Get to Know the Real Los Angeles in 5 Insanely Gluttonous Days
It may come as a bit of a shock that Los Angeles, a place often imagined for beach bodies and plastic surgery, would be the ultimate destination for a vacation based around eating, but life is full of surprises. You’ll hear stories about how LA has “finally” figured out our culinary scene in the last few years (thanks for the pity visit, Michelin!), but the fact is that the city has always had a killer food scene. This is a city where ex-Nobu busboys open their own Mexican sushi restaurants, a city that essentially jump-started the food truck revolution (thanks Roy Choi!). It’s where you can turn a quiet corner and walk directly into the heart of a Guatemalan street food market, or find world’s-best-sushi contenders in the dusty corners of a strip mall. LA is stuffed top to bottom with incredible things to eat.

It’s also, you know, one of America’s biggest and most vibrant cities. And one of the best ways to see LA at its best is through the lens of food -- something that makes LA one of the 20 Best Places for a Big Trip in 2020.

In this guide, we’re talking about the Los Angeles of 2020. We’re not sending you to Rodeo Drive, the Walk of Fame, old-world LA legacy restaurants, or any of Wolfgang Puck’s Beverly Hills establishments. We’re sending you to the places that define LA right now, because today in 2020, the city’s food scene is stronger than it’s ever been -- and you need to get over here and experience it.

MORE: The best restaurants in LA right now

Recommended Video
There are a lot of different options for when to visit a city that gets about 329 days of sunshine a year, but spring -- between March and May -- is probably the best weather-wise, as it’s like to be 75 the whole damn time (Coachella is in April, if you’re looking to extend your trip to include that).

If you’re planning on coming in the summer, prepare for a bit of a trade-off: With potentially oppressive heat will come a slew of food & drink festivals, Dodger Stadium season, and
outdoor music (including shows at the The Hollywood Bowl and Greek amphitheaters) -- but perhaps the biggest draw of 2020 will be the 50th anniversary of LA Pride, which should turn June 12-14 into the best party LA has seen in a while.

August and September can get stupid hot, so if you’re somebody who doesn’t enjoy melting into a puddle in 100-plus-degree heat, skip ‘em. Though it may sometimes take all of October for us to finally shed the heat, fall can be lovely too, as rooftop patio and outdoor movie seas wraps up.

**Where to stay in Los Angeles**

Because Los Angeles is so gigantic (more than 500 square miles, in fact) consider what you actually want to focus on while you’re here. If you want to spend most of your time on the beach, stay in Santa Monica or Venice. If you’re planning on cutting through a good chunk of the city (like the places outlined in this sample itinerary), however, there is nowhere more central or easy to get around from than Koreatown. It’s a great neighborhood in and of itself too, so this is my number one recommendation. Downtown is a good option as well -- full of life and fancy hotels and right in the center of a ton of our new development. The Mid-City area, while not as bustling or beautiful, also has the exact benefit it sounds like: It’s in the middle of the city.

**Arrival night**

If you’re flying into LAX, you’re going to be decently far away from the stuff you’ll be doing throughout this trip, so don’t feel too much pressure to cram a lot in if you’re arriving in the evening or night. Is In-N-Out Burger one of the primary reasons you chose to visit California? There’s one right next to LAX and now’s a great time to take advantage of it.

**Pro tip:** LAX is a nightmare, so if have the option to fly into Burbank instead, you absolutely should. It’s tiny, closer to the city, and absolutely worth the slightly higher ticket price. And if you’re flying into LAX, just get a Lyft or take a FlyAway bus to get you downtown: Both are cheap. Plus, even the most polite friend in town will secretly hate you for asking them to enter the fifth circle of hell (the terminal) to pick you up.
Day 1: Los Feliz, Silver Lake, and Highland Park

There’s no one secret to understanding Los Angeles, but the best way to start is to take it neighborhood by neighborhood. The adjacent neighborhoods of Los Feliz and Silver Lake are a great launching pad, and are perfect to help ease you into the trip. A consistent juxtaposition of mellow and buzzy, they are both extremely walkable and will act as a doorway into all the exciting things happening in our food scene, as well as the general vibe of what locals are actually like (surprise twist: Most of us are not vapid Instagram models!).

You should kick your trip off with a big, beautiful brunch, and Atrium in Los Feliz is just the place for it. The space itself is gorgeous, and the magic that chef Hunter Pritchett is working in the kitchen -- like smashed potatoes brushed with chipotle queso, salted honey butter biscuits, and an exceptional caramelized kimchi breakfast burrito -- isn’t to be missed. Afterward, take a walk down Vermont Avenue to Barnsdall Park to kick back, digest, and catch some pretty views of Griffith Park and the Hollywood Sign (did you even visit LA if you didn’t snap a pic in front of it?).
Chances are high that the weather is beautiful, so take a walk down Sunset Boulevard into Silver Lake. Everything you’ve heard about the iconic neighborhood is probably true; hipster awkwardly sparse clothing showrooms -- you’ve no doubt seen the “Sunset Junction” sign in movie or TV show.

Trendiness is a two-sided coin though, and that means along with all those laughably long coffee shop lines comes a restaurant scene at the absolute top of its game. Most of these spaces have a bar area, so if you’re not exactly hungry yet, stop in for a cocktail somewhere.

Along Sunset alone you’ll find the elevated Filipino grand slam that is Ma’am Sir, the seafood-centric Sawyer (which also boasts one of our best happy hours), and the coffee shop-meets-diner-meets-new American restaurant vibes of All Day Baby. Once you are hungry, grab sor lunch at Pine & Crane, because as you nibble on Taiwanese small plates, sip delicious iced teas, and watch the ever-present foot traffic in the middle of Silver Lake, you’ll start to get a sense of what this place really is.

MORE: Catch our full guide to eating and drinking in Silver Lake

Once you’ve had your fill of Silver Lake, it’s time to move northeast. Call a car (or grab the Red Line in Los Feliz and transfer to the Gold Line...public transit actually does exist here) to Highland Park. There’s a special kind of charm to northeast Los Angeles, a collection of neighborhoods full of craft beer, Jewish-Chinese deli mashups in the back of liquor stores, and secret, invite-only backyard speakeasies.

These days, Highland Park is the most flourishing neighborhood in the area, and despite its recent (and rapid) gentrification, the Highland Park of the past is not yet lost. For a sneak preview of the oh-my-god-I-can’t-believe-this-came-from-a-food-truck emotions you’ll be feeling soon enough, stop by Mariscos El Faro for a snack and some of the freshest ceviches and aguachiles you’ll find anywhere in LA. The two main streets of the neighborhood, Figueroa and York, are ripe for exploration, full of street carts, food trucks, and cocktail bars (like ETA and Sonny’s Hideaway). Post up at beer bar Block Party for some elite-level day drinking or one of our best patios, take a peek in the old-school soda shop that is Galco’s, have enormous rose-colored gin & tonics at Otoño. When you’re ready for dinner, Hippo is waiting to serve up California-meets-Italian food and some of the best cocktails on the east side.
Day 2: Venice, the Valley, and Koreatown

You’re headed west toward the ocean to start today off, so get ready to experience some of that storied LA traffic. You might think that renting a convertible and heading across town to the beach is something you’re supposed to do. This never really works out the way you think will. Because of said traffic, the wind-in-your-hair vibes are not going to be achieved, and all you’re left with is an expensive car rental. Take a Lyft.

Santa Monica might be the most famous place on the west side, but today’s Santa Monica beach isn’t dissimilar to the Santa Monica beach of 2000. Instead, head to Venice to explore Abbot Kinney, a neighborhood that even the most vehement of eastsiders can agree is relentlessly charming. Have brunch here (either buried under Nashville hot shrimp and corn waffles at Yours Truly, or swimming through fresh bread and pizzas at Gjelina); wander nec boho Abbot Kinney Boulevard; have some wine and oysters at Dudley Market; and enjoy the fresh air. If the beach is crucial to you, now’s the time to go soak up some sun. You’re right around the corner from the bodybuilders of iconic Muscle Beach and the pickup basketball games memorialized in White Men Can’t Jump, so if you need a pic for the ‘gram, this is as great a spot as any.

MORE: Everywhere you need to eat in Venice right now

Lunch today is going to lead us to a place that is probably going to confuse you at first. The San Fernando Valley (you know, like from Clueless) certainly doesn’t have the flashiness you might expect out of West Hollywood or Beverly Hills, but it’s unequivocally one of the best places to eat in the entire country. Not only is the Valley the biggest hotbed for unbelievable, cheap, strip-mall dining (defined by places like Mom’s Bar-B-Q House, Cemitas Don Adrian, and Salsa & Beer), the sushi scene is simply out of this world. There are more than a few Japanese expats who claim that Valley sushi is as good or better than the sushi in Japan. Hit up Go’s Mart, Iroha, or Chiba for out-of-this-world sushi made with imported Japanese ingredients or go a little more chef-driven with Phillip Frankland Lee’s Sushi Bar. Throw your expectations aside, order a car into the Valley (not as painful to get to from the west side as you’d expect), and have a lunch you’ll brag about later.
Dinner tonight is all about Koreatown. Perhaps you’re even catching a show at The Wiltern so come hungry. The city within a city is nearly 3 square miles, and tightly packed with specialty grocery stores, late-night eats, karaoke bars, and most importantly, Korean BBQ. (Keep in mind that most of these spots don’t take reservations, so mentally prepare yourself for a bit of a wait.) Park’s and Kang Ho-Dong Baekjeong are impossible to beat when it comes to meat and banchan quality -- Park’s may in fact be the best Korean BBQ in the city -- but Quarters’ outdoor bar that allows you to drink while you wait for your table is absolutely clutch. Still want Korean food but don’t eat meat? Hit the Bourdain-approved Beverly Soon Tofu for the best soondubu-jjigae (tofu stew) in town, or even Mapo Kkak Doo Gee for some delicious, sizzling bibimbap. If you’re a karaoke fiend, Koreatown is most definitely where you want to end your night, as it’s packed to the gills with karaoke bars. A little late-night bowling at gloriously divey Shatto Lanes never hurt anybody either (plus, the bar is unspeakably cheap).
**Day 3: DTLA, Boyle Heights, and the Arts District**

If your vacation to Los Angeles is rooted in the culinary explosion the city has experienced, there is perhaps no neighborhood more exemplary than Downtown. DTLA, as it’s referred to, went through a whole lot of changes throughout the 2000s. Years of decline and stagnation finally began to transform into new life in 1999 when the Staples Center was built, and as the years went on to see the redevelopment of businesses and residences (especially the 30,000 square foot food hall Grand Central Market), DTLA finally began to take shape as the centerpiece of the city. This set the stage until 2010, at which point the restaurant scene went absolutely bananas.

Today, you’ll find a horde of LA's best restaurants speckled throughout DTLA, including Fina Table winner Tim Hollingsworth’s new American Otium, the modern Mexican stunner Brok Spanish, and omakase sushi phenom Q. Places like Angel City Brewery helped kick off our craft beer explosion around this time too, and today you’ll see it perfected at spots like Boomtown and Mumford. Whereas before the ‘90s you wouldn’t find much life downtown, any walk through the streets today is littered with courtyards, restaurants, bars, and most importantly, people.

MORE: The best bars in DTLA right now

The neo-Indian restaurant Badmaash will make for a delicious brunch, serving up lamb burgers, masala fries, and some of the best butter chicken you’ll ever eat. Save some room though, because when you’re done, you’re taking a stroll beneath the continually growing skyline for some tacos at Sonoratown and Tacos 1986, two spots that paint an excellent picture of what our modern taco scene looks like, both serving some of the best meats and handmade tortillas you’ll ever eat.

Surprise! You’re going on a taco crawl. If each LA neighborhood has its own specific culture, East LA is undoubtedly one of the strongest. Because the population is over 85% Mexican, it should come as no surprise that the Mexican food is better here than, well, most other place in America (Ave 26 Taco Stand in Lincoln Heights is an outdoor taco market so bustling it might as well be its own society). A great place to experience a ton of them within a close proximity is Boyle Heights, where trucks like Carnitas el Momo serve pork shoulder braised...
in its own fat, **Tacos Arabes de Puebla** cooks Pueblan-style tacos on homemade flour tortillas, and **Mariscos Jalisco** fries crispy shrimp tacos that could stand up to *any* dish in *any* restaurant anywhere.

It’s not at all a far walk across the mighty **LA River** (did you know *you can kayak that* when there’s actually water in it?) to the **Arts District**, where you’ll be spending your evening -- and if your taco crawl went well, you’ll probably want to do a bit of walking anyway. The collection of warehouses along the eastern edge of DTLA was once nothing more than a hub for the freight industry. Recently, it exploded at an exponential rate; luxury lofts, distilleries, coffee shops, boutiques, breweries, and restaurants can’t seem to stop sprouting here. Stop by **Two Bit Circus**, a warehouse full of classic arcade & VR games, food, and booze. If you’ve planned far enough in advance, perhaps you’ve snagged some tickets to the **Lost Spirits Distillery tour** one of our ever-growing local distilleries.
The Arts District might just be the most exciting dining neighborhood in the city, featuring an onslaught of incredible things to eat, not the least of which the shrimp toast at Top Chef-winner Mei Lin’s Nightshade, the southern biscuits at Manuela (hidden inside the impressive Hauser & Wirth building, which is worth a walk through), and the perfectly charred pizzas from Bestia -- but it’s the Bestia team’s other restaurant that you’re having dinner at. Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis are at the helm of Bavel, a Mediterranean powerhouse like absolutely nothing else. Mention the name and anybody will tell you to get the duck ’nduja hummus and lamb neck shawarma (and they’re right), but your table should also be piled high with cloud-like pita, perfectly-spiced mushroom kabobs, and fresh scallop crudo. A lot of people say Bavel is the best restaurant in all of Los Angeles. I’m not prepared to argue.

**Day 4: The San Gabriel Valley, Chinatown, and Echo Park**

If you liked the way Koreatown transported you to another country, you’re most certainly going to like brunch today. The San Gabriel Valley, commonly referred to as the SGV, is LA’s other valley, and another area absolutely essential to LA’s culture. It’s here that you’ll find an oasis of Chinese, Taiwanese, and Sichuan food unlike anywhere else. Dim sum is the move (any and all dumplings from Lunasia are a must), but you most certainly won’t go wrong with a big meal at either Sichuan Impression or Chengdu Taste, where mapo tofu and toothpick lamb reign supreme.

Hopefully you’re not totally spooked by the LA Metro system, so you can hop back on the Gold Line and head to Chinatown. The newly renovated LA Historic Park is a fine way to spend an afternoon, offering sweeping views of the DTLA skyline, prime Frisbee-throwing space, and (if you went too hard at brunch) tons of grass perfect for napping. It’s also conveniently located across the street from the city’s single best brewery, Highland Park Brewery, and you’d be making a huge mistake to miss it. If this morning’s breakfast/brunch feels like a distant memory, grab yourself a sandwich. Between the mom & pop energy of Wax Paper, the brutal Nashville hot chicken (and even more brutal line) at Howlin’ Ray’s, and the century-spanning French dip legacy of sandwich inventor Philippe, there aren’t many better sandwich options (except of course, at the pastrami haven Langer’s, which might be worth staying an extra day for).
As the day winds down, it’s time to make our way to another essential Eastside neighborhood, **Echo Park**. This is the home of **Elysian Park** and **Dodger Stadium**; there is no LA without Ecol Park. If you’re taking this trip with your significant other, there aren’t many things more iconic (or lovably cheesy) than hopping into one of the swan-shaped **pedal boats** at **Echo Park Lake**. It’s a photo opp waiting to happen, and a good way to decompress. If you need a snack while you’re pedaling around, the **Japanese convenience store-style egg salad sandwiches** at **Kon** are among the single best bites in LA. Echo Park is another neighborhood exploding with restaurants, so you should have no trouble finding a terrific dinner. But at the top of your list should be the magical small plates and extensive sake list at **Ototo** or the wood-fired pizzas and antipasti snacks from **Cosa Buona**.

![Itty’s Cheese, located in the LA Farmers Market, sells locally sourced California cheese...and butters and jams.](image)

**Day 5: Hancock Park, Sawtelle, and Fairfax**

Your final day of kickass dining has arrived. If your heart has truly been set on experiencing the glitzy pulse of **West Hollywood**, feel free to wander the Sunset Strip and enjoy the farm-
to-table, rustic fare at Eveleigh. The Strip is also home to The Comedy Store and The Laugh Factory, both of which have big-name comics getting up every single night, if you have some juice left in you by that hour.

If you feel like you already understand the vibe of West Hollywood from every TV show and movie you’ve ever seen, you probably do. Now is a great time to head to Hancock Park to have brunch in the absolutely essential République. The dining room, which was originally built for Charlie Chaplin in 1928, is just about as gorgeous as it gets, and the food even moreso. The cooking here -- tender beef short rib nestled between kimchi fried rice, porcini mushroom & goat cheese omelettes, handmade corn agnolotti -- is simply insane. This is a place to splurge.

If you didn’t get your fill with sushi in the Valley, the last major LA cuisine you’ve yet to dive into is Japanese. Little Tokyo -- right by the Arts District -- gets most of the hype when it comes to Japanese eats, but Sawtelle is an area that’s simply far too slept-on. Speckled with Japanese markets, sushi, and a beautiful surplus of noodle shops, you’ll be able to find just about all of the Japanese goodies you require. Get lunch at Sushi Tsujita if you wanna spend some dollars, or maybe even join the frenzy of Kura, where surprisingly high-quality sushi revolves around you, each plate less than $3 off the high-tech sushi track. Noodles might be more your speed, and if so, you’ll be safe in the arms of any establishment under the Tsujita name (particularly the oh-so-spicy Killer Noodle), but if it’s udon that calls to you, head over to Marugame Udon.

Before dinner is probably the best time to knock out anything in Beverly Hills you’re itching do. You’ll find a slew of high-end shopping and hotels, just like in the movies, so if that’s the type of thing your trip needs, here’s your chance to tell people you’ve been to Rodeo Drive. The Grove isn’t far either, and offers another option to walk around and shop in the energy of an outdoor mall or, if you’re somehow still hungry, hit the stalls at the neighboring LA Farmers Market.

Once dinnertime has arrived, you’re capping off your trip in the Fairfax area. This neighborhood, for all its wonderful dining, is irrefutably a scene. You’ll probably see at least three separate lines for some sort of sneaker release, along with a half-dozen tattoo shops a more hypebeasts than you can count. Luckily, there are enough excellent restaurants to make
up for it. Jon Shook & Vinny Dotolo, two of the most prominent restauranteurs in the city, have made Fairfax a sort of home base. The Italian-centric Jon & Vinny's, seafood-heavy Son of a Gun, and offal-specializing Animal are all posted here, and if you're doing a big, final meal to cap off your trip, it's the latter you'll want to make a reservation for. Anybody with a brain in their head will consider Animal among LA's defining restaurants, and it's a hell of a bang to go out with. Famous for their chicken liver toast, off-menu burger, and bone marrow, the place will convert anybody opposed to uncommon animal cuts into a believer. This is your last meal in the best dining city in America -- make it count.
MEET THE WRITER

Wilder Shaw is an LA native who writes about food and lifestyle for a variety of publications, but you probably know him from when he played “Trick-or-Treater No. 2” on an episode of The Nanny.

When was the last time you were in LA?
I’m a native and local -- I was born here, went to college in San Francisco, and moved right back home afterward.

What’s something about LA that people don’t understand if they’re not from there?
I think people feel like the most exciting parts of LA are the beach or the Hollywood Hills, but there is so much more to the city than that. Every neighborhood is practically its own city -- the sleepy stretches of Eagle Rock, the chaotic energy of the Santa Monica tech scene, the steadily prospering South LA -- and each one is home to things a lot more interesting than the Venice Boardwalk.

Number one can’t-miss recommendation?
We’ve got great places to eat just about every type of cuisine you can think of, but above all, you need tacos. Tacos are LA on a plate. Ideally you’ll be eating them on the street, too, out of a truck or from a cart. This doesn’t mean that every single taco truck in LA is perfect, of course: but you’re more than likely to stumble across something great, especially if you’re on the east side. Multiple fresh salsas, homemade tortillas, and (sigh) long lines are all indicators of a great truck, so enjoy the hunt, because discovery is half the magic.

What’s a low-key LA hidden gem that visitors don’t usually consider?
I cannot state this strongly enough: Just because a small, strip-mall restaurant doesn’t look like much from the outside, chances are high that it’s a banger. One of my favorite restaurants has a sign that says just one word: “Cuisine.” I can’t tell you what it is because the owner would kill me.

What’s your best tip to a visitor?
First of all, this place is big. Like, really big. Our public transit, while reliable if you’re taking it
to the places it runs, simply doesn’t cover enough ground. Because of this, you can either rer
a car (ew), or prepare to spend some bucks on Ubers and Lyfts. This is a far better option, as i
offers relief from the hellbeast that is parking in LA, as well as the chance to imbibe as you
please. Another tip: Make as many reservations as possible. A lot of these places simply won
be able to accommodate walk-ins.

**Next big trip in 2020 that you’re excited about?**
I’ve been to Austin, Texas, twice, but both times were for Austin City Limits Music Festival. I
didn’t really get a sense of what the city is really like, since it was so full of tourists. This year
I’m heading back to do it right -- that means talking to locals, eating at more places than just
Torchy’s Tacos, and exploring a lot more neighborhoods.

**Ultimate bucket list that you’re dying to go to one day?**
Japan is firmly rooted in my number one spot.

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