

The Magazine of
the East Bay

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SNOW



INSIDE Soaking up
Sun Valley, plus sharp
menswear and
our annual salute to
local heroes

DECEMBER 2006 \$3.95



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Liaison Bistro 1849 Shattuck Ave., (510) 849-2155, www.liaisonbistro.com. This Shattuck Avenue bistro, just down the street from the heavy hitters in Berkeley's famed gourmet ghetto, offers unpretentious French fare in a friendly atmosphere. Executive chef and proprietor Kenneth Todd Knies formerly starred as chef de cuisine at the popular Left Bank restaurants in Larkspur and Menlo Park. Liaison has a similar French-but-not-fussy feel, and the menu features hearty favorites like beef Burgundy stew, niçoise salad, and French onion soup, as well as several vegetarian choices. A wine list with numerous Northern California and French selections complements the fresh cuisine. Lunch and dinner daily, brunch Sat.–Sun. ¥☼+\$\$\$

O Chamé 1830 Fourth St., (510) 841-8783. On a foggy day—no, any day—duck into this intimate retreat on busy Fourth Street for the best noodles around, whether buckwheat soba or the fat white udon. Don't miss the fish specials, either.

Chef-owner David Vardy brings a high aesthetic and considerable prowess to everything he prepares. The waitstaff will bring you beer or wine, but ask them about the selection of fragrant Japanese and Chinese teas. Lunch and dinner Mon.–Sat. ¥☼\$\$\$

Olivia 1453 Dwight Way, (510) 548-2322, www.oliviaeats.com. Chef Nathan Peterson resuscitated this intriguing late 19th-century Moorish building in 2005 by opening Olivia, a tiny temple of honest yet stylish food. Chilled glass bowls cradle the green salads, which on our visit included a delicious mix of delicate butter lettuce, apples, Spanish blue cheese, and walnuts. We loved the green chili enchiladas, which were mildly spiced and delectably cheesy. Peterson's chicken potpie, with its thin sheet of buttery pastry and roasted turnips mingled with the meat, is a sophisticated rendition of a homey classic. Desserts like house-made ice cream and fruit cobbler provided a happy ending. Menu changes weekly. Reservations recommended. Dinner Tues.–Sat. ¥+\$\$\$

NEW

Paragon Bar & Café 41 Tunnel Rd., (510) 549-8585, www.paragonrestaurant.com. The hip, casual restaurant at the Claremont Resort & Spa has expansive views of the San Francisco Bay, and at night it turns into a hot spot with live music for the area's young elite. Try the frothy, not-too-sweet pineapple martini, made with vodka infused in-house with the fruit. On our visit, the tuna tartare burst with the flavors of fresh ahi tuna and ripe avocado. We also enjoyed a breaded chicken sandwich, with a touch of jalapeño heat, served alongside house-made coleslaw, and an entrée of pan-roasted salmon presented with a side of perfectly cooked broccoli rabe. At lunch, the burger is a good bet. Service at the bustling restaurant can be slow, but only because the place is understaffed. Lunch and dinner daily. ¥☼+☼\$\$\$

Picante Cocina

Mexicana 1328 Sixth St., (510) 525-3121. Before Picante opened in Berkeley in 1994, it was Tex-Mex chains versus the dozens of hole-in-the-wall family restaurants serving authentic Mexican cuisine. Although Picante's food is more like the latter, the concept of ordering at the counter, taking a number, and picking a table offers the relatively accessible, quick convenience of the Americanized chains. Whether it's the delicious *sopa azteca* (a chili-laden broth strewn with shredded chicken and fried tortilla strips) or the more common chili-verde burrito, Picante seldom disappoints. *Platos*—complete with beans and your choice of meat, rice, and tortillas—make a meal for two, and the house-made habanero, green-chili, and tomato salsas are insidiously good. Extra credits: Corn tortillas are made in-house, and the pork and beef are from Niman Ranch. Lunch and dinner daily. ¥☼+\$

Can Fabulous

'TIS THE SEASON for food drives. But you won't find grocery bags or barrels filled with canned goods at *CANstruction*, a special food-drive-and-art-exhibit combination now on display at Copia in downtown Napa.

In October, nine Bay Area teams competed to build the most creative sculptures out of food cans—43,622 of them. In *Gnome More Hunger*, Lionaki's Beaumont Design Group of Sacramento used 3,200 tuna and olive cans to create a garden gnome, and Chaudhary & Associates of Napa built a rainbow and pot of gold with cans of corn, tomatoes, and peas.

Copia encourages exhibit visitors to bring a can of food with them. At the close of the exhibit, all of the cans used in the sculptures and contributed by guests will be donated to the Napa Valley Food Bank for distribution.

"Last year, [Copia] told us to expect eight pallets of food, but we got 22," says Shirley King, program director for the Napa Valley Food Bank. "When you see that many cans, it really brings the whole hunger issue to mind. This has been a great collaboration."

CANstruction is on display through January 1; Copia's \$4–\$5 day pass includes exhibit admission. Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts, 500 First St., Napa, (707) 259-1600, www.copia.org —LeeAnne Carson

