



## HIDDEN TREASURES

### Pasadena ‘food explorer’ Colleen Dunn Bates hunts down the San Gabriel Valley’s lesser-known restaurants in ‘Eat: Los Angeles’

By [Cindy Arora](#) 01/14/2012

It’s over coffee and a strudel from Europe Bakery that Colleen Dunn Bates confesses that while she does love food, she wouldn’t necessarily call herself a foodie. A foodie, by definition, is a person who has an avid interest in the latest food fads — this could be anything from foie gras foam to the current frenzy of baconmania. But Bates, publisher of the dining guide “EAT: Los Angeles” is more of a food explorer, someone always on the hunt for that undiscovered neighborhood gem. It could be an upscale wine bistro in Santa Monica, a taqueria in Boyle Heights, Chinese food in Monterey Park or a tidy spot for the ladies-who-lunch in Pasadena.

It was this type of thinking that inspired Bates, 51, who lives in Pasadena with her husband, Darryl Bates, and owns the locally based publishing company Prospect Park Books, to create the hyper-local “EAT: Los Angeles.” Her vision was to create a unique guidebook that would delve into LA’s food scene, more deeply than just celebrity chefs and Michelin-rated hotspots. Instead, it would explore the specialty markets, ethnic eats and the uncharted neighborhoods off the critic-beaten path and often overlooked.

With its 2009 edition a local success, Bates just released the updated second edition with two extra chapters, 1,200 listings and 56 more pages of new places to discover. Bates handpicked a motley crew of food writers plying their trade in LA’s dining trenches to create a guide that reads more like a list of favorites put together by friends who happen to know the best secret spots.

“The idea was I wanted to tell people in a sentence or two why they should try someplace. Almost as if you were in an elevator with someone and you had to describe it quickly,” explained Bates, who also edits and co-authors the hometown-pasadena.com Web site, which focuses on food, arts, people and events in the Crown City. “And I didn’t just want restaurants, I wanted food ... there’s so much here, the markets, the bakeries, the tea shops, and I wanted to be able to show all of that.”

Pasadena and the San Gabriel Valley aren't typically lauded for award-winning restaurants, unlike Hollywood and the Westside. But as the area continues to evolve and new restaurateurs move on, it is making its own distinct mark in the culinary landscape of Los Angeles.

Linda Burum, food writer for the Los Angeles Times and author of "A Guide to Ethnic Eating in Los Angeles," wrote about the San Gabriel Valley for "EAT: Los Angeles" and described the area as the "largest, splashiest, suburban Chinatown in North America." She focused on the cities of Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, Arcadia and Rosemead and put together a small sampling of some of her favorite dim sum places, noodle houses, Shandong and shabu-shabu spots.

Burum has spent several years scouting the San Gabriel Valley, watching it quickly grow and become an exciting dining area frequented by Chinese expats and food adventurers, like herself, willing to search out the restaurants, bakeries and supermarkets that make this region feel like another country, sans the 20-hour plane ride.

"It's like going to a foreign country or four," explains Burum. "You can go to China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong all in one. But I still couldn't include them all, there's just too much."

Bates, who grew up just over the hill in Los Feliz, remembers Pasadena's reputation as being slightly provincial in comparison to the rest (or west) of the LA area. Not known for its thriving nightlife or cutting-edge restaurant scene, the city began to find its own niche when places like John Bull Pub and the Espresso Bar opened in the center of town.

These days, the area is a hodgepodge of restaurants — chains, mom & pops, new independents, classic institutions and ethnic haunts.

Pat Saperstein, blogger of the popular [eatingla.com](http://eatingla.com) and a contributor to "EAT: Los Angeles," found that a huge part of enjoying the dining scene in Los Angeles and Pasadena is the willingness to get in your car and explore outside the comforts of chains and your neighborhood.

One of the favorites for Saperstein is Daisy Mint, a Korean-Thai-Chinese eatery in East Pasadena that's decorated in flea-market fashion and vintage chandeliers. "This is a new approach to dining that more places in Pasadena should follow. A bit more fun and modern," she said.

Other restaurants noted in the guidebook for their sense of spirit include The Dining Room at the Langham, Huntington Hotel & Spa, where Michael Voltaggio — Bravo's latest "Top Chef" winner — is now heading the kitchen and having fun with molecular gastronomy.

In South Pasadena, there's Mamma's Brick Oven Pizza (710 S. Fair Oaks Ave.); The Counter (140 Shoppers Lane), a small Santa Monica burger chain, opened on Lake Avenue. On the western side of Pasadena, the lively bakery and sandwich spot Little Flower Candy Co (1424 W. Colorado Blvd) has beguiled local moms.

“We just picked places that get that you have to have a more interesting menu — that if you try a little bit harder with décor it does go a long way, and that people in this area are sophisticated and you don’t need to dumb down flavor,” Saperstein said.

Going beyond the restaurant scene, the guide directs readers to various hot spots for satisfying their hungers (or thirsts) at home: Altadena’s Super King Market, jam and condiment king E. Waldo Ward of Sierra Madre, Mission Wines in South Pasadena, Gerlach’s Liquor in Pasadena and, of course, the Pasadena Farmer’s Market.

---

*The “EAT: Los Angeles” guidebook is available at local bookstores and Nicole Gourmet Foods, Savor the Flavor, Porta Via and Once Upon a Time. Purchase it online at [eat-la.com](http://eat-la.com), which is updated daily with new restaurant information. You can also keep up to date on local dining news at [hometown-pasadena.com](http://hometown-pasadena.com).*