



LA'S CULINARY ROOTS

SETTING TRENDS 30 YEARS AGO AND AGAIN TODAY

by Lesley Balla

Wolfgang Puck

For far too many years, primarily thanks to movies and reality T.V., the Los Angeles dining scene has been lumped into two categories: sprouts-loving and celeb-drenched. And, really, we have plenty of restaurants to support those claims. But today, L.A. is seen as a new culinary mecca, and as a magnet for the best and brightest culinary talent from around the country. For the food-obsessed, this is exactly where everyone wants to be.



It wasn't much different 30 years ago, when places like Michael's, Spago and Patina were at the forefront of a new culinary world order. These restaurants helped launch the careers of many of today's celebrity chefs: When Jonathan Waxman, Mark Peel and Nancy Silverton wanted to find their footing in the kitchen, they went to work for Michael McCarty and Wolfgang Puck, two of the most innovative chefs and restaurateurs of their time. Along with Northern Californian chefs like

Jeremiah Tower and Alice Waters, the combined group would shape what soon became known as "California cuisine." And it spread through the country like wildfire.

We have a lush restaurant family tree in Los Angeles, where the culinary lineage can be traced from the patriarchs and matriarchs like McCarty, Puck, Silverton and Joachim Splichal directly to the stars of our dining scene today. Think of it this way: If it weren't for Michael's, we might not have Sang Yoon's Father's Office. Or if not for Spago, maybe Campanile wouldn't have come to be, which would mean no Mozza, and then no Spice Table, Bryant Ng's Singaporean-Vietnamese restaurant downtown. As different as they are, they're all inextricably tied together.

One restaurant that played an important role in the genesis of how we eat now—here and across the country—is Michael's, McCarty's eponymous Santa Monica spot that debuted in 1979.

"Back then, if you asked anyone what the best restaurant was in town, you would've been told a classic French restaurant like L'Ermitage," says McCarty. "And if you wanted to cook, the rule of thumb was Escoffier, which meant no variation of theme, no regional concept, no farm-to-table. I wanted to change that."

McCarty and his opening chefs—Jonathan Waxman, Ken Frank and Mark Peel among them—used classic techniques they picked up in European kitchens and culinary schools, and introduced fresh, locally raised produce to the menus. It was the beginning of a food revolution.

“We were very simple... we loved the foundations of French cooking. We grilled a lot. We used fresh vegetables. We understood that we needed nouvelle cuisine, and that what was the norm is no longer. It got a lot people thinking.”

— Michael McCarty

In the 80s, when McCarty took the concept to New York, there were a few restaurants like it on the East Coast. Some that had a direct link to his own kitchen. In addition to Waxman—who was already doing a California-centric menu at Jams in New York back then and now owns Barbuto in Manhattan—the list of chefs that came out of Michael’s kitchen reads like a who’s who of the food world : Gordon Naccarato, who ran L.A.’s popular Monkey Bar in the 90s, and is now with Pacific Grille in Takoma, WA; Roy Yamaguchi, founder of the Roy’s Hawaiian Fusion group; and Mark Peel and Nancy Silverton, who met there and eventually went on to open Campanile and La Brea Bakery.

This was also the time when farmers’ markets were coming onto the scene, most importantly the Santa Monica market, which debuted in 1981. Now, farm-to-table cuisine is de rigueur; then, it was practically unheard of.

“Part of it was getting the farmers to grow some of these ingredients we wanted,” says McCarty. “The other part was finding a marketplace for it. But we knew that, even if the product was more expensive, the chefs would want them. And then as more diners came to the restaurants and learned about certain things, they’d want to buy them for home, to use at their own dinner table. And now look at how many markets there are!”

As a young 20-something, Silverton thought Michael’s was one of the most cutting-edge restaurants in the country. After discovering her love of cooking in college, the Los Angeles native went to study at the Cordon Bleu in France, and when she returned to the States, she went to Michael’s for dinner with her parents. This, she decided, was the place to be.

“Besides Chez Panisse, there was very little happening in the Bay Area at the time,” she recalls. “L.A. just had a more dynamic food scene, not only with Ma Maison, but also Michael’s, which had just opened. I loved the attention to the food, it was edgy. It was controversial.”

Being a pastry chef was the farthest thing from Silverton’s mind when she went to work at



Nancy Silverton

Michael’s. She was first put on ordering duty using a new computerized system in the front of the house, which wasn’t her forte. (“I swear, it’s why I never use computers to this day,” she laughingly says.) And then, knowing she wanted to get into the kitchen, Waxman, who was executive chef at the time, told her to work with pastry chef Jimmy Brinkley.

She figured it was one step closer to the hot line, where she really wanted to work and learn. So she took the job. “This was one of the first restaurants to make their own desserts,” Silverton recalls. “But at Michael’s, not only was Jimmy making the desserts, he was making desserts that didn’t really have names. It was the first time I saw desserts listed by ingredient instead of by name.”

She admits she wouldn’t be where she is today if it wasn’t for Michael’s, or for Waxman giving her a chance, and for Brinkley. It’s also where she met her future husband and business partner, Mark Peel, who convinced her to work with Wolfgang Puck at his new Italian-inspired restaurant, Spago.

Like many young chefs, Puck came here to work in what was fast becoming one of the most exciting restaurant scenes in the country. In 1975, he took over the reins at the French restaurant Ma Maison. But he was most pivotal in shaping his version of California cuisine when he opened Spago on the Sunset Strip in 1982.

Through the years, Spago, both the original and the current Beverly Hills location, became home ground for many of L.A.'s greatest chefs. Peel and Silverton worked there for two years before they opened Campanile and La Brea Bakery. Sherry Yard, the queen of sweets, and chef Lee Hefter continue doing great things for the Wolfgang Puck Fine Dining Group across the country. Husband and wife team Suzanne Goin and David Lentz, who now have six restaurants between them (Lucques, A.O.C., Tavern and three Hungry Cats), met there. Govind Armstrong (8 oz.) peeled potatoes as a teenager in the Spago kitchen, and Ben Ford (Ford's Filling Station), Neal Fraser (Grace, BLD), and Quinn Hatfield (Hatfield's) all did turns at the stoves.

"Places like Spago and Michael's were about mentoring, where we got support and encouragement," says Silverton. "More people stay with Wolf because he has so many restaurants to move around. He always said, 'They'll leave me, so I open more.'"



"I learned more from the one restaurant that didn't work than from all the ones that were successes."

— Wolfgang Puck

And he did: His reach is now global, with more than 20 fine dining and, an expansive number of casual restaurants around the world.

By the time Joachim Splichal opened the first Patina in 1989, California cuisine was firmly planted in the mindset and palates of America. Stuffy French restaurants were on their way out, and people wanted to have more fun in the kitchen and dining room. He saw this as a time for more innovation.

At Patina, Splichal created new experiences with tasting menus, and using seasonal and local ingredients. Indeed, these are almost overused buzzwords today, but the idea was fresh and new then. He blended Mediterranean flavors and French technique, and created a fine dining aesthetic, one he hoped would get better with age. "Like the name suggests," he says.

This was yet another restaurant for young chefs to cultivate their skills and talent, like Traci des Jardin, one of the first female executive chefs on the scene. She tried out for a job at Splichal's 7th Street Bistro, where she ended up running her own station within two weeks. He sent her to France for

more schooling, and upon her return, she landed at Patina. Now she owns and operates four successful restaurants in Northern California: the much heralded Jardiniere, Mijita and Public House in San Francisco, and Manzanita in Lake Tahoe.

Octavio Becerra, now with Palate Food + Wine, was at Patina in the beginning. Joe Miller, who worked with Splichal for several years before branching out on his own, took what he learned and opened a more casual version at Joe's in Venice, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Eric Greenspan was the last chef at the original Patina before it moved to the Disney Concert Hall downtown, and now he owns the super popular Foundry on Melrose. Walter Manzke, who many herald as one of L.A.'s best new chefs, grew at Patina; he and his wife Margarita will open their own downtown restaurant and bakery, République, next year.



Joachim Splichal

And that's before we even get to Café Pinot, Zucca, Nick & Stef's and the other myriad Patina Group restaurants.

And even today, Splichal fosters up-and-coming talent, like Kris Morningstar, who's making waves at Ray's and Stark Bar at LACMA. "What I try to do is take the raw talent, but I don't try to instill the creativity in them," says Splichal. "I try to guide them, to direct them in the right direction so they are successful, so they have a good career path."

While buzzwords like "local" and "seasonal" were brand new when Michael's started using them in the late 70s, they're still widely used today. But our "California cuisine" is decidedly more robust and globally inspired. It's no longer just Italian or



In 1979, soon after Michael's opened in Santa Monica, McCarty (foreground) posed on the steps to the garden patio with (from left) his kitchen brigade: Jonathan Waxman, Mark Peel, and Ken Frank.

French influenced, but more regionally influenced from those and other European countries. After Wolfgang Puck's Chinois and Nobu Matsuhisa's Matsuhisa and Nobu, Asian flavors are more prominent in everything from sushi to salads to having sake on non-traditional wine lists. We have high-end Peruvian food now, thanks to Picca Peru's Ricardo Zarate, and dishes from remote corners of Mexico showing up in the least likely places.

And chefs who've trickled down the branches of our culinary family tree continue to open new restaurants across the city. Sang Yoon, a Michael's alum, serves one of the best burgers in town at two Father's Office gastropubs, and opened a wonderful Southeast Asian-inspired restaurant, Lukshon. Bryant Ng, who worked at both Campanile and Pizzeria Mozza, has a fantastic Singaporean-Vietnamese restaurant, The Spice Table, in Little Tokyo. Vinny Dotolo and Jon Shook, who worked with Ben Ford and Govind Armstrong at their restaurant, Chadwick, now have two of the hottest restaurants in town, Animal and Son of a Gun.

What's more, there's a whole new fleet of chefs from around the country hungry to tap into the ever-growing L.A. dining scene. We have chefs from New York, Chicago and San Francisco all clamoring to stake a claim, some returning to where it all started for them (Thomas Keller, for one).

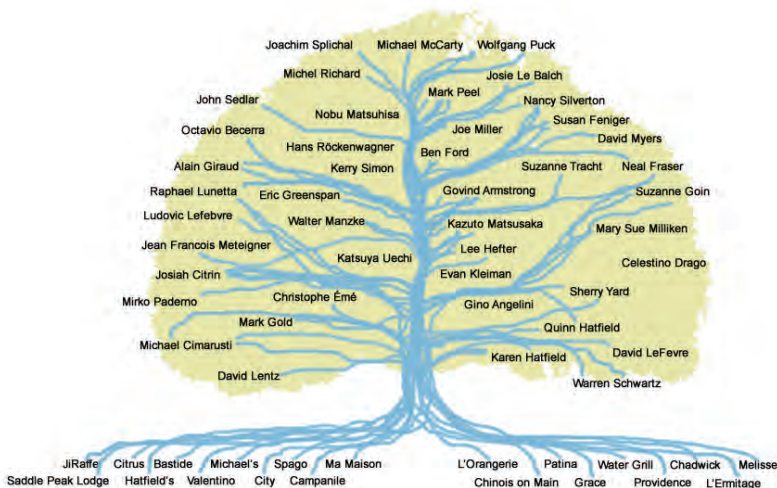
It's as if the flavors of the West Coast bounced to the East Coast, around the country and back again, creating a richer, more delicious culinary landscape day by day. It's, once again, one of the most exciting times for dining here, and everywhere, says McCarty

This is what happens when these revolutions occur," he adds. "There has to be a place where it starts."

All photos courtesy of dineLA Chefs Family Tree Project

For more connections and great visualizations visit the dineLA website at familytree.dineLA.com.

Los Angeles Chefs Family Tree



From French-inspired Californian Cuisine to Singaporean home cooking



WOLFGANG PUCK
Spago
 Smoked salmon and caviar pizza



Head pastry chef at Spago



NANCY SILVERTON
Moza
 Pizza: Finnochiona salame, mozzarella, tomato & Fresno chiles



On opening team at Pizzeria Moza



BRYANT NG
The Spice Table
 Lamb Belly Satay