

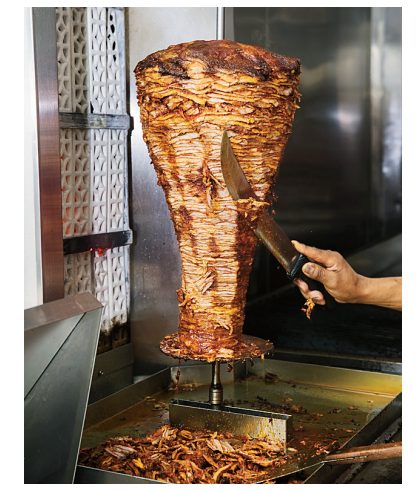
# THE TABLES of BABBLE

by Kevin West Photographs by Jessica Sample

Thanks to gleefully unorthodox young chefs, world-class local ingredients, and a delicious hot pot of immigrant cultures, Los Angeles has become the most exciting food city in America.



Clockwise from top left: Row DTLA, home to Hayato; a cocktail at Ma'am Sir; the bar at Guerrilla Tacos; Tsubaki co-owner Charles Namba; chicken katsu sandwich, *okonomiyaki*, and the Ode to Mos Burger at Ototo; the Silver Lake neighborhood; adobado at Tacos 1986; zensai at n/naka; diners at Nightshade; outside Ma'am Sir; chef Minh Phan (far right) and her team at Porridge + Puffs; scallop on the half-shell with *uni* at Ceviche Project; a spread at Porridge + Puffs.



# THIS STORY IS ABOUT RESTAURANTS IN LOS ANGELES IN 2019,

but I need to begin in 2004. It was June, and I had just moved to L.A. after four years in Paris. The culture shock was seismic: the unblinking sun, the grown men wearing shorts and flip-flops in public, the way cashiers addressed me as “dude” and wished me a “very excellent afternoon.” Still, nothing surprised me as much as the houses I saw while driving around Beverly Hills. Not any one house—all of them, a delirious grab bag of styles, a U.N. gathering of architectural inspirations. Along the palm-lined drives between Sunset and Santa Monica Boulevards, I’d see a hacienda next to a Tuscan villa next to a pagoda next to a château across the street from a square-edged modernist experiment. The weird thing was how they hung together, all part of the gloriously motley fabric of L.A. exuberance. None of them was “authentic” in any sense, but all belonged to the one authentically L.A. building style: Dream House.

That epiphany came back to me in July after dinner with my friend David, an American-born/Lima-trained chef, at **Nightshade** ([nightshadela.com](http://nightshadela.com)), the Arts District restaurant opened this year by Mei Lin, a chef esteemed locally as a culinary Olympian for her 2015 win on *Top Chef*. David and I couldn’t get a reservation at a reasonable hour, so instead we just waltzed in one day and perched at the bar.

The menu at Nightshade is a global mash-up, the stream-of-consciousness creativity of a classically trained chef who has eaten far and wide and now claims the whole earth as her pantry, with nary a thought to how things would be done “authentically” by cooks who were native-born into the mother cuisine. Our dinner included raw oysters afloat in *leche de tigre*, a Peruvian-style ceviche marinade stained tiger-orange with passion-fruit pulp and polka-dotted with charred garlic oil; a drop-dead delicious bowl of congee, the homely pan-Asian rice porridge elevated to fine-dining status with pork floss and who-knows-what other cheffy magic; prawn toast, an Instagram favorite, for which Lin reinterpreted the dim sum classic by spackling shrimp mousse onto a raft of *pain de mie* and floating it on a slurry of Taiwanese curry; quail fried in the style of Nashville hot chicken, which came off as a play on L.A.’s phenomenally successful hot-chicken joint Howlin’ Rays, making the spicy quail a sort of inside joke or at least a cheeky riff on someone else’s cheeky riff, an appropriation of an appropriation, except Lin’s 20-ingredient spice blend included such Nashville non-native items as black and green Szechuan peppercorns, cardamom, shiitake powder, and porcini powder.

Not everything worked—we actually didn’t love the prawn toast—but Lin’s all-in, freestyle imagination was a kick. I asked David how he, as a chef, would describe her style of cooking.

“I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “It’s very Los Angeles.”

In the standard telling of America’s Great Food Awakening, a tidy narrative usually gets trotted out. Whether one dates the dawn of the food movement to the opening of Chez Panisse in



1971 or to the publication of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* a decade earlier, the usual line is that Americans got inspired by France and, over time, created a New American cuisine rooted in European tradition and adapted to American ingredients and tastes. As late as 2004, fine dining was still defined in L.A. by restaurants that served Fancy French Food, such as the venerable L’Orangerie, Wolfgang Puck’s launchpad in the early 1980s. Meanwhile, carnitas, bulgogi, *dan dan mian*, pho, kebab, and *ghormeh* remained in the realm of “ethnic” food—which more or less meant cheap eats served by someone speaking English as a second language.

It hardly needs stating that the food world has changed. For today’s young chefs, there’s no single axis of inspiration to travel. Instead, bursts of inspiration pulse like radio waves from Mexico City, Seoul, Tehran, Lima, Tokyo, Oaxaca, Bangkok, Chengdu, Taipei, Jerusalem, Yerevan, Lagos, and beyond. In Los Angeles, many of those cuisines from those places are also local because, like roads to ancient Rome, the world’s culinary paths lead to L.A.’s immigrant enclaves.

Occasionally an “ethnic” cuisine escapes and goes mainstream. Filipino made the crossing, and with-it eaters now have opinions about restaurants including **Ma’am Sir** ([maamsirla.com](http://maamsirla.com)), which has managed to do what the nine-year-old Night + Market did for Thai—magnetize hipsters on a Friday night with strong flavors, craft cocktails, and natty wine.

“It’s not just that these communities exist here and flourish,” notes *Los Angeles Times* restaurant critic Bill Addison, who shares the paper’s food-critic desk with Patricia Escárega. “But many of them manage to hold on to what is essential to their culture and



At Nightshade, the No. 923 cocktail, oysters in passion-fruit *leche de tigre* with charred garlic oil, and prawn toast in Cantonese curry. Opposite: Hayato owner Brandon Go (right) prepares a bento box.

What is this fusion style, this *Blade Runner* cuisine, this progressive percent define what it is,” Nightshade chef Mei Lin said. “It’s putting

become a larger part of the L.A. tapestry. No other city in the country has quite this idea of a rich restaurant culture.”

Japanese cuisine, which crossed into the mainstream in the 1980s, remains a staple. Peak ramen may now be behind us, but **Konbi’s** (*konbila.com*) precisely engineered sandwiches and the sake list at **Ototo** (*ototo.la*) show how a seemingly familiar culinary heritage continues to unfold. Ototo owners Courtney Kaplan and Charles Namba were already running **Tsubaki** (*tsubakila.com*), a busy restaurant that elevated izakaya (drinking food) and provided a platform for Kaplan’s sake obsession. Their new place is looser—imagine a crowded wine bar with bowls of chicken *karaage* and cast-iron skillet of *okonomiyaki*, a savory pancake.

Of course, no cuisine runs second to Mexican as the city’s native food. The hottest restaurant of 2019 is arguably **Tacos 1986** (*tacos1986.com*), now settled downtown after six months of popping up with a theatrical *taquero* named Jorge “El Joy” Alvarez-Tostado, who creates Tijuana-style perfection in the form of adobado on hand-pressed tortillas. Another roving pop-up chef, Octavio Olivas, recently planted his **Ceviche Project** (*cevicheproject.com*) in a Silver Lake storefront hardly larger than a studio apartment.

Such culinary pluralism remains central to L.A.’s food identity—but that’s not really what this story is about. I’m trying to throw a conceptual lasso around a loosely confederated group of chefs who work within Uber distance of downtown L.A. and have collectively induced an almost chromosomal evolution in Los Angeles cooking. Like Nightshade’s Lin, the chefs in this cohort cook across



Above: The shochu bar at Ototo. Left: At Guerilla Tacos, hamachi tostada with uni, sweet potato taco, smoked cauliflower taco, and fried cod taco.



Right: Guerrilla Tacos chef Wes Avila. Below: Tsubaki, an izakaya in Echo Park.



three great global food cultures—Asian, Latin, and Anglo-European—and their rampant cross-pollination has given rise to an authentically L.A. Dream Cuisine. And this cutting edge R+D is hardly restricted to high-end tasting menus. At **Baroo** (*baroolosangeles.com*), **Sqirl** (*sqirlla.com*), **Guerrilla Tacos** (*guerrillatacos.com*), and **Porridge + Puffs** (*porridgeandpuffs.com*) you can eat on a twenty. **Tiny Kato** serves Taiwanese tasting menus in a strip mall, and the even tinier **Hayato** (*hayatorestaurant.com*) offers a kaiseki tasting menu to seven diners per seating. Guerrilla Tacos started on a street corner.

The through line for this generation of chefs is cross-cultural fluency—polyglot cooking. And with all due respect to the Bay Area, they have shifted the state’s culinary epicenter south. Bill Addison’s previous gig had him wandering the country for five years as national restaurant critic for *Eater*, and he told me “without hesitation” that he’s now living in the country’s most exciting food city.

A month before I began research for this story, I happened to be in Los Angeles on other business. Here are some things I ate: chicken drumsticks adobo simmered with fish sauce and jaggery; an octopus tostada and scallop ceviche topped with green chilies and pomegranate seeds; a tortilla pressed into a supple disk and griddled before being folded in half over a handful of melty cheese; two kinds of hand-pulled *biang biang* noodles, sweet pork dumplings, sweet smoked fish, tofu skin “noodles” tossed with pickled vegetables, and a platter of sautéed celtuce, aka “stem lettuce”; a vegan burger, for which I had to stand on line at 4:30 P.M., a between-meals time when most restaurants close for lack of business; a

California cooking that’s so hard to name? “I can’t one hundred together flavors that you may not think would work, but they do.”

pastrami sandwich of citywide acclaim; milky, sweet green tea ornamented with warm tapioca beads; Korean BBQ served with ten *banchan* (side dishes), including garlic chives kimchi, potato croquettes, and marinated mussels; oceanic razor clams grilled at a street stall; a puffy taco, a peculiar variation promulgated in L.A. by a chef of Texas origin; a falafel plate from a second-generation Armenian restaurateur whose culinary platform is a 225-square-foot bungalow in Glendale; one sweet potato taco and a pair of uncommonly delicious potato taquitos splashed with tomatillo salsa alongside a plate of sautéed ridgeback shrimp, which, the chef came from the kitchen to tell us, had just arrived, still wriggling, from the Channel Islands.

Not one of the restaurants I ate at received a star from the Michelin judges in its 2019 California guide. Michelin recently returned to L.A. after a nine-year absence, raising hackles because none of L.A.’s gazillion Mexican restaurants were deemed “a very good restaurant in its category” (the definition of one-star quality), let alone “worth a detour” (two stars) or “worth a special journey” (three stars). If Jay Fai’s crab omelet ranks in Bangkok, then why not **Mariscos Jalisco’s** (*twitter.com/mariscosjalisco*) crispy shrimp taco or the Yuca-tán-style raw seafood at **Holbox** (*holboxla.com*), where second-generation chef Gilberto Cena prepares *aquachile* and ceviche with the intention and ingredients of a sushi master?

The two-star winners included **Somni** (*exploretock.com/som*) at the SLS Beverly Hills, part of the José Andrés empire, who operates on the grand scale Michelin likes, and local favorite **n/naka** (*n-naka.com*), where partners in work and life Niki Nakayama and Carole Iida-Nakayama create intimate kaiseki meals that use a dozen or more courses to create edible portraits of SoCal’s fleeting micro-seasons.

A few days after dinner at Nightshade, I drove out to Palms—

one of those in-between neighborhoods that even Angelenos might not be able to place—to where n/naka inhabits a modest bungalow on a busy thoroughfare.

In a sense, n/naka is the most L.A. of the Michelin two-starred places, similar in spirit to Sqirl and Porridge + Puffs, even if the tab runs ten times higher. All three are run by women with a highly nuanced understanding of seasonality who followed affordable rent to offbeat locations and in so doing redrew the culinary landscape. As the second generation of the old-school mom-and-pop Japanese fish market run by Nakayama’s parents, n/naka is a mom-and-mom operation that has joined the ranks of the world’s culinary elite.

“Because of Michelin’s global profile, it opens the door to more conversations, like invitations to go work with other starred chefs abroad,” said Iida-Nakayama. She noted that the “tenets” of the Michelin philosophy—mastering your craft, using the best ingredients, constantly improving—were already the guiding aspirations at n/naka. The Michelin imprimatur provided reassurance that “we’re not far off.” But Nakayama also gently acknowledged that Michelin is being judged by L.A. just as surely as it is passing judgment.

“It’s only their first year back,” said Nakayama. “Perhaps in time they’ll have a better sense of what L.A. is about.”

I decided to go back to Nightshade to ask Mei Lin that question: What is L.A. about? What is this fusion style, this *Blade Runner* cuisine, this progressive California cooking that’s so hard to name?

“I can’t one hundred percent define what it is,” she said as she sat in the dining room and her team prepped for dinner. “It’s putting together flavors that you may not think would work, but they do.”



Jessica Koslow of Sqirl and Gabriela Cámara of Mexico City’s Conramar at Santa Monica Proper hotel, the location of their new collaborative restaurant, Onda.

Lin's accent hinted at her mall-going teenage years in Dearborn, Michigan, and her focused demeanor loosened up as she recounted her early food memories, such as bitter melon soup, a very un-childish taste she liked even as a toddler. The stroll down memory lane got us onto the topic of chefs who draw inspiration from culinary memories of homeland—either their own or someone else's—and pursue “authenticity” to the nth degree, learning to roll pasta in northern Italy or pound a *pok pok* in northern Thailand. By those standards, I suggested, Lin's cooking is totally inauthentic.

“I think I'm very authentic to Los Angeles,” she said, not offended but quick with a TV-ready comeback. “This restaurant, being in Los Angeles, is very authentic in the sense that we have all these different cultures around. We can elaborate on that and take it as far as we want.”

Nightshade represents her new authentic, so to speak, a personal cuisine that comes from one chef's lived experience as she expresses it to a public with the culinary sophistication to hang with her as she does her thing. Well-traveled food obsessives might rightly note that L.A. is not the only city where chefs are creating a pan-global Euro-Latino-Asian mash-up. But L.A. has an ace in the hole—two, actually.

The first is ingredients—the farmers, the soil, the growing season, the weekly markets. Chefs are constantly refracting multiple culinary influences, and produce is their prism. Seasonality and local/organic sourcing are so embedded in the L.A. culinary consciousness, passed down through generations of California chefs, that it might as well be a genetic trait. Varietal greens, rare citrus and stone fruit, blooming herbs, fleeting seasonal delicacies with one-week harvest windows—they are the stuff of L.A. creativity, and an attuned diner can tell where a chef buys produce. Lin told me about one new dish she was developing, octopus tikka masala, inspired by an encounter with celtuce. The following Wednesday I saw her inspiration on a table at the Coleman Farm stall alongside purslane, mouse melon, papalo, lovage, kaffir lime leaf, and fragrant shiso.

Produce like that can help a chef upend the usual distinction between fine dining and cheap eats. Over in Historic Filipino Town, aka Hi-Fi, Minh Phan's artfully composed porridge bowls at Porridge + Puffs are adorned with edible flowers and labor-intensive seasonal pickles that wouldn't be out of place in a white tablecloth dining room. She uses five custom-grown herbs, all exotic to the European palate, such as rau ram (Vietnamese hot mint), to make slaw she sells for \$6. Minh foregrounds grains and vegetables on her menu for a variety of reasons—health, cost, personal preference, a rejection of Eurocentric, protein-based plating—and flat-out rejects the “*Oui, chef*” hierarchy of the French kitchen brigade with its belief in the superiority of classical French technique.

“There is a little bit of decolonization in my food,” she acknowledged. “The mingling of cultures does make really good food, but to credit European colonizers for all the techniques and all the foods we know is a shame.”

As for L.A.'s second ace in the hole—the second factor that distinguishes it from other notable food cities—Lin brings up the very thing that shocked me when I moved from Paris in 2004. It's impossible to underdress in L.A. Even a restaurant that puts as much intention, ambition, creativity, labor, and food costs on the plate as Nightshade has lowered expectations of a dress code essentially to zero.

“You could come in here in shorts and flip-flops,” she said.

A similar impulse propelled Sqirl founder Jessica Koslow and Gabriela Cámara, chef-owner of Mexico City's beloved Contramar, to launch **Onda** ([properhotel.com](http://properhotel.com)), a new Cali-Mex collaboration on the grounds of Santa Monica Proper hotel. The restaurant was not the result of careful planning. Koslow saw the space, had a flash, and called Cámara, a friend.

“I said, ‘I know this is very strange, but I just walked into this space, and it really feels like it should be a conversation between sister cities,’” recalled Koslow. “It should be a dialogue between Mexico City and Los Angeles.”

The food would be like those one-night-stand pop-ups they did at each other's restaurants—as Sqirl x Contramar—except permanent. As a cuisine, it will be “foundationally Mexican,” said Koslow, meaning there will be tortillas, using single-origin corn sourced in Mexico and ground in Los Angeles by artisanal *tortilleria* Kernel of Truth Organics. But the menu will also be nostalgic, market-driven, and totally original.

“There will be some sort of playfulness in dishes that feel very familiar, whether Mexican or Sqirl-y, but are unfamiliar,” she said. “People will come in and say, ‘This isn't Contramar’ or ‘This isn't Sqirl. It can't be.’”

Instead Koslow talked about a breakfast menu with *torta ahogada*, “a drowned sandwich,” or one dipped in sauce, which is also basically a French dip, a sandwich invented in either one of two L.A. restaurants, Cole's or Phillippe's, depending on whose version of the story you believe. Then Koslow and Cámara dreamed up a black-and-white *concha* filled with coconut cream, almost a jelly doughnut, but one that almost tastes like an Oreo.

“Obviously we could sit here and play our greatest hits, but why?” said Koslow, turning philosophical. A restaurant has to be something bigger than a money-making scheme for chefs—or a tax write-off for the investors.

“I believe that part of what makes restaurants great is that they can give insight into what's happening in a city,” Koslow continued. “They can be a meeting point for a neighborhood, and they can also become a viewpoint for people outside. A restaurant should show the world what a city is about.”



Nightshade chef Mei Lin using liquid nitrogen to make dessert.