

STAY LOCAL

EAT GLOBAL

From high-end Peruvian cuisine to traditional Ethiopian eats, the world's best flavors shine in our international restaurant guide to the East Bay.

Written by Nicholas Boer, Lauren Bonney, Casey Cantrell, Ethan Fletcher, Deborah Kirk, and Alejandra Saragoza

NAT AND CODY GANTZ

AFRICA

EL MOROCCO

Moroccan cuisine was a mystery to the East Bay when Fadil Shahin opened his Concord restaurant in 1978. But the allure of fluffy couscous and sweet braised lamb proved irresistible. With its warm spices and nightly belly dancing, El Morocco was a winning concept and eventually moved to more spacious environs in Pleasant Hill, in 1995. The dining room is in the round, with a tented ceiling, low cushioned seating, brass tables, and eye-dazzling tapestries.

MOROCCO



Traditionally, the prix fixe meal is eaten with bread. While Shahin offers silverware, too, the first course is still an oversized empty brass bowl—a vessel to catch the stream of cleansing water for your hands. Green towels are at the ready.

Then, lentil soup arrives seasoned with toasted cumin, garlic, and tomato. Next comes chilled salads on a shared platter: roasted, olive oil-rich eggplant with smoky paprika alongside a tart Moroccan-style salsa of tomato, lemon, minced onion, and

flat-leaf parsley. Irresistible flatbread is always at hand to soak, scoop, pinch, or chew.

The defining course—one that Shahin calls “everyone’s favorite”—is *bastila*, a crispy package of phyllo dough stuffed with cinnamon-spiked ground chicken. The dish is showered with powdered sugar. When eaten by hand, it’s an experience you’re unlikely to forget. But the entrée is up to you: lamb with honey and almonds, beef shish kebab, cornish game hen with olives, or vegetable couscous. Each meal finishes with mint tea and baklava.

At \$32, belly dancing included, the prix fixe is a steal, but you can also opt to order à la carte. While there is no doubt El Morocco is showing its age, the belly dancing performances help the restaurant seem eternally young.

“People ask me when I’m retiring,” says Shahin. “But I’m not retiring. I’m going to operate this place forever.” elmorocco.net. —N.B.



ETHIOPIA

ASMARA

Located in Oakland’s hip and vibrant Temescal neighborhood, Asmara is a local haven with a homey atmosphere, friendly waitstaff, and comforting Ethiopian fare that you eat sans utensils. Instead, tear off pieces of tangy flatbread to scoop up delicious morsels such as *zizil tibs* (tender strips of beef with onion, garlic, and jalapeños) and *doro tibs* (chunks of chicken with peppers, clarified butter, and spices). asmararestaurant.com. —A.S.

CAFÉ COLUCCI

At this colorful Ethiopian eatery in Oakland, diners use injera—a tart and spongy flatbread—to eat myriad vegetarian dishes, succulent spiced lamb, and crispy whole fish (it’s hands-on dining here). Showcasing honey wine and captivating art, Colucci raises spirits and deepens connections among its relaxed clientele. cafecolucci.com. —N.B.

3 Questions for a Belly Dancer

See our Q&A with a longtime El Morocco performer at diablo mag.com/belly-dancer.



This page, from left: Dinner at El Morocco; the *bastila* alongside roasted eggplant with cabbage and a Moroccan-style salsa at El Morocco. Opposite page, clockwise from left: The setting at El Morocco; the dining room at Café Colucci; vegetarian and meat platters from Café Colucci.



NIGERIA

MILIKI

Oakland may be better known for its boon of Ethiopian restaurants, but this festive Nigerian spot makes a strong case for West African cuisine. Build your own plate by choosing a stew with up to three types of meat, and dive in with a piece of *okele* (steamed dough for dipping). milikispot.com. —C.C.

SENEGAL

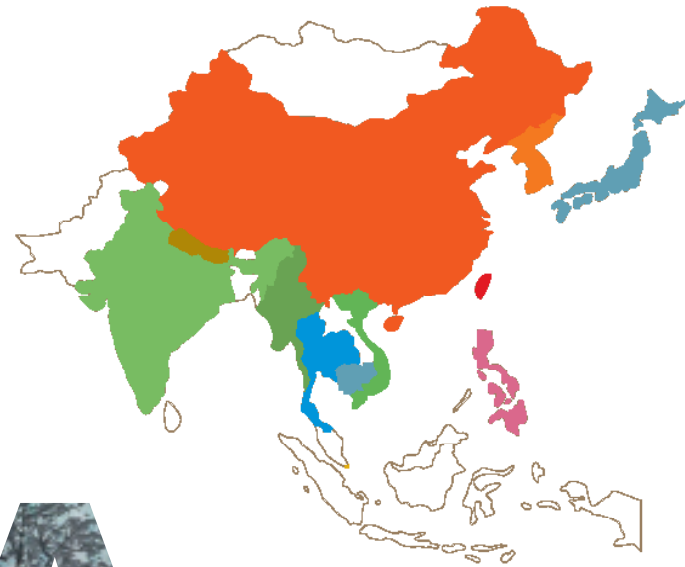
BISSAP BAOBAB

Good vibes and soulful food come together at this Senegalese joint in Oakland. You can’t go wrong with the *aloko* (fried plantains served with house-made tamarind yogurt sauce) and the famous Baobab *gambas*, featuring prawns sautéed in garlic and cayenne pepper and smothered in spicy red curry. bissapbaobab.com. —C.C.

NAT AND CODY GANTZ

CHINA LOUNGE

Worlds away from the saucy, sweet cartons of Americanized Cantonese food, Pleasanton's China Lounge explores the wonders of authentic Sichuan cuisine, where pristine white rice becomes a foil for fiery oils, pungent seasonings, and provocative meats. Master chef Jian Li hails from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, bringing with him uncommon dishes such as Chengdu rabbit: fried bits of meat laced with dried chiles



CHINA

and mouth-numbing peppercorns. Like so many of the globe's distinctive dishes, it's a preparation born of necessity: Farmers and laborers needed to stretch precious protein as far as it would go.

But in America, the land of Costco and 99 Ranch Market, Li also has the luxury of offering bone-in pork shoulder rich with *doubanjiang* (fermented soybean paste) and pork belly—its fattiness cut by the bitter heat of mustard greens. Even these more complex dishes, however, rely on traditional Sichuan cooking styles.

If you want to explore more cautiously, an excellent and accessible appetizer is Li's flash-fried Chinese eggplant, its custardy flesh encasing finely ground pork. The crackling crust and glossy sauce of rice vinegar and chili paste stirs the palate.

Follow that up with kung pao chicken. It may be a familiar dish, but this version boasts wok-scalded peanuts in a silky dark sauce with notes of citrus. And consider Li's most humble dish, "boiling fish," consisting of poached cod and cellophane noodles, with just enough spice to keep it Sichuan.

Sichuan culture is also apparent in the design of the gorgeous restaurant. The booths in the main dining room are cloaked in drapery and separated by hand-painted black screens of labyrinthine



design. The wide, white-cushioned chairs add a royal effect—particularly near the bar, where a Chinese symbol of prosperity has been cut into the chair backs. It all creates a relaxing yet refined atmosphere, but the central exhibition kitchen adds bursts of energy as the wok cooks fly and fry, making for a fun and authentic dining experience. chinaloungeus.com. —N.B.

BURMA

BURMA SUPERSTAR

Conjure in your mind the best of Chinese, Indian, and Thai cuisines, and you'll have an inkling of this restaurant's dazzling menu laced with sensual accents of mango, curry, and fresh herbs. Both the Oakland and Alameda dining rooms are contemporary, with a vibrant crowd and shareable plates. Don't miss the famous tea-leaf salad, a textural masterpiece. burmasuperstar.com. —N.B.

CAMBODIA

PHNOM PENH HOUSE

It's hard to say what's better at this family-owned Alameda restaurant: the delicious offerings of traditional Cambodian fare such as charbroiled beef skewers and shrimp fried rice, or the überfriendly owners who make you feel right at home. Wash down your meal with a Cambodian iced tea or one of the refreshing foreign beers. phnompenhouse.com. —C.C.

CHINA

YAN'S CHINA BISTRO

Whether you drop in for puffy, batter-fried pork chops and a glass of Alsatian Gewürztraminer, or go upscale with soy-marinated rib eye and an aged Barolo, you can't go wrong when you dive into owner Alex Yan's extraordinary food and the hundreds of refined wines at his Walnut Creek restaurant. Entrées such as honey walnut prawns may sound like common menu items, but here they are of uncommon quality. yanschinabistro.com. —N.B.



INDIA

HIGH PEAKS KITCHEN

The Himalayan-inspired artwork at this Oakland restaurant reflects the heritage of its Tibetan owners, but the delicious menu offers distinctly Indian flavors. If you're feeling courageous, order the spicy potato vindaloo—along with a mango lassi to help you cool down. For something milder, pick the creamy coconut curry. hipeaks.com. —C.C.



INDIA/NEPAL

MOUNT EVEREST RESTAURANT

Take a virtual trip to the Himalayas at this Berkeley eatery, which offers a mix of classic Indian dishes alongside traditional Nepalese cuisine. Start with the veggie momo (Nepalese dumplings served with a spicy house-made sauce), then follow up with the *khasi ko masu* (Nepalese goat curry) or chicken tandoori. mounteverestberkeley.com. –C.C.



KOREA

MIXED GRAIN

It's amazing how good Korean food can make you feel. And at this Walnut Creek eatery, pristine ingredients, sweet-spicy Korean chili paste, and sides of seaweed salad and kimchee have an invigorating effect. The *dolsot bibimbap*—with its fluffy rice, vibrant veggies, creamy egg, and your choice of protein (can't beat the pork)—is revelatory. A side of chicken wings is a must. mixedgrain.com. –N.B.

SEOUL JUNG KOREAN BBQ

Caramelized soy and sesame-spiked short ribs (kalbi) and crackling-hot rice bowls (*dolsot bibimbap*) have created countless Korean cuisine fans. And here, with Seoul Jung's all-you-can-eat BBQ and hip decor, one can tastefully dabble in an endless variety of food. Happily, the natural digestive properties of *banchan*—chile-flecked, fermented sides—served at this Dublin restaurant spark an appetite. (925) 999-8299. –N.B.

JAPAN/KOREA

KOJA KITCHEN

"It's like a burger, but better." That's the slogan of this Korean-Japanese fusion food truck-turned-restaurant with Emeryville and Walnut Creek locations, and its delicious signature KoJa burger is full of meaty, savory goodness: Piled between two lightly fried garlic rice "buns" is tender Korean barbecue short rib, *katsu aioli*, and lettuce tossed in sesame vinaigrette. kojakitchen.com. –L.B.

SINGAPORE

DRIP LINE

The fresh coffee, house-made pastries, and chic vibe are reasons enough to seek out this hidden gem in West Oakland. But it's the ambitious food peppered with Singaporean-influenced twists that makes it special. The burger is slathered with sambal aioli, shrimp and grits are bathed in coconut cream, and the Singapore chicken rice is spiked with Thai chili sauce. Starbucks this is not. driplineoakland.com. –E.F.

TASTE OF SING-MA

At Sing-Ma (Singapore-Malaysia) in Pleasanton, the tropical dishes are most electric: crispy crepes with coconut curry, pineapple fried rice with cashews, and Singapore's famous chile crab. Drink juice from a coconut, and finish with mango sticky rice. tasteofsingma.com. –N.B.



PHILIPPINES

CRAFT AND SPOON

This hipster magnet in Uptown Oakland serves up delicious takes on Filipino classics, including Java rice bowls with *adobo dilaw* chicken and a Pacific Islander-style panini made with *tocino* (sweet cured chicken). The lunchtime-only spot is also vegetarian friendly. craftandspoonoakland.com. –C.C.

TAIWAN

THE CHAIRMAN

Step up to the window of this Asian-fusion food truck to grab tasty Taiwanese street snacks such as *gua bao* (steamed buns stuffed with slices of stewed meat and veggies). Don't miss the tender pork belly topped with turmeric-pickled daikon or the Coca-Cola braised pork with crunchy savory cabbage. hailthechairman.com. –A.S.

THAILAND

DAUGHTER THAI

This elegant spot in the Oakland hills pulls off a neat balancing act: It freshens up a familiar ethnic cuisine without losing the food's soul, mixing excellent standards like tom yum soup, elevated appetizers such as wagyu beef rolls, and intensely sweet-spicy-sour regional specialties like *kang kua* prawns and *nam khao tod* salad with fermented sausage. Make sure to get a snow cone-esque Thai iced tea, too. daughterthai.com. –E.F.

KACHA THAI BISTRO

With its open kitchen and cozy bar, this Walnut Creek restaurant is surely contemporary, but fish sauce, lime, and chiles steep the menu in ancient flavors. Get a stimulating starter, such as the seared tuna with mint or the shrimp and shredded green mango salad. Then, indulge in coconut-milk curries: pumpkin redolent of Thai basil and galangal, and lamb enriched with braising juices. kachathai.com. –N.B.

This page: The dining room at Vanessa's Bistro 2. **Opposite page, from left:** "The Original" KoJa sandwich, ahi tuna bowl, beef tacos, and strawberry mango mint lemonade at KoJa Kitchen; Drip Line's sambal shrimp and grits.

Know Your Noodles

Keep your Asian noodles straight with this breakdown of soba, udon, ramen, and more at diablogam.com/noodles.



VIETNAM

VANESSA'S BISTRO 2

Chef-owner Vanessa Dang had the prescience to introduce exquisite Vietnamese tapas to East Bay diners just as the craze for small plates was peaking. Think ethereal pot stickers, luscious salt-and-pepper prawns, and superb banh mi sandwiches. Fun weekly events (Tapas Tuesdays, Wine Wednesdays, Friday Late-Night Happy Hour) keep the crowds coming to the tastefully appointed—and recently remodeled—Walnut Creek favorite, while Vanessa's beloved original location in Berkeley is still going strong. vanessabistro2.com. –D.K.

EUROPE

RÊVE BISTRO

Despite the influence of inspirational Alice Waters and the ensuing revolution of California-French cuisine, France gets scant credit on today's menus, so Rêve in Lafayette is a standout.

The foie gras torchon—prized medallions of just-poached duck liver—serves as a custardy spread for thick toasted brioche. It's a rich yet ethereal formulation that invests the restaurant's name (*rêve* translates to "dream") with meaning.



ENGLAND

COMMONWEALTH CAFE AND PUBLIC HOUSE

Head to this cozy Oakland café for hearty grub like shepherd's pie topped with cheesy mashed potatoes, and English breakfast plates loaded with bangers, bacon, eggs, sweet "beanz," and roasted veggies. Pair your pub fare with a pint—there are nearly 20 local beers and ciders on tap, plus numerous bottles imported from the U.K.—and watch a bit of soccer on the telly. commonwealthoakland.com. —A.S.

FRANCE

LA NOTE RESTAURANT

Rustic French cuisine is pure comfort fare, and when you add a dash of Provence, with its sunny produce and uplifting herbs, it's hard not to swoon. Buttery eggs with thick toast and roasted tomatoes, salad Niçoise, and daube (beef slow braised in red wine) over noodles make this charming Berkeley eatery a restorative respite—especially when enjoyed out in the courtyard. lanoterestaurant.com. —N.B.

GERMANY

GAUMENKITZEL

Boasting a name that means "tickle your taste buds," Berkeley's Gaumenkitzel lives up to its moniker, serving traditional German dishes with fresh, vibrant flavors. Start with an order of the house-milled whole wheat bread and local butter (trust us), then feast on the crispy schnitzel featuring Homestead pork loin on a bed of house-made spätzle and braised red cabbage. And with more than 30 beers available, a stein is always in order. *Prost!* gaumenkitzel.net. —A.S.



FRANCE

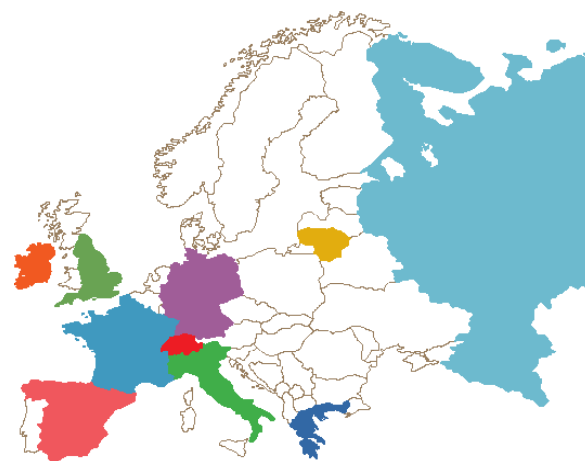


This page, from left: The dining room at Rêve Bistro; chef-owner Paul Magu. Opposite page, from left: Rêve's foie gras torchon, sweetbreads with ratatouille, and salade Lyonnaise; beers at Sláinte.

Sweetbreads, an almost forgotten dish, deliver impossibly tender morsels of veal, nutty from a buttery sear and splashed with shimmering stock. A tapestry of caramelized ratatouille—neatly arranged strips of dried tomato, squash, and eggplant—adds depth and intrigue.

And it's not just the food that speaks French: checkered tablecloths, black-and-white-clad servers, fine china, and a wine list threaded with Vignier, Sancerre, and Bordeaux capture a true bistro's charming yet-refined character. The dining room is cozy and intimate but not claustrophobic; a windowed wall reveals the quaint back patio, an expanse that seems improbable from the small strip mall's facade.

Concord-based couple Laura and Paul Magu have built a loyal following while steadily refining their concept over the past two years. Paul—who grew up in Paris and worked under Alain Ducasse in the French Alps and more recently at The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco—recently upped the ante by bringing in pastry chef Dana Farkas, who was previously at The Peasant and the Pear in Danville. Her fig tart, dark and buttery but brightened by dots of berry coulis and sprigs of fresh mint, proves she was a smart hire. And Laura, in colorful and carefree French



country fashion, clearly relishes her role as manager and host.

Order the rosy slices of duck on a bed of olives and ripe produce, then finish with the fruit tart or another delectable dessert ... or just a sigh of contentment. reverbistro.com. —N.B.



NAT AND CODY GANTZ

LEFT TO RIGHT: NAT AND CODY GANTZ; KELLY PULEIO

IRELAND

SLÁINTE

If the current mania over the American craft brew and gastropub scene has left you cold, look to Ireland, where a properly poured Guinness with a flaky sausage roll has been trending for generations. Oakland's Sláinte (which is pronounced *slahn-cha* and translates to "cheers" in Irish Gaelic) is a contemporary spot but boasts all a well-worn pub should, including crackling fish and chips and shepherd's pie, in an upbeat atmosphere. slainteoakland.com. —N.B.

GREECE

LOKANTA MEDITERRANEAN GRILL AND BAR

The sultry flavors of the sun-scorched Mediterranean suit California well, particularly as fall fades to winter. With nods to Greece (flaming Halloumi cheese) and Turkey (flaky chicken pastry), as well as ouzo-laced sauces and supple Aegean wines, Lokanta is alluring. The original Pleasanton location has a warm neighborhood ambience while the new Walnut Creek spot is built to party. eatlokanta.com. —N.B.

EUROPE

ITALY

LOCANDA RAVELLO

Representing Italy as much with its spirited service (prepare to be serenaded) and warm hospitality as with its rustic cuisine, Locanda has been turning heads since it debuted in Danville two years ago. Passersby were drawn to the aroma of pizza and fresh-baked bread, but lingered for Mama Carmela's meatballs, restorative cioppino, and a well-suggested bottle of vino. ravello-danville.com. –N.B.



LITHUANIA

MAMA PAPA LITHUANIA RESTAURANT

Offering hard-to-find Eastern European cuisine (Mama Papa is the only Lithuanian restaurant on the West Coast), this Alameda eatery delivers delicious comfort food, including hearty dishes like chicken goulash and ground pork-stuffed cabbage rolls. But the biggest star is the indulgent Lithuanian amber rye bread that's fried and rubbed with garlic. Get an order (or two) for the table. mamapapalithuania.com. –C.C.

SPAIN

DUENDE

Savor the flavors of Spain at this stylish spot in Uptown Oakland, where you can find delectable *pintxos* and tapas. (Don't miss the spicy pork rillettes or the *piquillos* stuffed with Idiazábal cheese, olive salsa, and currants.) Enjoy the small plates over a craft cocktail or glass of sherry, then dig in to the arroz negro—a beautiful pan of squid-ink paella dotted with chorizo de *mariscos*, mussels, and lobster aioli. duendeoakland.com. –A.S.

Eat Like a Spaniard

Make your own Spanish tapa using this recipe from Telefèric Barcelona: diablogmag.com/tortilla-recipe.

RUSSIA

BABUSHKA

Largely overlooked for 21 years, this Walnut Creek restaurant reinvented itself earlier this year, moving its spectacular Russian deli (fresh pastries, smoked fish, piroshki) to the back, and recasting its formal dining room into a contemporary and inviting space. Truly rich and refined interpretations of Russian delicacies include chicken Kiev and beef stroganoff. babushkafood.com. –N.B.

SWITZERLAND

SIMPLY FONDUE

Calling this romantic spot in Livermore Swiss might be a bit of a stretch. But stretching a forkful of bread swathed in Gruyère and Emmentaler from melting pot to mouth is a brilliant option. Indulge in a plethora of cheese pots (like smoked Gouda with bacon); choose from broth or oil fondues to cook a panoply of proteins; and finish with a silky fondue of chocolate. simplyfonduelivermore.com. –N.B.



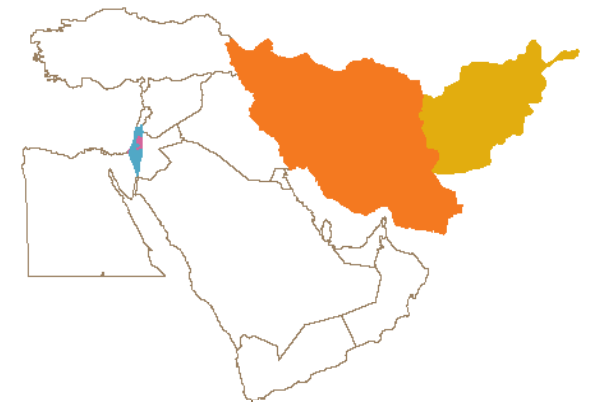
THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: KBC PHOTOGRAPHY; COURTESY OF SIMPLY FONDUE. OPPOSITE PAGE: NAT AND CODY GANTZ

MIDDLE EAST

ALBORZ

When we caught up with Alborz owner David Dornan, he was enjoying a plate of *khoresh bademjan*, a comforting ragout of braised lamb and fried eggplant baked and bound with beguiling notes of saffron and cinnamon, and lifted by a scattering of sour grapes called *ghooreh*.

The history of Alborz is as rich as the stew. Iranian-born Dornan unveiled the first of his five Alborz restaurants in Fremont in 1990, when he was just 25 years old. Today, only his San Francisco (2000) and Walnut Creek (2009) locations remain open, but Alborz is well-regarded in the Persian community.



IRAN

Located on Mt. Diablo Boulevard with plenty of on-site parking, a full bar, and a sheltered patio, the Walnut Creek restaurant is particularly inviting. The dining room has a royal aspect, boasting Persian carpets, decorous chandeliers and artwork, and richly stained chairs with blue cushions.

At the restaurant's entrance is a tandoor oven where *taftoon*, a pitlike flatbread, is baked and blistered. Meals start with soft triangles of the bread along with Feta cheese, shaved onion, and freshly plucked herbs. It's a generous gesture and a stimulating start. An appetizer of *kashk e bademjan* (succulent roasted eggplant with crispy onions) goes with the bread and cheese particularly well. An easy introduction to the menu is *koo-bideh* (ground beef and onion kebab), the restaurant's most popular dish; it's juicy and boldly seasoned.

If you're feeling more adventurous, order *doogh* (a fizzy mint and yogurt drink), an appetizer combo plate, and a classic dish such as *fesenjoon* (best with chicken)—made with a long-simmered sauce of roasted ground walnuts and pomegranate. It's a rich, complex combination that takes practice to get just right. Luckily, Dornan has had plenty of time: Twenty-seven years may not be an eon compared to the age of the snow-capped Alborz mountain range, but it is in restaurant years. orderalborz.com. –N.B.



This page, from top: Alborz's lamb shank with saffron-topped basmati rice; a bartender pours a cocktail at Alborz. Opposite page, from left: Wood-fired pizza at Locanda Ravello; diners enjoy dessert at Simply Fondue.





AFGHANISTAN

OASIS WINE LOUNGE

Ancient Afghan cuisine is as hot as Jalalabad right now. And Pleasanton's Oasis, with its shaded rose garden and fiery red dining room, reveals why. Stay traditional by ordering the fragrant pumpkin *borani* with garlic and yogurt or the skewers of *koobideh* (spicy ground sirloin) to understand what all the fuss is about. oasiswinelounge.com. —N.B.

IRAN

FAZ

With menus that celebrate his Iranian heritage but span the Mediterranean, Faz Poursohi has been a culinary force in the Bay Area for decades. Specializing in pizza and kebabs, and offering everything from falafel to lasagna, his Faz restaurants in Danville, Oakland, and Pleasanton have broad appeal. It's a concept that appreciates Iranian authenticity but is more focused on bringing varied flavors—and cultures—together. fazrestaurants.com. —N.B.



MIDDLE EAST

ISRAEL

BA-BITE

The name comes from the Hebrew word for “in the home,” which rings true given the immaculate—and noticeable—care this casual Oakland eatery puts into its Middle Eastern staples, including succulent lamb *kefta*, moist falafel, luscious hummus, and a beautiful lineup of flavorful salads. babiteoakland.com. —E.F.

PALESTINE

ZAYTOON

Impeccable versions of Mediterranean classics like baba ghanoush, chicken shawarma, and moussaka will suck you in. Traditional Levantine specialties like *mansaf* (lamb braised in sheep's yogurt) and *makloub* (an upside-down rice dish with cauliflower and other vegetables, and choice of meat) will keep you coming back to this Albany restaurant. Excellent ancillaries, such as Middle Eastern-tinged cocktails and awesome desserts (get the baklava with vanilla ice cream and caramel), are added bonuses. zaytoon510.com. —E.F.

Food on Wheels

Wonder what it's like running a food truck? Visit diablog.com/food-on-wheels for an interview with Elmy Kader, the owner of Royal Egyptian Cuisine and a food-truck pioneer.



NAT AND CODY GANTZ

LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN



CEVICHE AND CO.

“[There's] nothing like Mother's cooking,” says Xavier Moncayo, CFO and manager of the Ceviche and Co. food truck. Moncayo hopped on the food-truck bandwagon a little over four years ago with his brother and chef/co-owner, Daniel, and his mother, Cecilia.

“She is the inspiration for the truck, and that's what made it such a big hit,” says Moncayo. “There's not really an Ecuadorian food truck



or restaurant in the area, and we thought, *Let's bring a taste of another part of the world to this area.*”

The house-made dishes on this mobile kitchen stem from a long line of motherly and Ecuadorian traditions, and the Moncayos have hit their niche. “One traditional Ecuadorian dish that is really well-known is ceviche,” says Cecilia. “And we thought that was the perfect thing to put on the truck.”

While Cecilia admits that ceviche has started to become more popular due to the recent Peruvian restaurant boom in the East Bay, she insists that the Ecuadorian version is distinct. “There are many similarities. You know, we are neighbors,” she jokes, “but there are some dishes that are uniquely different.”

For example, Peruvian ceviche uses a lot more shrimp while Ecuadorian ceviche relies on fresh fish. Though this may not seem like such a big difference to an outsider, it's what makes the Moncayos' dish authentic. The ceviche of the day is a refreshing treat for the palate. With a tangy citrus marinade, seasonal spiced veggies, and pickled onions, it's a bowlful of exploding flavors—and the toasted corn nuts offer a crunchy, savory finish.

But the truck serves other dishes, too. Try the best-selling chile verde empanadas made fresh every day by Xavier as “a labor of love.” Featuring buttery, light dough filled with fire-roasted poblanos, beans, and sautéed veggies, the little empanadas pack the best kind of heat. cevicheco.com. —L.B.



Opposite page, from top: The tabbouleh at Alborz; *taftoon* is pulled out of Alborz's tandoor oven; the dining room at Alborz. This page, from top: The Ceviche and Co. food truck; Ceviche and Co.'s ceviche of the day.





CHILE

PATATAS

This charming Emeryville spot might be small, but it brings a vast array of mouthwatering flavors to the table. The menu showcases decadent Chilean dishes like hearty beef stew (order it with a side of roasted cauliflower) and rotisserie chicken bathed in a rosemary-tomatillo sauce. patataskitchen.com. –C.C.

SABORES DEL SUR

A celebration of South American cuisine, this Walnut Creek restaurant offers various traditional dishes that reflect the robust cultures of many Latino immigrants like chef Guisell Osorio. Order the *pastel de choclo*, a traditional Chilean-style shepherd's pie packed with beef, chicken, and a hard-boiled egg; topped with a sweet corn mash; and baked to golden, caramelized perfection. saboresdelsurf.com. –L.B.

CUBA

CAÑA CUBAN PARLOR AND CAFE

Cuba's cuisine is electric, and Caña in Oakland delivers—whether it's street food (empanadas with salsa verde and chicken wings sticky with mango) or swanky dining (lobster paella, dazzling rum cocktails, and a little Afro-Cuban rumba). Its sexy parlor is all ambience, while the outdoor café celebrates a gritty urban vibe. Happily, both venues offer a spot-on Cubano sandwich. canaoakland.com. –N.B.



EL SALVADOR

RESTAURANTE EL SALVADOR

It's all about the pupusas at this Concord restaurant. Not only are they the best deal in town at just three bucks a piece, but the cheese and meat-stuffed masa is happiness in every bite. You can't go wrong with these flavor-packed Salvadoran delights, especially when they're topped with some spicy coleslaw. (925) 680-6618. –L.B.

JAMAICA

KINGSTON 11

A community gathering place saluting Jamaica's capital, Oakland's Kingston 11 boasts a character and clientele as colorful as the Caribbean. The eatery excels at capsicum-laced jerked chicken, chocolatey-rich oxtail stew, and on the weekends, curried goat. The blue-crowned bar's sugarcane rums are destined for refreshing Cuba libres and signature cocktails such as the cardamom-scented Fern Gully. kingston11eats.com. –N.B.

MEXICO

AGAVE UPTOWN

Step into this bright and festive Oakland eatery for authentic Oaxacan cuisine with an upscale twist. Seasonal, farm-fresh ingredients are at the center of tantalizing seafood dishes and Oaxacan specialties like *tlayudas* (large and crispy tortillas topped with beans, meat, and veggies), but Agave is known as a mole and mezcal mecca for a reason: The rich mole negro, crafted from 20 ingredients sourced from Oaxaca, is a delectable accompaniment to succulent chicken or savory carnitas—and is best enjoyed with a signature mezcal cocktail. agaveuptown.com. –A.S.

CALAVERA

Can't pronounce *Oaxaca* or locate this Mexican gastronomic mecca on a map? Just ask for the banana leaf pork, chicken mole poblano, grilled whole fish with black garlic at this Uptown Oakland restaurant. Pair your entrée with the smoky, chile-spiked *Mezcalara margarita* and an order of creamy guacamole topped with chapulines (fried grasshoppers). With some practice, you'll soon be a Oaxacan connoisseur. calaveraoakland.com. –N.B.

This page: Tamales with mole from Agave Uptown. **Opposite page, from left:** The tres leches cake at Limon Rotisserie; the bar at Calavera.



PERU

LIMON ROTISSERIE

"Authentic with a little bit of California cuisine and fusion from Latin America" is how chef-owner Martin Castillo sums up his Peruvian style. He opened his Walnut Creek restaurant in July, attracting droves of diners with such delicious dishes as passion fruit ceviche, spit-roasted chicken slathered in garlic and lime, and cinnamon-spiked tres leches cake—and pisco sours, of course. limonrotisserie.com. –N.B.

PUERTO RICO

BORINQUEN SOUL

Tucked inside a market on the outskirts of Oakland's Dimond district, this Puerto Rican take-out spot might not look like much. But once you take a bite of the beef empanada served with *maduros* (sweet plantains) and *arroz con gandules* (yellow rice with pigeon peas), you'll be quick to ask for seconds. borinquen-soultakeout.com. –C.C. ■

¿Qué?

Ever need help deciphering the menu? Visit diablog.com/latin-american-food-glossary for a guide to the most common Latin American dishes so you can order *con confianza*.

LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN

ARGENTINA

EL PORTEÑO

This Argentinian food truck offers sweet and savory empanadas that are hearty enough for a quick but tasty meal. Stick with a classic such as the *jamón y queso*, or take a bite out of the *champiñones*: The rich, handheld pocket is chock-full of tasty, local, seasonal mushrooms sautéed with shallots, aged Parmesan, and crème fraîche. We dare you not to drool while waiting your turn. elportenosf.com. –L.B.

BRAZIL

GALETO BRAZILIAN STEAKHOUSE

It's a meat lovers' paradise at the refined Galeto in downtown Oakland, with all-you-can-eat steak, chicken, lamb, and pork. The gourmet bar is suited for those with an appetite; standouts include the mango salad and steamed mussels, but make sure to save plenty of room for savory cuts of traditional *churrasco* (grilled steak). galeto.com. –C.C.

PEDRO'S BRAZIL CAFE

The colorful Berkeley eatery turns every meal into a celebration. Get the *pao de queijo* (baked cheese puffs) before indulging in Pedro's tri-tip plate. For a quicker meal, stop by the restaurant's even flashier "shack" just up University Avenue by the UC campus, and try "Obama's Favorite Sandwich"—savory carnitas on fresh-baked bread with grilled onions, jalapeños, ricotta cheese, and pineapple. pedrosbrazilcafe.com. –C.C.