

How Sacramento Turned Into a Great Restaurant City

Soaring Bay Area housing prices, a highly diverse community and some of the world's best produce have been catalysts for the dining scene in California's capital.

By Ella Quittner

Reporting from Sacramento.

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On a recent evening in a dimly lit Japanese restaurant, nearly a dozen diners watched rapt from across the bar as a chef blowtorched a sliver of sturgeon until it was kissed with char. He topped the nigiri with crisped fish skin and a spoonful of caviar.

The quiet veneration from the customers, the practiced flick of the chef's wrist and the buttery, bouncy pieces of fish might have suggested the meal was unfolding on a side street of Ginza.

The restaurant wasn't in Tokyo, though. It wasn't even in New York City or San Francisco — it was in a residential neighborhood of Sacramento, at a restaurant called Kru.

But the real surprise wasn't the skill with which the sushi chef carved the tender fish, or how he draped it delicately over a quenelle of grains. It was its origin story. The sushi rice had come from Rue & Forsman Ranch, less than 40 miles away, and the sturgeon from even closer.



Behind the bar at Kru in Sacramento, Ernesto Rodriguez broke down a bluefin tuna for the restaurant's many sushi preparations. Taylor Allred for The New York Times



For each "sturgeon trio" nigiri at Kru, a slice of local fish receives a blast of heat from a blowtorch, before it's topped with crisped skin and caviar. Taylor Allred for The New York Times

"Growing up in Sacramento, I had a chip on my shoulder," said Billy Ngo, the owner and chef of Kru. "After high school, all my friends wanted to get the hell out; I stayed behind and worked, like, 'No, Sacramento is cool — or it's going to be cool.' And it's been really great to be part of that change."




For years, Sacramento had the makings of a great restaurant town. It consistently ranks among the three most ethnically diverse cities in America — with all the variety of cuisines that brings — and it sits near the middle of California's Central Valley, with its 12-month growing season of vast agricultural wealth.

The region's decades-long farm-to-fork cooking movement has produced a handful of culinary stalwarts. But it took a cadre of young chefs returning or relocating to Sacramento, and a flock of new residents fleeing from punishing Bay Area housing prices, to fully flip the switch.

In the past several years, Moonbelly and Faria, two bakeries whose flaky croissants and elegant loaves rival those at Du Pain et des Idées in Paris, have opened, with rotating offerings of buckwheat coffee cake, roasted bok choy-milk bread buns and focaccia sandwiches stuffed with beet and feta sold under the moniker “girl dinner.”

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At least three pizzerias with distinct pie styles — Pizza Supreme Being, Pizzasaurus Rex and Majka — have been attracting lines and selling out creations like a kimchi- and potato-topped sourdough pie and a Pizza Supreme Birria.



Customers at Moonbelly line up for the rotating and often seasonal pastries and loaves. Taylor Allred for The New York Times

The ramen joints Kodaiko and Binchoyaki, which also serves izakaya fare, supplement the epic brothy noodle-soup offerings of Little Saigon and add to the host of styles put out by older shops like Shoki. In Downtown Sacramento, the culinary duo Ryan Royster and Byron Hughes have taken over the menu at Tiger for those who want a taste of their craft in between their buzzy Last Supper Society pop-ups.

Nearby, at the newly revamped Jim Denny's American Diner, N'Gina Guyton is paying homage to the city's 1940s West End melting pot with hot dogs topped with togarashi and Takis snack chips. Patricio Wise, the chef at Nixtaco, in Roseville, nixtamalizes and hand-presses his own blue corn tortillas.

There's also Sacramento's robust coffee culture, its rash of specialty cocktail bars and its proximity to both wine country and the suppliers that produce roughly 90 percent of the nation's domestic caviar.

As Gary Bradley, 49, a real estate agent, put it on a recent Friday night at the inventive American restaurant Canon, "Nowadays when I travel, I can't wait to get back to Sacramento; the food is just better here."

With the spread of remote work, the number of people relocating from San Francisco County to Sacramento County increased by 70 percent in 2020. Before the pandemic, the number of Google and Microsoft employees who lived in Sacramento and commuted to Silicon Valley was "negligible," said Barry Broome, the president and chief executive of the Greater Sacramento Economic Council. Now there are more than 450 full-time employees in greater Sacramento from Google and Microsoft alone.

Housing prices are a big reason for that migration. In January 2020, shortly before lockdowns began and remote work became widespread, the median sale price for a single-family home in San Francisco was \$1.46 million, according to Redfin. In Sacramento, it was \$360,000.



Lucía Plumb-Reyes, who grew up in Sacramento and returned to raise her child, opened Moonbelly in August 2022. Taylor Allred for The New York Times

Cauleen Doughty, 31, moved to the area in October 2022 so she could afford to live alone. The one-bedroom rentals she was seeing in the Bay Area were several thousand dollars a month — on the low end. Fully remote work enabled her to find a stand-alone cottage in Sacramento with a walk-in closet for \$1,500.

Many born-and-bred Sacramentans also moved back, and a fair number of them are opening restaurants.

Lucía Plumb-Reyes, 38, spent years working at farms and kitchens all over the country and wanted to raise her child closer to family. She was happily surprised to find less competition for her dream project.

“Sacramento didn’t have a lot of bakeries already,” said Ms. Plumb-Reyes, who opened Moonbelly in August 2022. “In San Francisco, there are so many bakeries, and there’s a new one every week.”

In Sacramento, she also has access to the sort of produce many bakers only fantasize about, and to customers who welcome her experimentation. In early November, Ms. Plumb-Reyes received a basket of persimmons from the wife of her former high school teacher; by the following weekend, they were topping seasonal croissants at Moonbelly.

Returning chefs and bakers were joined by newcomers like Alex Sherry, 35, who along with his wife, Chutharat Sae Tong, 44, transposed a concept familiar to Bay Area expats to the streets of Midtown with their funky sourdough-pizza shop Majka. Mr. Sherry and Ms. Sae Tong had met at the popular Cheese Board Collective in Berkeley, where Mr. Sherry produced similar pies. In just an hour on opening day in June 2020, they sold out 50 pizzas topped with cherry tomatoes from a farmers’ market.



Mr. Sherry and his wife, Chutharat Sae Tong, met while working at the Cheese Board Collective in Berkeley. They opened Majka in June 2020. Taylor Allred for The New York Times

The changes are not without complications, however. The historically Black neighborhood Oak Park, where Faria Bakery is located, had more than a 24 percent decrease in Black residents from 2010 to 2020, according to Sacramento's Capital Public Radio. And the influx of new restaurants and residents in neighborhoods like Downtown, which has been a business district since many residents of the West End were forcibly evicted and displaced in the mid-20th century, has spurred debate.

"It's financial gentrification," said Ms. Guyton, 47, the chef and owner of Jim Denny's, which sits on the border of Downtown and Mansion Flats. "You've got to have some coin if you're going to live down here." At the same time, Ms. Guyton added, in some ways the new restaurants and bars were merely serving the market. "If that's what your demographic is that's buying right now, you kind of have to do that."

Some chefs, like Mr. Sherry, who have noticed the influx of young Bay expat customers say they hope the business will help offset diminished foot traffic around lunchtime from government workers who have gone at least partly remote.

Eating well in Sacramento is nothing new for those in the know, who have long raved about the preponderance of restaurants featuring sublime produce from the city's numerous farmers' markets, including one with a D.J. and a bike valet.

For the rest of their bounty, locals shop at a cooperative grocery store that would make any salad freak weep, or pick up sandwiches at the last remaining location of Corti Brothers, a grocer that brought Parmigiano-Reggiano to California in the 1970s and was championed by Alice Waters.

Since as early as the 1990s, local luminaries like Patrick Mulvaney, Randy Paragary, Randall Selland, Nancy Zimmer and Rick Mahan have evangelized a hyper-seasonal style of cooking that they call "farm-to-fork." (The cuisine continues to flourish at the newer-comers Canon and OBO', as well as at classic spots like Mulvaney's B&L, where Mr. Mulvaney himself

recently replenished the bistro's stock of his "Ass Fire" hot sauce using habanero chiles dropped off by a farmer friend.)



Each weekend, Mr. Sherry fills his truck with farmers' market produce to top sourdough pies. Recently, his haul included carrot, baby bok choy and young ginger. Taylor Allred for The New York Times

"We're getting this very elite produce — and we get first pick," said Ginger Elizabeth Hahn, 42, a chocolatier who since 2008 has incorporated local fare like Eureka lemons from the Good Humus farm into chocolates. "Some of the wealthiest people on the planet don't have access to some of this food. It's mind-blowing."

The beloved third-culture restaurant Frank Fat's has been turning heads since 1939 with dishes like steak smothered in oyster sauce, and egg custard-inspired banana cream pie. The strip of Stockton Boulevard called Little Saigon has long been studded with immaculate bowls of pho and broiled nem nuong cuon. Hop Sing Palace is the oldest — and one of the more beloved — restaurants in nearby Folsom.

The Michelin Guide finally took notice of Sacramento's culinary riches after the Visit California tourism board paid \$600,000 to persuade Michelin to send its inspectors outside the Bay Area. In 2019, three restaurants were awarded "Bib Gourmand" awards, and no one was surprised to see the fine-dining restaurant the Kitchen receive a star.

Now in its third decade of operation, the Kitchen still books up months in advance for its nightly shtick, a \$185 meal that takes the form of an interactive luxury dinner party. At the helm in its latest iteration is the chef Kelly McCown, who offers caviar bumps as he plates the first course (currently, a velvety cauliflower pot de crème, followed by ricotta gnocchi topped with a crumble of Rice Krispie-ified potatoes from a farm in nearby Capay). Localis was awarded a single star in 2022.

Institutional stamps of approval aside, the culinary scene has emerged in recent years is noticeably dynamic.

"In the 41 years I've been here, it's a definite, absolute glow-up," Ms. Guyton said.

“There’s always that mundane article that’s like ‘Sacramento is the next this.’ It doesn’t need to be Portland, or Oakland. It doesn’t need to be Berkeley,” said Ben Roberts, 36, who owns Pizza Supreme Being. “Sacramento is just Sacramento. It doesn’t need to be anything else.”

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