

AS SEEN IN BOULEVDARD MAGAZINE

# COMMANDER IN

Meet some of the exceptional culinary innovators endeavoring to lead the L.A. Restaurant Scene to enduring culinary leadership



RITZ CARLTON

# “Chef”

By Elyse Glickman

**T**hanks to the pop-cultural machinery that drives all aspects of L.A. life, any talented chef who can do with food what great directors and writers can do with actors has the potential to become a trendsetter on a national scale.

Case in point—Wolfgang Puck, Joachim Splichal, Rockenwagner, Kleiman, (Fred) Eric, the brothers Drago, Shiro, Milliken and Feniger, Gerry Garvin, Norman Van Aken (of the much loved Norman’s in our recent Valentine’s Day round-up) and Ludovic Lefebvre (Bastide) just to name a very few.

Loyal Boulevard readers can also argue that every round-up we’ve done features at least one restaurant associated with a celebrity chef or rising culinary star. Our anniversary issues, meanwhile, are like re-affirmations of our enduring love affair with food. In this spirit, for our 24th anniversary, we are looking to the future with chefs that may not yet be household names, but could very well be, with the right mix of attitude, dedication, presentation, and of course, good taste.

Welcome to the Hotel California—such a lovely place. On site at The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton Pasadena, 33 year-old Craig Strong brings new school flair, East Coast sophistication and youthful verve to the old school setting of this classic landmark hotel. As my dining companion and I sample a series of imaginative amuses (foie gras fritters, miniature caviar tacos, ahi tuna and a bite of salmon tartare) washed down with Bollinger Champagne (a lovely bubbly with Granny Smith apple freshness, hints of vanilla and a toasty finish) to the fitting strains of “Hotel California” by a live musician, he explains how he takes pleasure in customizing the dining experience for every person who walks into the restaurant. You have a choice of ordering directly from the menu, ordering a tasting menu that changes daily, or allowing yourself to be surprised with a blind tasting menu where you put your trust in his hands (along with specifics of what you like, don’t like or may be allergic to).

“The way I approach things is that I start with a traditional base, and then I adapt it to the California diner who wants it both ways, choosing to maintain a lighter diet but also not willing to give up things that taste good,” says Strong. “When I arrived here four years ago, the restaurant was essentially a grill, and at that time, that section of Pasadena seemed to need a fine dining restaurant that could suit the visitors as well as the upscale people who live in the immediate area. Along with their taking a leap of faith and letting me change the menu completely, I also brought the décor up to date so it would fit perfectly with the menu I was creating. When putting together a memorable meal for each client, I

enjoy the process of hand selecting what will go into each and every meal.”

There are more hits than misses to this meal (and when things were slightly flawed, it was simply due to a slight excess of salt), which we decided would be the blind tasting meal. Though it all, however, The San Diego-born Strong’s showmanship clearly shows he’s been around the oven block a few times, from his formative teen years training under one of Washington DC’s top pastry chefs, to honing his skills at a private dining room that mostly catered to members of the Senate and Congress (he recalls how politicians would leave after one course to vote and return in time for the other course). His career path would later take him out of the Capitol and into stints in Ritz-Carlton Hotels in Philadelphia and Atlanta, as well as sojourns into Barcelona, Spain and Hong Kong before the lure of the California lifestyle drew him back home.

Among the delights on our separate tasting menus (Strong shrewdly gave us completely different things to show us how serious he was about customization), the highlights included the Sautéed Turbot with gulf prawns in a shellfish lemon verbena sauce, the John Dory with Caramelized Onions and Pistachio Sauce, Sautéed Foie Gras in a porcini mushroom soup and the Warm Lobster and Mango Salad with Pineapple Sate Dressing. The Pork Loin and Lamb offerings, meanwhile, were solid comfort food. Among the desserts—also crafted by Strong—we thought the pre-dessert of pine nut sorbet and berries was refreshingly un-sweet, while the Chocolate Trio Dessert Plate (consisting of a brandied cherry cake, Swiss milk chocolate ice cream and minted mousse) was a winner.

Though Doug Arrango is one of the hottest names in the L.A. dining scene right now, it is Executive Chef Christopher Bennett along with the support of his wife, Julie/manager, brother in law/sommelier Robert Evans and staff keeping the name of Arrango alive. The restaurant, which was originally based in Palm Springs, was created to honor the memory of Bennett’s cousin, noted esteemed television writer/producer Doug Arrango (The Jefferson’s, All in the Family, Too Close for Comfort) with a lively ambiance and sensational food that successfully balances comfort food and fine dining flourishes. Against a lovely, American Beauty-rose colored backdrop and Trattoria-styled furniture, fellow journalist Anita Talbert and I enjoyed simple-but-elegantly executed signature appetizers like the soup of the day (a hearty lentil, perfect to warn off the



Chef Craig Strong Ritz Carlton

chill of January rains), lightly breaded artichokes, Nantucket bay scallops and Prosciutto in mint-infused olive oil and a show-stopping grilled salmon appetizer drizzled in a lovely puree of arrugula and capers atop a flavorful onion gruyere pancake. Though their signature ribs dish was tempting (a must try in the future), the brisket-like pot roast and a perfectly executed Asian-style cod (crispy on the outside and buttery on the inside) were satisfying on all levels. Also original was their adaptation of the popular butternut squash ravioli, where the mild brown butter sauce commonly served with it was flavored up several notches with a layer of tomato sauce. Desserts, which change nightly, are classic but made original via presentation and side sauces, and the house blend lemon-mint herbal tea was a sensational way to conclude a meal that was as rich and warm service-wise as it was recipe wise. Kudos to Bennett and his team for making this family enterprise an L.A. experience.

At Saddle Peak Lodge, a long-standing sentimental favorite of Publisher Raspin Stuart, the changing of the culinary guard offered up the perfect opportunity for me to experience the Calabasas-situated fine dining getaway for myself. After several years of working in a kitchen with the industrious and acclaimed Executive Chef Warren Schwartz at the helm, Mark Murillo now steps up to the Executive Chef plate. Prior to joining Saddle Peak, he spent one and a half years at Felt in West Hollywood, where he also became chef de cuisine. His first, serious restaurant training came during the two years he spent at Café Pinot working under Executive Chef Bernard Rank, spending time at virtually every line station. According to Murillo, his primary cooking muse was his mother, who eventually talked him into taking his love of cooking to a professional level. He enrolled at the California

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Nine Thirty Bar



Mr. Cecil's Ribs



School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena in 1998, graduated in 2000 and has continued to ascend up the local culinary ladder ever since.

Under Murillo's capable hands, the updated menu sports some modern and dramatic touches while remaining true to Saddle Peak's traditional roots and appeal. This is particularly true with the gorgeous spread of appetizers, which included Seared La Belle farms foie gras on candied apples and toasted brioche, with champagne-rhubarb sauce and balsamic reduction; Smoked salmon with toasted pumpernickel, dill cream, pickled red onions, and baby greens; Seared diver scallops with asparagus puree, pea tendrils, smoked bacon and pommes gaufrettes or the seductive Sautéed Tiger shrimp with cauliflower compote, blood oranges and orange-Muscato drizzle. Murillo also adapts his natural style to the meat and game dishes. Though everybody knows about Elk, which is admittedly a very acquired taste, you just cannot go wrong with a Mesquite grilled Black Angus cote du boeuf, with Yukon Gold whipped potatoes, caramelized sweet onion sautéed spinach and red wine reduction or a Grilled New Zealand rack of lamb with Ricotta gnocchi, baby turnips, black Tuscan kale, honey-yoghurt and mint dust. The lean buffalo with twice baked potato, creamed spinach and béarnaise sauce is a great transitional choice for those getting to know the “game.”

Ever mindful of vegetarian palates, Murillo included a very hearty and comforting Butternut squash and Mascarpone ravioli dish in sage-parsley brown butter with mixed wild mushrooms. Fish lovers, meanwhile, will savor the Queen Charlot wild salmon with an unusual blend of flavors and color derived from haricot verts, fingerlings, hedgehog mushrooms, chive nage and lemon-caviar sauce. Since the dessert menu was also daunting with its unusual and earthy choices, we had to opt for the Dessert Sampler, a lovely array of “deadly sins” for fruit and chocolate fans alike. You just could not go wrong with the Chocolate Macadamia nut tart, frozen Mascarpone soufflé, Dulce de leche crème brûlée. However, there is no denying that fresh berries and warm banana and huckleberry bread pudding was quite special.

In Westwood, step into the W hotel, and you are instantly on vacation in an ambiance that is fragrant, modern and filled with beautiful young things. In some respects, their restaurant Nine Thirty is a seamless continuation of that vibe. But when it comes to the food, it's rooted in traditional American cooking, thanks to 27 year-old executive chef Travis Lett and, in turn, the chefs who have mentored him and inspired him in the years he transformed from a fine-arts student to an emerging culinary star. “I started working in restaurants to pay for school, but I soon realized (cuisine) was my true calling,” says

the New Jersey native who has been making a name for himself in L.A. for the past three years after some educational stints in Colorado. “Some of my best teachers included Tiziano Gordon of L'Osteria and James Mazzio of Triani. Kelly Courtney, who was a Food & Wine “Best New Chef” a few years ago, was instrumental in helping me shape the menu from the bottom up with the best local produce and ingredients anywhere.”

Even with his reverence for the chefs who taught him the tricks of the trade, Lett is already proving himself to be a talent in his own right. Of the small plates Anita Talbert and I tried, everything was a hit, from the savory candy appeal of the merquez-stuffed bautista dates wrapped in bacon with a piquillo pepper puree, to a lively roasted organic beet salad with blood orange pieces, aged sherry vinegar and warm hazelnut oil to the indulgent chanterelle mushrooms in crème fraîche sauce. The garlic spinach and rapini sides were also simple but astonishingly flavorful. The highlight was the braised beef short rib plate in a zinfandel-based sauce that really did remind us of the brisket grandma used to make (growing up in Midwestern Jewish homes) only better. The weak spot of the meal was the pan roasted monkfish. Though the sauce and side rapini were good, the fish itself was tough and fishy—but imagine how good the preparation could be with the right piece of fish. For the next visit, I would be tempted to try the Rib eye steak and the veal rib chop, based on reactions from people at the other tables...In the meantime, Anita and I savored some inspired Pomegranate Martinis from Scott Anthony Warren, Nine Thirty's knowledgeable and creative bartender who has been on the L.A. scene for 25 years and treats every guest like a veteran customer.

“I wanted to make the menu simple, approachable and based on the freshest things available to us seasonally,” sums up Lett. We're not about crazy, over the top presentation or strange sauces. We want to create food everybody will identify with.”

While the contemporary, elegant Breeze is based out of the Century Plaza Hotel, Chef Andreas Nieto has made the menu friendly enough to enable the restaurant to become one of the “neighborhood spots” for area residents while delivering the presence and panache to lure repeat business from professionals who make their homes in Century City during the work week. Nieto brings to his current base of operations fifteen years worth of experience developing menus for four- and five-star hotels and fine-dining establishments. The French trained Nieto has also gained a reputation, thanks to his imaginative mix of pan-Pacific, Mediterranean, regional American and increasingly popular Spa cuisine. His resume includes executive chef stints at Diaghilev Restaurant, the Beverly Hills Hotel and Bungalows

and the Loews Santa Monica Hotel.

While like other upscale restaurants, Nieto's menu emphasizes local produce and seafood, they even go as far as seasoning the food with herbs grown in the Century Plaza's on-site organic garden, making for an unexpected home-y touch. Much of the menu is California classic done right, from a generous Tuna Tartare, to steamed Lobster Dumplings, to a fantastic lobster entrée salad to one of the best scallop dishes in town. While some restaurants give you three or four scallops and fill out the plate with a fancy starch, Breeze just gives you a wonderful, generous plate of nothing but scallops garnished with a wonderful, light balsamic-based sauce and fresh-cut apple straws. Their pasta is also surprisingly good. While the popular halibut dish was too dry and slightly bland on our outing, Nieto's team deserves props for a pretty, flavorful presentation. But if you are jonesing for something small, like a bite of sushi (and some really creative sushi plates, at that), Breeze has you covered with a nice sushi bar.

Though customers still enter Mr. Cecil's California Ribs in search of the old Presto's in Sherman Oaks, more often than not, they will stay to check out the food and then become repeat customers, according to owner and chef Jonathan Burrows. His signature dish, of course, is the ribs, which are served “au natural” with the house-made sauces (one sweet, one spicy) on the side. Although many things are prepared with some southern accents (i.e. fried foods getting their flavor from lard), Burrows has worked very hard to offset that with some decidedly healthful touches, like offering sauces and garnishes on the side. “I believe I have developed a particular California style of barbecue, taking a quintessentially western offering and adding both Asian influences and the California ideal of making things as healthy as possible,” he says. “I want

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*Saddle Peak Lodge*



the flavor from the meats and vegetables to come through, and not have the sauces dominate.”

Although Burrows is not a “new face” chef in the way the other chefs in this story are, he is living proof that you can be anything you want at any age you choose. He already had a most inspiring career in New York Theater, and later, as a Hollywood producer (credits include “Fletch,” “Texasville” and “The Iceman Cometh”). However, as the top guns at studios became increasingly younger and ageism became a hot topic, Burrows felt the time was right in 2000 to explore his other passion, cooking—something he cultivated over many years preparing meals for dates and friends. Although foodie magazines and customers alike were strongly positive with his West L.A. restaurant, and later, the Sherman Oaks outpost, he decided culinary training could give him the edge he needed to make his restaurants more substantial than the usual Hollywood eatery endeavor.

“At the Epicurean School in West Hollywood, I learned the basics needed to not only perfect the things I taught myself, but also explain the recipes to the kitchen staff so they can maintain consistent high quality,” says Burrows. “With the training that I started three years ago, I really felt I could call myself a chef. Now, when I am asked to participate in food-driven events like Bon Appetit’s Make-A-Wish benefit, I am totally awed and humbled when chefs at some of the city’s most revered restaurants treat me and talk to me like a colleague. For example, Lee Hefter of Spago approached me to tell me he loved my food, and Ludovic Lefebvre had told me he enjoyed eating at my restaurant.”

Burrows’ next goal is to expand Mr. Cecil’s, first with ten restaurants between Santa Barbara and San Diego, and then across the United States in the coming years. The real test of a menu is to see how various alternatives to the ribs could hold up, and on that score, there were some pleasant surprises (especially as one dining partner was Kosher and the other Vegetarian). Though there were some nice, if perfunctory, vegetable skewers, my non-meat eating friend adored the vegetable sides and said in the future she could make a meal of the string beans, glazed carrots, and corn on the cob in chili-lime butter. The teriyaki salmon, though slightly dry, was flavorful and generous. As the omnivore of the group, I

took the opportunity to taste various things I had not experienced on previous visits (as this restaurant is in my neighborhood), such as the chili (with a very thick, comfort-foodie texture), the Cajun links (beautifully cooked and with just the right amount of spice, and great when dipped into the sweet barbeque sauce) and the Short Ribs Dinner (Burrow’s personal favorite) which in its own way reminded me of my grandmother’s brisket served on Thanksgiving, but like the ribs, with the sauces smartly on the side. Other things I have enjoyed in the past that I could recommend are the fries, BBQ Beef Sandwiches and the Jonathan’s Selection Appetizer plate for large groups who just want a little snack.

Finally, if a weekend escape takes you through the Newport Beach/Costa Mesa area, a trip to Sutra is the perfect place to see how our neighbors in the O.C. live it up. While the cast of *The O.C.* (the fictional one) would be perfectly at home in the plush, jewel-toned, East Indian-influenced space (which, by the way, becomes a lively club on weekends), the crowd you will find there covers people of all ages and walks of life, giving it a genuine feel of neighborhood casual chic. The menu, created by Parisian bred and educated chef Stephane Beaucamp, is evolving from its original Asian-Fusion concept to something, well, more original. There are some hits and misses in the appetizer category (i.e. soggy dumplings, good but somewhat routine spring rolls), other sexy selections are winning, such as the Sashimi with a substantial apple/sesame vinaigrette, a spicy tuna tartare served in lightly fried seaweed cones and the Spicy Shrimp Sutra. Though I was dining with friends keeping Kosher and made selections accordingly, word from other tables had it that the lamb dish was quite exceptional as were the beef lettuce wraps and mango glazed pork ribs. The very French Crispy Goat Cheese entrée salad was also a winner, thanks to the surprising, sweet addition of the apple-mango chutney. The desserts, meanwhile, in keeping with the restaurant’s decidedly sexy theme were right on the money. While the Black Chocolate Goddess is a sure bet for chocoholics, and the Love Apple Tart was a treat both garnished with exceptional, clean-tasting gelatos custom made for the restaurant.