

Art ON A PLATE

Delicious food and fine art have long been considered two of life's greatest pleasures. So why not combine the two interests with a museum dining excursion? As a complement to their artistic fare, many Southern California institutions feature restaurants and cafés that cater to culture lovers with creative, flavorful cuisine. Here are a few of our favorites. BY BETH FHANER ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY VANESSA STUMP

Seafood
bouillabaisse



LOS ANGELES

THE RESTAURANT AT THE GETTY CENTER

The J. Paul Getty Museum; 1200 Getty Center Drive; (310) 440-6810; getty.edu

For museum dining where the beautifully plated food matches the stunning views, look no further than The Restaurant at the Getty Center. Aside from the world-class art on display here, patrons could easily spend a day just taking in the colorful gardens and Richard Meier's ingenious architecture, which blends seamlessly with the landscaping. The Restaurant's upscale dining room is spacious and sophisticated, with one wall entirely devoted to the word "taste" and its definition.

Executive chef Mayet Cristobal's Mediterranean-California-inspired menu changes seasonally, and the dishes are often extensions of featured exhibits at the museum. Diners rave about the Dungeness crab cakes with smoked paprika aioli and the seafood-packed bouillabaisse. The reasonably priced three-course prix-fixe lunch (\$34; ends May 6), in coordination with the "Pacific Standard Time" exhibits, is a good way to sample the restaurant's offerings. Additionally, The Restaurant offers dinner on Saturday evenings and a Sunday brunch, as well as a wine list and full bar.

Artful Ambience: Full-service fine dining in an elegant room with white tablecloths, sage-green chairs, and fresh flowers on each table; floor-to-ceiling windows offer stunning views of the Santa Monica Mountains; patio dining is also available

Top Picks for the Palate: Seasonal dishes may include Dungeness crab cakes, striped bass, bouillabaisse, citrus-glazed short ribs, Cobb salad, and pear and apple galette for dessert

Current Exhibit: "In Focus: Los Angeles, 1945–1980"



Striped bass



Triple chocolate "threat"



SAN DIEGO

THE PRADO AT BALBOA PARK

The San Diego Museum of Art
1549 El Prado, Balboa Park
(619) 557-9441; pradobalboa.com

Just a short walk from The San Diego Museum of Art, The Prado is located in the House of Hospitality, a National Historic Landmark, which was originally built for the 1915–1916 Panama–California Exposition. The beautifully restored 400-seat restaurant and lounge—with its inviting entrance off an inner courtyard that features Spanish Moor architecture, a large water fountain, and potted flowers and plants—is a great setting for special occasion meals or a romantic dinner. Look for Martin Blank’s colorful, hand-blown glass orbs found throughout the restaurant on walls, shelves, and stands; his artwork also fills the fireplace in the lobby.

Diners should allow plenty of time to peruse the exhaustive California cuisine menu, which includes an array of appetizers, salads, sandwiches, meats, and seafood dishes.

The nearby San Diego Museum of Art features a renowned permanent collection, including Spanish and Italian old masters, South Asian paintings, and 19- and 20th-century American paintings and sculptures.

Artful Ambience: A warm interior dining room with mustard-yellow walls, hanging Spanish lanterns, and glass artwork. Diners can opt for seating in the lounge area or on the terrace overlooking lush gardens.

Top Picks for the Palate: Short rib potpie; spicy calamari fries; halibut and clams cassoulet; cumin-roasted shaved pork *torta*; triple chocolate “threat” for dessert

Current Exhibits: “Walk From the Sun” (photography); “Echoes of the Past: The Buddhist Temples of Xiangtangshan”



Salmon Cobb salad



SANTA ANA

TANGATA

Bowers Museum; 2002 N. Main Street
(714) 550-0906; www.bowers.org

The Bowers Museum has a well-deserved reputation for bringing world-class exhibits to Orange County, including the recent “Warriors, Tombs, and Temples: China’s Enduring Legacy” exhibition (ends March 4). Now, Bowers is making a name for itself in the culinary world with Patina Group’s Tangata (“mankind” in the tribal Maori language of New Zealand). Overlooking the courtyard of the Bowers’ beautiful Spanish-Colonial building, the upscale 160-seat restaurant is a hidden gem in Orange County.

Through an open kitchen, diners can watch executive chef Gregg Wiele and his team create modern California dishes prepared with French flair, such as crispy duck steak with duck confit ravioli, an albacore tuna Nicoise sandwich, and seared Maine sea scallops with clam chowder sauce.

Tangata’s large skylights and glass doors allow plenty of natural light to illuminate the space. Service is attentive but not intrusive, and the menu is moderately priced.



Tahitian vanilla crème brûlée

Artful Ambience: A contemporary dining room with Southwestern decor, white tablecloths, and fresh flowers; alfresco dining on two patios that overlook the mission-style courtyard; a full bar with limited seating

Top Picks for the Palate: The eclectic menu changes seasonally and may include salmon Cobb salad, an Angus burger, chow mein noodles, and Tahitian vanilla crème brûlée for dessert

Current Exhibit: “Sacred Gold: Pre-Hispanic Art of Columbia” opens March 31

SANTA BARBARA

MUSEUM CAFE

Santa Barbara Museum of Art
1130 State Street
(805) 884-6487; sbma.net

With its 27,000 works of art, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art rivals museums in much larger cities. Highlights of the permanent collection include classical antiquities, Latin American art, and masterpieces of French Impressionism. The museum also owns more Monet paintings than any other West Coast museum.

Tucked directly behind the museum store at street level, you'll find the Museum Cafe, which serves lunch and tapas, as well as extensive coffee and tea selections. Inspired by current and former exhibits at the museum, the menu focuses on a combination of flavors and tastes to reflect either an artist or region of art.

Chef-owner Brenda Simon uses local, seasonal, and organic ingredients to create her quirkily named entrées, including The Little Leonardo (whole-grain capellini with herbed turkey sausage) and Reframing America (Louisiana gumbo). For a sweet ending to your meal, be sure to check out the house-made bread pudding and brownies.



Artful Ambience: Minimalist yet warm decor; intimate dining area with approximately a dozen tables and a small counter seating area; betta fish bowls add a whimsical touch

Top Picks for the Palate: Lobster ravioli with roasted prawns; green coconut curry shrimp and soba noodle salad; various tapas

Current Exhibits: “Pasadena to Santa Barbara: A Selected History of Art in Southern California, 1951–1969”; “Publicly Private: Enrico Natali and Doug Rickard” (photography)

TOP LEFT: CHUCK PLACE

LONG BEACH

CLAIRE’S AT THE MUSEUM

Long Beach Museum of Art
2300 E. Ocean Boulevard
(562) 439-2119, ext. 270; lbma.org/cafe.html

Located on the first floor of the historic Anderson House, a Craftsman-style structure built in 1911, Claire’s at the Museum is a waterfront restaurant boasting unobstructed views of the *Queen Mary* and Catalina Island. On a pleasant day, opt for patio seating, which surrounds *Structure and Flow*, a huge water fountain-sculpture by prolific artist and the restaurant’s namesake Claire Falkenstein (1908–1997).

Open for breakfast and lunch, the eatery showcases California cuisine, including a variety of salads, soups, sandwiches, and pastas. Claire’s is also one of the most popular Sunday brunch spots in town, serving an extensive breakfast menu all day (try the Eggstravaganza Omelet), along with specials on mimosas. Afterward, head over to the Long Beach Museum of Art to view the permanent collection, which includes early 20th-century European art, California Modernism, and contemporary California art.



Artful Ambience: Casual, oceanfront dining in the historic Anderson House and on the outdoor patio with numerous yellow umbrella tables; along with the museum’s free admission every Thursday, Claire’s offers a happy hour from 3 to 8 P.M., with occasional live music.

Top Picks for the Palate: Crème brûlée french toast; blackened salmon salad; Museum Work of Art—a starter combination of bruschetta, calamari, flautas, and spinach-artichoke dip; banana bread pudding for dessert

Current Exhibits: “Oskar Fischinger”; “Small Expressions” (fiber art)

PASADENA

GARDEN CAFÉ

Norton Simon Museum of Art; 411 W. Colorado Boulevard; (626) 449-6840; nortonsimon.org

The Norton Simon Museum, renowned as having one of the most distinguished private art collections ever assembled, specializes in American 20th-century and European art (Renaissance to the 20th century), as well as South and Southeast Asian art. Look for celebrated artwork by Rembrandt, Degas, Picasso, and van Gogh, among others.

The Garden Café overlooks a tranquil sculpture garden and a pond of water lilies—a scene straight out of an Impressionist painting. Designed by landscape designer Nancy Goslee Power, the 79,000-square-foot garden area—which features Australian tea trees, lavender plants, Japanese sedge, and hundreds of other plant and tree species—was indeed inspired by Monet’s home in Giverny, France.

Operated by chef Joachim Splichal’s Patina Restaurant Group, the restaurant is casual and affordable, with a tasty selection of sandwiches, salads, and soup of the day. Order at the counter, and food will be delivered to your table. Beer and wine (by the glass or bottle) is also available. Whether you want to eat, sip, or just relax, the Garden Café’s lush, serene setting offers a quiet respite.



Marinated portobello sandwich



Carrot cake

Artful Ambience: Informal patio dining overlooking a sculpture garden and a free-form pond; small seating area with umbrella tables and heat lamps

Top Picks for the Palate: Southwest chicken quesadilla; marinated portobello sandwich; ham and Swiss *panini*; carrot cake for dessert

Current Exhibits: “Proof: The Rise of Printmaking in Southern California”; “The Original Print: An Introduction to Printmaking in the Postwar Period” **W**

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