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# LETTER FROM L.A.

What everyone will be talking about this spring

By Margot Dougherty



Faye Dunaway at the Beverly Hills Hotel, 1977

Los Angeles, that city of spectacular reinvention, is outdoing itself once again. An influx of chefs besotted with its farmers markets is gilding the restaurant scene, new galleries and boutiques are challenging New York's supposed art and retail supremacy, and close-

up-conscious celebrities aren't the only ones getting work done: Two grande-dame hotels trying to avoid losing the affections of the "It" crowd have also undergone face-lifts to keep up with a spate of competitors.

For example: The SLS Hotel may have

youth, a Jose Andres restaurant, and Philippe Starck decor as its calling cards, but the iconic **BEVERLY HILLS HOTEL** now claims the city's largest suites, which make ideal headquarters for those traveling with children and nannies in tow. The two Ultra Presidential Bungalows have three bedrooms, each of which has a private garden. Inspired by the Hollywood homes of the '40s and '50s, interior designer Lauren Rottet made gardens the suites' centerpieces. Living room glass walls look into a lush tangle of tropical plants, the master baths (with heated floors) have doors leading into private courtyards with outdoor showers, and the premises are guarded by ornamental gates with hand-hammered banana leaves. Each villa has a waterfall-edged lap pool and artwork by the likes of Claes Oldenburg and Larry Bell, and in the master suites everything that moves, including the curtains, can be remote-controlled.

For those happier in a more secluded aerie, the other big news is the reopening of the **HOTEL BEL-AIR** this summer. Celebrities have been calling GM Tim Lee for months hoping to get into their favorite rooms on Day One. Though the 12-acre Eden was becoming antiquated—no Wi-Fi, no spa—a two-year renovation promises to make it completely current. Along with Wi-Fi (of course), there will be a dozen new villas with outdoor fireplaces and plunge pools, and the Presidential Suite will trump even the Beverly Hills's in the size sweeps (it's larger by 1,225 square feet). And since a very large number of locals swear allegiance to La Prairie's Skin Caviar creams, perhaps the most highly anticipated addition is the brand's new on-site spa, where the products may be outdone by the grand treatment rooms, which have oversize soaking tubs and patios overlooking the emerald green grounds.

Maybe it's the influence of food shows like *Top Chef* or fallout from the gourmet food truck phenomenon (which is still going strong), but Angelenos—who have treasured their market-fresh produce for as long as it has been Alice Waters's cause celebre—have gotten much more adventurous in their dining of late. At **CLEO**, in the Redbury hotel (where moody lighting and a quirky-chic aesthetic has proved a magnet for screenwriters and creative types), Stella McCartney-clad diners are going wild for chef Danny Elmaleh's



Mediterranean mezze, including warm flatbreads, beef cheek tagine, and, especially, the spiced Brussels sprouts, which are competing with fennel to be the city's vegetable du jour. Photographer Matthew Rolston is the Redbury's design director, and he's given Cleo a cozy decor that mixes sage velvets, bleached wood, and mismatched tables that front an open kitchen—another feature of almost every new L.A. restaurant.

At Sang Yoon's **LUKSHON**, in the foodie-heaven district of Culver City, the kitchen acts almost as a stage, and it turns out mod, Southeast Asian-inspired dishes like duck popiah (spring rolls made with leek pancakes) and the delectable Ma La ris de veau (numbingly hot pickled sweetbreads). Fans will no doubt clamor for the chef to begin bottling his sambal and sriracha, both of which he makes in-house.

Though everyone is still vying for a table at Mozza, **SCARPETTA**—the handsome, understated restaurant at the Montage in Beverly Hills—might soon edge it out as the most coveted reservation in town. Bicoastal locals and industry types sit near the patio fountain and order chef Scott Gonant's outrageously fresh crudo, the signature petite domes of earthy spaghetti with tomato sauce, and bowls of truffle-topped creamy polenta. Farther east, another freshman darling is **HATFIELD'S**, which has clean, burnished woods, warm lighting, and white linens that make it feel like a dining room from the 1940s. The dishes are soulful and elegant, especially the shrimp espetlette with creamy crab rice tossed with preserved lemon and roasted peanuts, and the sugar-and-spice beignets, served warm with chocolate fondue and a shot of ginger milkshake. And in Malibu, **SAVORY** is where Julia Roberts and David Geffen dine on supreme locally produced comfort food, like pasta tossed with sea urchin and creme fraiche that's as rich and warming as a sable stole.

Alongside all that dining, L.A.'s percolating contemporary art scene has galleries gearing up for the city's first Biennial (set for 2012) and embracing every medium imaginable—even spray paint, which will be celebrated next month when **MOCA'S GEFEN CONTEMPORARY** hosts the first major museum survey of the history of graffiti and street art in the country. A retrospective devoted to Tim Burton will strike a different chord when it opens

at **LACMA'S** new Resnick Pavilion at the end of May, and by that point the museum's new Renzo Piano-designed restaurant will be in full swing.

In Venice, Tadao Ando protegee Kulapat Yantrasast has turned a brick electric substation into the West Coast branch of the Manhattan-based **L&M ARTS**, comprising two interlocking galleries with an attendant sculpture garden. The large plaster and bronze figures of Thomas Houseago are on exhibit until March 5, after which the provocative sculptural beadwork of MacArthur genius Liza Lou will be shown. "The stars really align in Los Angeles right now," says Yantrasast, who moved here from Tokyo six years ago. "We have the most exciting artists, museums, museum directors, and art galleries. The artistic synergy is so dynamic and will prove influential for years to come."

It's a short walk from L&M to the boutiques (and general nowness) that is **AB'BOTT KINNEY BOULEVARD**. Leather is the watchword this spring, and **ILLIA**, known for its body-skimming tissue-thin leather jackets and dresses, has the leather short-shorts everyone's after. **MONA MOORE**, a few blocks up, has what celebrity stylist Elizabeth Stewart calls "a curated collection of shoes," including this season's Ann Demeulemeester and Haider Ackermann strappy sandals, as well as scary-terrific heels from the Rodarte runway shows and hard-to-find styles from Pierre Hardy, Dries Van Noten, and Balenciaga. Bags and braided cuffs are across the street at **KENDALL CONRAD**, a den of lasciviously supple leathers, as well as python, American alligator, and Tibetan lamb fur made into everything from voluminous weekenders and beach bags to wallets and sleek clutches.

After all this culture and consumerism, a cocktail is the only way to synthesize the day's activities. The boho-elegant nightspot worth knowing is **HEMINGWAY'S LOUNGE**, a secret clubhouse of a bar (there's no sign) in which bookcases soar from the floor to the stamped-tin ceiling and typewriters with lines from Hemingway on their pages hang from the walls. Starlets and studio executives come for cocktails named after works by the spirits-loving author. An Old Man and the Sea, a tipple of rum freshened with lime juice, mint, and a spoonful of sugar, is just the thing to preserve an L.A. state of mind. •

# Address Book

## Stay

**BEVERLY HILLS HOTEL**  
9641 Sunset Blvd., Beverly Hills; 310-276-2251

**HOTEL BEL-AIR**  
701 Stone Canyon Rd., LA; 310-472-1211

**THE REDBURY**  
1717 Vine St., LA; 323-962-1717

## Eat

**CLEO AT THE REDBURY**  
1717 Vine St., L.A.; 323-962-1711

**LUKSHON**  
3239 Helms Ave., Culver City; 310-202-6808

**SCARPETTA**  
Montage Hotel, 225 North Canon Dr.  
Beverly Hills; 310-860-7800

**HATFIELD'S**  
6703 Melrose Ave., LA; 323-935-2977

**SAVORY**  
Point Dume Village, 29169 Heathercliff Rd.  
Malibu; 310-589-8997

## See

**L&M ARTS**  
660 Venice Blvd., Venice; 310-821-6400

**RESNICK PAVILION AT LACMA**  
5905 Wilshire Blvd., LA; 323-857-6000

**GEFFEN CONTEMPORARY AT MOCA**  
152 N. Central Ave., Little Tokyo  
213-626-6222

**HEMINGWAY'S LOUNGE**  
6356 Hollywood Blvd., LA; 323-469-0040

## Shop

**ILLIA**  
1638 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice; 310-450-2890

**KENDALL CONRAD**  
1121 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Ste. 3  
Venice; 310-399-1333

**MONA MOORE**  
1112 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice; 310-452-4070