

# A requiem for L.A.’s lost, loved restaurants

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COLE’S French Dip said it would shut, then delayed its closure when a crush of people descended on it. (Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times)

Here we are again, mourning at yet more tombstones in Los Angeles’ culinary cemetery, the last resting place of restaurants.

The newest obituary is for the oldest restaurant in the city of L.A., Cole’s French Dip, in downtown. It opened in 1908, the year the first Model T rolled off Henry Ford’s assembly line. It’s a place that I suspect many Angelenos had not heard of until they heard it was closing, so Cole’s got a temporary deathbed reprieve because of the crush of people wanting a last — or first and last — meal there.

The Original Pantry Cafe, Cole’s younger sibling about a mile away, opened in 1924 and flourished on the strength of its we-never-close pledge. COVID-19 curtailed its hours, and the Pantry closed altogether this spring, two years after the death of its owner, former Mayor Richard Riordan. Its fare was stick-to-the-ribs and elsewhere kind of food that works wonders on a hangover, as did the coffee that was as thick as the meaty ceramic mugs the waiters kept filled.

Also on the death notice list: La Golondrina, opened in about 1930 in Olvera Street, in a brick building that was nearly 80 years old even then. It closed its double doors last year, doomed by money and legal troubles.

The Pacific Dining Car just west of downtown came up a year short of its centennial when it closed in the COVID-19 year of 2020. It was a hangout for politicians and power muckety-mucks. During the Democratic National Convention here in 2000, you could show up at 2 a.m. and see statesmen and dealmakers eating the signature baseball steak, or my favorite, Eggs Sardou. Any hope of reopening the landmark went up in flames in March, right after the Pantry closed.

California, and especially L.A., were out of the nation’s sight and mind for so long that we were left to cultivate our own notions of good food. The culinary mismatch between “here” and “back there” let the folks “back there” believe we shot our food on the hoof and ate it with bare hands. But our cosmopolitan eateries eventually created a singular “fusion,” with its own explosion into a thriving restaurant scene. Not all of our stars are onscreen; more than two dozen are in the Michelin firmament.

Everyone has a lost restaurant to mourn. I would lay flowers at the grave of Ago, a flossy Italian restaurant on Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood, gone in 2019. I weep for its vanished gnocchi, sublime as angel farts (note: This is metaphor. Are angels corporeal? Would they even have farts? I do not know).

Restaurants have a high mortality rate; generally more than 80% make it through the first year, and about half are still around after five years. Yet so much can derail them: fractured supply chains, staff blowups, quirks of locations and traffic, social media ambushes, even the unexpected, like COVID.

So survivors are remarkable, and originals even more so. It borders on the impossible to verify anything venerable as “the first,” but L.A.’s first restaurant was likely in the Bella Union Hotel, opened in downtown in 1850 in an even older building. The first freestanding restaurant may have been the “Old American,” opened maybe a year earlier, but it too eludes confirmation.

Hard to know what restaurant food was like in that long ago, but very likely beef, the region’s major food group, or mutton, with potatoes and onions and a palate cleanser of beer or wine or the local liquor, aguardiente. [A Bella Union newspaper ad 20 years later vaguely promised that its bill of fare “shall be inferior to none in the State.”]

I have my doubts that the Bella Union or even the Old American was L.A.’s first restaurant. Food was surely being cooked and served and sold in private houses and small shops and on street stands in ethnic enclaves under the Anglo-Angeleno radar. Eventually, such places did get “discovered,” and the local gentry might have bragged that they had just found the most delish little cafe hidden away in an edgy neighborhood.

In 1921, The Times suggested that daring tourists might try the food in “foreign quarters,” like “Chinatown’s alleys,” whose waiters were described in stereotypes. Italian restaurant-goers were advised to ditch steak and potatoes to try “authentic” Italian food like artichokes, and the “peculiarly seasoned tomato sauce.” Or they could join movie stars and sports heroes for original chili burgers at “Ptomaine Tommy’s” in Lincoln Heights, which started out in 1913 as a street lunch wagon.

Into the 20th century, some things Mexican were considered dec classe, except in designated quaint settings like Olvera Street. Restaurants serving Mexican food to Anglo-Angelenos often styled themselves “Spanish.”

At Glendale’s renowned Casa Verdugo, the food was straight-up Mexican — tamales, enchiladas, burritos — but advertised as “Spanish” cuisine. El Cholo, on Western Avenue, just celebrated its 100th birthday as a “Spanish” cafe. There are tales of Angelenos who traveled to Spain and were astonished to find that Spanish food was not, in fact, tamales and enchiladas.

Cafeterias have gone retro chic now, but L.A.’s early cafeteria craze wasn’t ironic or hip. They served what working Angelenos needed: standard, middle-American comfort food at plausible prices — and, for nonworking Angelenos, sometimes no price at all.

Clifton’s, founded in the Depression year of 1931, once ran a chain of cafeterias arguably less notable for the food — beef dishes, fried chicken, Jell-O salads — than for the elaborate decor of religious dioramas, exotic South Seas vistas and redwood faux forests.

The founder, Clifford Clinton, was a good-government civic crusader, and his cafeterias’ policy was to let folks eat free if they couldn’t afford the tab. As a hungry young writer, Ray Bradbury made full use of that policy. What is left of this giant, Los Angeles’ unofficial kitchen? It now bears the name Clifton’s Republic, a weekend-only bar at Clifton’s old downtown address.

In the 18 decades since the Bella Union’s opened a kitchen, Angelenos never lost their beefsteak appetites, and 20th century steakhouses arose as haute cuisine, with steak places arrayed along La Cienega’s “Restaurant Row.”

In Studio City, Glendale, Palm Springs and Bakersfield, waiters at the Saddle and Sirloin restaurants handed diners a page of beef choices, and a few chicken and fish alternatives, printed on a die-cut menu embossed to look like a fancy gun holster.

On the far end of the grill sizzle was the vegetarian restaurant. It did not begin, as you might suppose, in the hipster 1960s. The Source, on Sunset Boulevard, was launched in 1969 by a Cincinnati-born guru who called himself Father Yod. Woody Allen made fun of the place and its vibe in “Annie Hall.” His character met Diane Keaton there and snottily ordered “alfalfa sprouts and mashed yeast.”

The food reform movement was a hit with Angelenos.

The Vegetarian Cafe, in downtown Los Angeles, hosted a July 1901 lunch meeting of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The menu: corn soup, beet salad, baked beans, unfermented grape juice, and sliced “protose” with lemon. Protose was a meat substitute of wheat gluten and peanuts, cooked up by the food reformer Dr. John Kellogg, the fellow whose name you know better from a line of sometimes quite sugary cereals.

In Hollywood, studios tended to lay claim to nearby restaurants almost as extensions of their own commissaries, with cocktail privileges. Paramount people adopted restaurants on Melrose: first Lucey’s, and later Lucy’s El Adobe, which together lasted a hundred years.

Lucey’s opened in 1922, and silent stars like Clara Bow showed up in limos and ordered fistfuls of caviar. Paramount artists painted the murals in the restaurant’s VIP room. Lucey’s headwaiter Don Avalier was reportedly “discovered” there, and screen-tested for a biopic of Rudolph Valentino. He didn’t get the starring role, but he did get other movie parts, often playing ... a headwaiter.

This Lucey’s closed some time in the 1950s. In 1964, the other Lucy’s, the fabled Mexican restaurant, opened a little way away. It too was an actors’ hangout, but celebrated as the place where Gov. Jerry Brown and singer Linda Ronstadt met and launched their headliner romance. That Lucy’s closed in 2019, the year before COVID.

More than Sunset Boulevard or Hollywood Boulevard, Melrose Avenue was where the stars came out, and dined in. One of two Nickodell restaurants was nudged alongside Paramount. In 1928, it began selling affordable food to starving actors, and did so even after they were no longer starving.

In 1982, Nickodell’s steak sandwich with grilled onion and potatoes cost \$6.95, a price you could hardly afford to duplicate at home, wrote Times food columnist Rose Dosti. Each day of the week offered a special: chicken cacciatore on Mondays, frankfurters and sauerkraut on Wednesdays, and so on. When it closed, in 1993, veteran TV actress Peggy Rea mourned its special dishes. “From here you go into the world of alfalfa sprouts.”

Our big, warm climate and our wide-open spaces made possible something that earned its own genre: mimetic architecture, whimsical buildings that look like something else, often the thing that they sell. The Brown Derby restaurant didn’t sell derbies, but the Tamale, on Whittier Boulevard in East L.A., sold tamales, and the trade of Randy’s Donuts in Inglewood is unmistakably doughnuts.

In 1927, the Buffalo Times gave us an eyeroll in print over an igloo-shaped restaurant with papier-mache icicles, a merry-go-round restaurant with revolving tables, a “bullpen” restaurant with a live bull and waiters dressed as matadors. And it singled out the Jail Cafe on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, where the El Cid restaurant now stands. The Jail Cafe set tables and chairs in “cells” for patrons served by waiters wearing trustee uniforms, presided over by a cashier dressed as a warden. When two masked men showed up there in March 1926, customers thought it was just part of the show — until the robbers fired their guns and relieved diners of about \$500.

The cafe ship Cabrillo was a gigantic mimetic. Beginning in 1903, it was berthed in Venice, if you can say “berthed” about a vessel that wasn’t a real ship. Early on, and briefly, waiters were unfortunately tricked out in white wigs and satin knee breeches, a la Versailles-on-the-Venice-canal. The dishes and the prices invited a well-heeled clientele — Charlie Chaplin, Jack Dempsey, Sarah Bernhardt. Sand dabs and halibut, still edible and plentiful there, were held in a net slung under the hull and served moments later. If you preferred food with legs, there was roast pheasant and, of course, steak. The place was auctioned off down to its timbers in October 1946.

Germans once had a large presence in Los Angeles, with beer gardens, restaurants, churches, and a downtown club and sports center. But as happened elsewhere in the country, much of L.A.’s public German community went to ground after May 1915, when a German U-boat sank the British ocean liner Lusitania.

So it was surprising to see that when the Second World War came around, a Manhattan Beach restaurant named Little Bavaria kept its doors open. On June 8, 1942, the restaurant ran an ad in The Times touting its 80-cent home-cooked dinners. That same night, the feds raided the place, and subpoenaed its owner, a German-born naturalized citizen, and three employees. The feds said the place was possibly an “important listening post” for German-friendly ears, considering that it was a popular lunchtime destination for dozens of workers at nearby defense plants.

If by now you’re still hung up on first/oldest, I direct you to the oldest surviving restaurant in L.A. County: the Saugus Cafe. Best birth date estimate for this railroad cafe: 1886 or 1887, and its address is now in Santa Clarita, a town that didn’t even exist then, but which rallied to save the cafe during COVID.

Why the longevity? Because fusion, flank steak, fusilli, futomaki — tastes come and tastes go. But diners are forever.