purple potatoes, are caramelised in a pan and then tossed with radish, mixed herbs and walnut pesto to satisfying effect. All done and polished up, I am still too early for Mr Willis but nonetheless, the food leaves me a little starstruck and whips up an appetite for more market finds.

I head to **Larchmont Farmers Market** (209 Larchmont Boulevard Opens 10am-2pm, Sun), which is much smaller but no less interesting, thanks to artisanal food creators like **The Olive Press**, an award-winning brand from Sonoma in California. After tasting eight different oils, I decide on the Arbequina for its citrusy-peppery note. **Hepp's Salt Barrel** catches my eye with a thick slab of what looks like amber-tinged marble but is actually a Himalayan salt block that can



be heated and used as a cooking plate. Hepp's other offerings are just as interesting – Cyprus salt flakes, ginger salt grains and a Hawaiian black lava salt named Hiwa Kai are among the more unusual finds.

That's a lot of sodium to contemplate, and I am craving for something sweet, light and healthy – all of which I find at **Sugarbirds Sweets and Teas** ([www.sugarbirdssweets.com](http://www.sugarbirdssweets.com)) in the form of organic teas, herbal infusions and soft, crumbly scones. In creating her teas, ex-pastry chef Kei Okumura begins by choosing a favourite dessert. She then recreates the flavours with carefully selected leaves, herbs and dried flowers and ends with a personal touch – each tea is named after a loved one or friend. Fiona, one of her bestsellers, is a blend of rooibos, raspberry and hibiscus that brews into a beautiful cuppa with a pleasant floral fragrance.

# Star servings

The biggest lure of Los Angeles is undoubtedly its celebrities, but the City of Angels also serve up some memorable experiences on a plate.

TEXT VIVIAN CHONG PHOTOS SHANE NELSON



(Facing page) Chef Joseph Gillard works his magic into delectable dishes such as Drake Farm Goat Cheese Pizza (inset); (this page from top) Delphine at W Hollywood has something for every palate and stunning décor to boot; radishes in pretty shades of pink at Larchmont Market

## ▪ Food trail



(This page clockwise from left) The lunch crowd at M Café; tuna *tataki* is among M's Japanese-influenced dishes; Sugarbirds' organic teas are inspired by founder Kei's favourite desserts; (facing page) CHAYA's modern, plush décor complements its fusion offerings, of which the yellowtail *mole* (inset) is a must-try



### Macro managing

Eating healthily is a popular way of life in LA, where there is so much emphasis on looking good. So it's not surprising that M Café (7119 Melrose Avenue [www.mcafedechaya.com](http://www.mcafedechaya.com)) has built up a fan base for its contemporary macrobiotic cuisine. Its emphasis is on balanced and nutritious freshly-prepared food without any refined sugars, eggs, dairy, red meat or poultry. Popular offerings include teriyaki tofu, *inari hijiki* (bean curd skin sushi with black seaweed), the very colourful and flavourful M Chopped Salad and the current 'IT' vegetable in health food, kale, which M tosses in a delicious spicy peanut dressing. Down it all with a glass of their refreshing lemonade ginger and you will leave feeling satiated, well-fed and very healthy.



LA IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST COSMOPOLITAN CITIES AND THIS IS REFLECTED IN ITS CULINARY MAKEUP

### Day starters

With some 140 nationalities calling it home, LA is one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities and this is reflected in its culinary makeup. Mexican is ubiquitous, and I develop a liking for *huevos rancheros* at **Delphine Eatery and Bar** (6250 Hollywood Boulevard [www.restaurantdelphine.com](http://www.restaurantdelphine.com)), which does an excellent version for breakfast: A hearty plate of sunny side up served with black beans, chorizo, *queso fresco* (a soft Spanish cheese) and *pico de gallo* (spicy salsa) topped with crunchy corn tortillas. Delphine is open for all-day dining, and its other menus are based on Mediterranean flavours. Every Monday, seafood lovers flock here for its Raw Bar promotion: Shrimps, oysters, clams and New Zealand mussels from USD1.

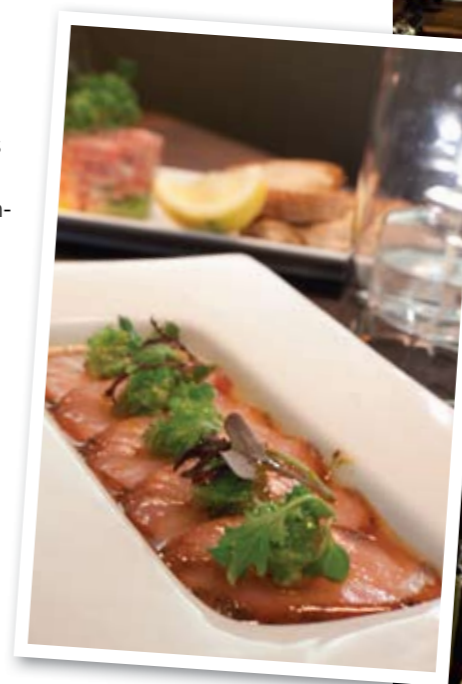
I work off breakfast by walking through the impressive Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the largest

of its kind in western USA housing some 150,000 works. I stay on for lunch at **Ray's** ([www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)), a Mediterranean-inspired restaurant housed in a glass box near the museum's entrance. I start with the white bean soup flavoured with almond pesto and garnished with slivers of artichoke chips. It's creamy, starchy, slightly green – a bit of an acquired taste at first, but it grows comforting and sets the pace for my entrée of Arctic Char. Similar in appearance to salmon, the char is slightly fattier and thus really moist even after being woodgrilled, providing a nice contrast in texture to the crispy, well-seasoned skin. But the icing on the dish is the accompanying trio of skordalia puree, pan-roasted sunchokes and chanterelles. The sunchokes are in a league of their own with a soft, chewy consistency and an intense savoury taste. Altogether, it was a most memorable meal.

### Sweet satisfaction

**CHAYA Brasserie** (8741 Alden Drive [www.thechaya.com](http://www.thechaya.com)), is a 25-year-old Euro-Asian eatery and a Beverly Hills institution with a new Executive Chef, Harutaka Kishi, and an all-new menu. Interestingly, Chef Haru grew up in France

and received his culinary training there (and speaks English with a strong French accent!), so French-Japanese fusion is what he's bringing to CHAYA. From the La Petite menu, an outstanding dish is the yellowtail *mole*: Fresh fish slices, tender and pink, served carpaccio-style topped with a dollop of *wasabi tobiko* and guacamole, swimming in *ponzu* dressing. For something French, the confit duck ravioli is beautiful, accented with red cherry tomatoes and olives. The pasta is generously coated in mustard seeds so each mouthful really packs a punch. But it was the dessert that sealed the deal – bread pudding that, instead of the usual soggy bread, is made with flaky croissants, crisply browned. So there's a bit of creaminess, crunchiness and custardy delight in every spoonful.



## Food trail

Still, it comes second to my pick of LA's best dessert, at **Fig & Olive** (8490 Melrose Place, West Hollywood [www.figandolive.com](http://www.figandolive.com)) where Executive Chef Pascal Lorange has translated his passion for Mediterranean cuisine and olive oils into dishes like the scrumptious Fig Gorgonzola Tartlet and a popular selection of crostinis. A 15m-long tasting bar and communal table greets patrons at the entrance of the restaurant, backed by a wall of olive oils, all of which are available for sale. But you haven't tasted olive oil until you sink your teeth into his Warm Marzipan Cake. Butter in texture but not in taste – in fact, no butter or cream is used in any of their dishes, just good quality olive oil. Toasted almonds and candied orange add some bite, but it's the olive oil gelato that really takes the cake. It has all the flavour of freshly pressed extra virgin olive oil in a creamy consistency that, when drizzled over the cake, elevates it from 'just a dessert' to something far more spectacular.



(Clockwise from right) Fig & Olive's tasting bar and communal table; Chef Pascal Lorange's menu centres around premium Mediterranean olive oils; Royal/T brings the Japanese concept of maid café to LA; Royal/T's Crispy Spicy Tuna; indulge in some Hollywood glamour at Public Kitchen and Bar



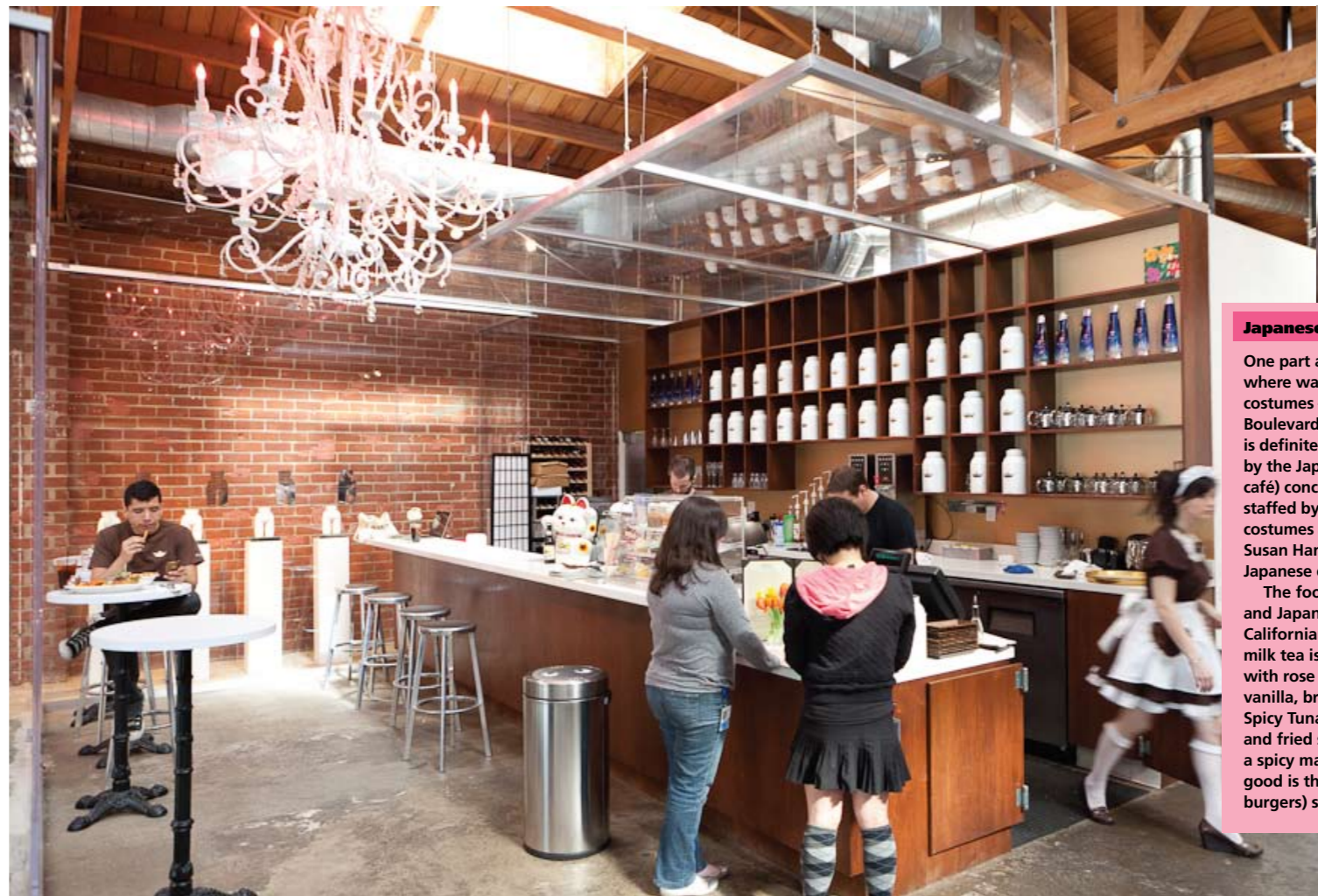
Buttermilk owner Gigi Pascual

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### Street cred

Asia has its streetside stalls where cheap, good eats reign. The USA's version is the lunch truck that doubles up as a mobile kitchen to bring affordable, delicious cuisine to the masses. Lunch trucks move from place to place and despite their names, also serve dinner. Even better, **The Buttermilk Truck** lets you enjoy breakfast delights at dinner time! There's also a night dinner menu, but everything uses buttermilk, so what you'll get is mainly breakfast food. But you wouldn't complain about having pancakes for dinner when you try the red velvet version – a bit like the best red velvet cake you've had incarnated as a soft, fluffy pancake dotted with chocolate chips and served with light cream cheese. The chicken with waffles is another good choice: The chicken is nicely spiced, well-flavoured and fried to a crunchy bite. The waffles have a hint of cinnamon in them, which works very well with the chicken.

To track down this truck, 'Like' their Facebook page, bookmark [www.buttermilktruck.com](http://www.buttermilktruck.com) or follow them on Twitter (@ButtermilkTruck).



### Japanese art forms

One part art gallery, one part café where waitresses dress in French maid costumes – the **Royal/T** (8910 Washington Boulevard, Culver City <http://royal-t.org>) is definitely worth a stop. It is inspired by the Japanese *meido kissa* (maid café) concept which involves cosplay, is staffed by Lolita-esque waitresses in maid costumes and decorated with owner Susan Hancock's personal collection of Japanese contemporary art.

The food, meanwhile, hints at French and Japanese influences, with touches of Californian tastes. Its signature Royal/T milk tea is a soothing blend of black tea with rose petals, pieces of fruits and vanilla, brewed in soymilk. The Crispy Spicy Tuna makes a great snack: Sliced and fried sushi pieces with raw tuna and a spicy mayonnaise dressing. Equally good is the Kobe Beef Sliders (mini burgers) served three ways.



### Going public

One week in LA and, apart from a wax figurine of George Clooney in my hotel lobby, my star sighting count is a big fat zero. My last chance to change that is over dinner at **Public Kitchen and Bar** (7000 Hollywood Boulevard [www.thompsonhotels.com](http://www.thompsonhotels.com)) at the historic Spanish-style Hollywood Roosevelt hotel. Its Blossom Room hosted the very first Academy Awards in 1929 and it has always been a magnet for Hollywood A-listers. An air of old-world grandeur prevails, from its impressive sunken lobby with high ceilings to the more contemporary loft-inspired décor at Public.

My dinner starts well with the Crispy Oxtail Galette, deep-fried and served with a poached farm egg. The runny yolk coats the galette like a sticky film – like it says on the menu, 'everything tastes better with an egg on it'. It gets better when I spy a certain *Mamma Mia* actress and her new, very affectionate actor



beau dining with a group of friends at the next table. So there: Star sighting count, two. Satisfying meals? A whole lot more.



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