

# LA Story: Downtown Reclaims Its Role

Los Angeles - home of Hollywood fantasy - is a city always reinventing itself. While many of its administrative and commercial institutions were located 'downtown' for decades, much of the city's cultural and social activity took place farther West, in Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, Santa Monica, and in recent years, Venice Beach. Downtown LA, with its broad streets lined with both Art Deco and contemporary buildings, was a social backwater, a place where people might work or attend a concert, but otherwise escape as soon as the sun went down.

BY JAMAL RAYYIS



Partners Matteo Ferdinandi (l) and Chef Angelo Auriana (r) offer a toast to the evening to come

Times have certainly changed. Streets that at night could have been movie sets for some dystopian future, are now alive with museums and galleries, cafés and clubs. Lofts once devoted to small-scale manufacturing have been converted into luxury living spaces, and people actually walk rather than drive. In short, it has become a neighborhood.

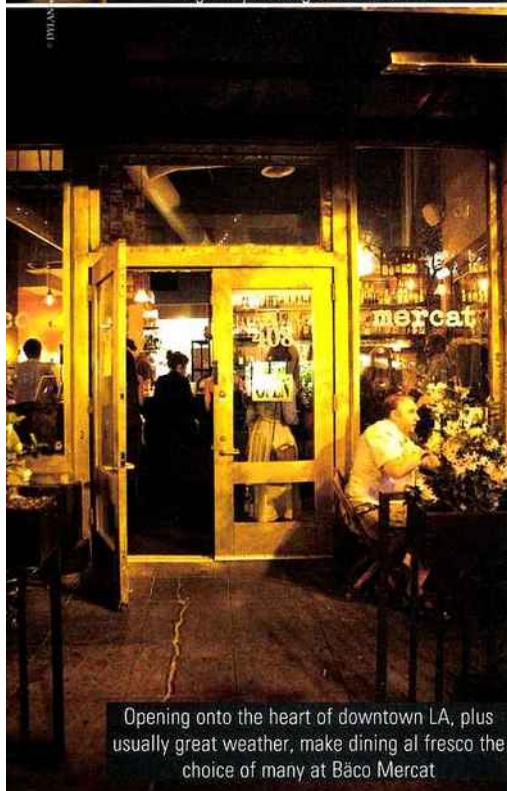
Several restaurants have opened in the last few years, too - ones that capture LA's open spirit and multiple cultural influences, places such as Bottega Louis (Franco-Italian), Drago Centro (Italian), Church & State (French), Alma (New American), Mo-Chico (Peruvian), The Spice Table (East Asian meets US Diner), Rivera (Pan-Latino), all restaurants that

experiment in ways that local chefs haven't done in a generation. After years of dormancy, Los Angeles today can be considered one of the country's most dynamic restaurant scenes.

Bäco Mercat, in Los Angeles' historic Bank District, proves the point perfectly. Centered on the 'bäco' a flatbread sandwich of chef/owner Josef Centeno's creation, the restaurant offers a mosaic of both casual and high dining. Both on the sidewalk terrace and the post-modern appointed, high ceilinged dining room, guests share small plates inspired by multiple idioms: Middle Eastern, Hispanic, East Asian, Italian, and French. Throw in a bäco or a coca (a Catalan bread) sandwich or two, a vegetable dish and one of several permutations of fish, fowl, or mammal and one has a satisfying, often inspiring meal. The 'original' bäco, made from pork belly, beef 'carnitas', and a peppery Catalan almond sauce is guaranteed to generate cravings late into the night. The



Bâco Mercat's great drink list and casual dishes regularly draw guests to the bar



Opening onto the heart of downtown LA, plus usually great weather, make dining al fresco the choice of many at Bâco Mercat

blistered okra with tomato, fenugreek and basil deliciously plays on a nexus between Africa, the Americas, South Asia and the Mediterranean. Squid stuffed with shrimp, fava, pine nuts and cardamom is tasty, if less exciting than one might imagine. Not so with the duck rilette bisteeya, which is a novel take on the classic Moroccan pastry, sweet and savory at once, with pistachio, honey mustard and fried egg. Heartier appetites can indulge in the pork 'Porterhouse' that weighs nearly one kilo and is seasoned with espelette chili, sage, pine nut and pomegranates. Bâco Mercat's creativity extends to its bar, with inventive cocktails such as the Monte Sevilla, made from Aperol, amontillado sherry, lemon, and orange bitters; homemade vinegar-based sodas in flavors such as raspberry-tarragon; over a dozen craft beers; and a diverse, international wine list with 50 bottles that include Giornata's Wild Horse Vineyard Vermentino from Paso Robles, a Pheasant's Tears Rkatsiteli from Georgia, and Paolo Bea's Rosso de Veo from Umbria.

Offering a well-composed, moderate-sized list of stellar, mostly Italian wines, is Factory Kitchen, a trattoria located in the Arts district, on the once-industrial outskirts of downtown LA. Located in an old factory on the appropriately named, Factory Street, Factory Kitchen indeed has an industrial feel to it, with cracked concrete floors, columns, bare walls and an open kitchen, all softened up with rubbed wood tables and leather-backed chairs. But, the restaurant partners' experience in luxury Italian restaurants, Chef Angelo Auriana at Valentino, and Matteo Ferdinandi at Drago Centro, shows there is nothing at all industrial about the food or the solicitous service. The cooking is mostly, though not totally, northern Italian. Auriana's mandilii ('handkerchief' in Genovese) pasta dressed with pesto is as silky as anything from a Milan atelier. His quaglia (quail),



Located in the once-industrial Arts District, Factory Kitchen has become a beacon of culinary excellence on the outskirts of Los Angeles' downtown

in which citrus-scented quail is seared with Mission figs, guanciale (cured pork jowl) and a natural jus, showcases the harmony between Californian natural food and the simple luxuries of the Mediterranean. The moleche is a study in seasonality and freshness, featuring pan-roasted soft shell crab with heirloom tomatoes, sugar snap peas and olives.

Factory Kitchen's wine list offers several temptations from the usual places: Barolo, Montalcino, Friuli, and Chianti, but there are a few unexpected gems, too, including the fresh red, Primofiore by Veneto master Quintarelli and the earthy but delicate Passopisciaro, a declassified Etna Rosso. La Ginestraia's Pigato is the perfect companion to Chef Auriana's mandilli. For Los Angeles wine lovers eager to drink their aged treasures, Factory Kitchen charges a modest \$20 corkage fee. ■

### **Bâco Mercat**

408 S Main St,  
Los Angeles, CA 90013

Tel. +(213) 687-8808

<http://bacomercat.com>

Lunch: Mon-Sun 11:30am-2:30pm

Dinner: Mon-Thu 5:30pm - 11pm

Fri-Sat 5:30pm-midnight - Sun 5pm-10pm

### **Factory Kitchen**

1300 Factory Pl.,  
Los Angeles, CA 90013

Tel. +(213) 996-6000

[www.thefactorykitchen.com](http://www.thefactorykitchen.com)

Lunch: Mon-Fri 11:30am -2:30pm

Dinner: Sun-Mon 5:30p-10pm

Tues-Thu, 5:30pm -10:30pm

Fri-Sat, 5:30pm-11pm