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### Lifestyle/Bon Appétit

## All You Can Eat

Find great meals and more at these SoCal restaurants

Photographs by Leslie Bird

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### Orange County

#### Gordon James Grill

110 N. El Camino Real  
San Clemente; (949) 498-9100

**Dinner for two, food only:** \$50–\$100

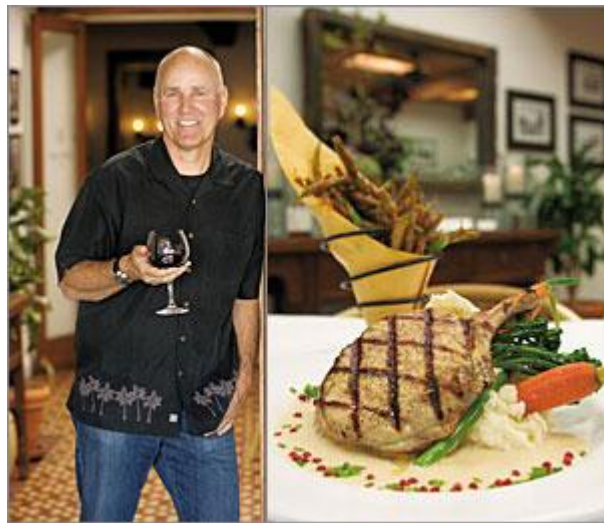
**Setting:** Rough-hewn Spanish-revival decor with large wooden beams, whitewashed adobe, and wrought-iron accents

**Service:** Friendly and exceptionally attentive without being cloying or stuffy

**Best dishes:** Fried green beans; filet mignon in cognac and four-peppercorn sauce; rack of pork

Sometimes the measure of a good restaurant is how well the staff handles adversity. Serving between 100 and 200 dinners per night, managing the ebb and flow of hungry crowds, and keeping pace with steep fluctuations in the quality and quantity of raw products can be a daunting proposition. Some nights, it seems like everything goes wrong.

The way in which Gordon James Grill, in San Clemente, handled one of those nights speaks volumes for all the evenings when everything is right as rain. The kitchen was between chefs one busy spring Saturday evening when one of my dining companions was served a slab of prime rib that was tough and sinewy. As the rest of us plowed through our steaks and seafood with gusto, he carefully sliced through different ends of the slab, hunting for a salvageable morsel. He'd been slicing for less than five minutes when our server — without prompting — approached the table and offered to substitute another dish for the rib meat. Soon, a manager came by to apologize. Before meal's end, the dinner had been deducted from the ticket, and we were given a delicious tiramisu on the house.



**It's all good: Service is a high priority at Gordon James Grill, in San Clemente. Co-owned by Gordon Rose, the restaurant has an eclectic menu that includes fried green beans and rack of pork.**

In prior visits, we had thoroughly enjoyed just about everything Gordon James offered up, including generous portions of fresh fish, such as Pacific white sea bass and Atlantic salmon; racks of pork and lamb; and a very tasty cut of filet mignon. Exceptional servers who were smart, informed, savvy, and funny made the whole experience a delight.

In just over a year, the restaurant has earned a loyal local following. Located in the original Ole Hanson real-estate office, the second permanent structure in San Clemente, Gordon James is the brainchild of the Gordon Rose and James Niederhauser families, great friends and veterans of the restaurant business. Their experience shows. Gordon James is a place where almost anyone, from the kids to Grandma, is going to respond to the eclectic mix of good food, the comfortable yet electric ambience, and the zipper-tight service.

— *Pete Johnson*

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## Points North

### **Jonathan's at Peirano's**

204 E. Main Street  
Ventura; (805) 648-4853

**Dinner for two, food only:** \$60–\$80

**Setting:** Stylish and comfortable

**Service:** Friendly and professional

**Best dishes:** Basque chicken; cioppino

As we sat contentedly nibbling our tapas and sipping glasses of full-bodied Rioja, we felt as if we were in a sun-drenched cafe in the Mediterranean. Luckily, we didn't have to go so far for the experience: We were on Main Street in Ventura, at the charming Jonathan's at Peirano's, happily eating our way through Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Morocco.

We didn't need our passports, but we did need healthy appetites. My husband, who is not a dainty eater, found himself hard-pressed to finish the tasty cioppino. Topped off with a Pacific lobster tail, the large bowl was filled with fresh local fish, shrimp, scallops, and clams in a broth of fresh tomatoes, garlic, white wine, and saffron. (Although some would point out that cioppino was most likely invented in the fishing boats at Monterey and San Francisco bays rather than in the coastal towns of Italy, we chose not to quibble but to savor every sweet, briny bite.)

The juicy Basque-style chicken, traditional to Spain and Portugal, was a good accompaniment. Marinated in olive oil, garlic, and shallots, it was char-grilled and finished with onions, tomatoes, leeks, black olives, and peppers, then sautéed with white wine, fresh thyme, and fresh oregano. Rack of New Zealand spring lamb, marinated with olive oil, garlic, and fresh rosemary, was also a big hit at our table, as was the filet with Gorgonzola and fennel. We didn't have room for dessert, but we were tempted by the Chocolate Surprise — a decadent molten chocolate cake.

Since that night, we've stopped by the adjoining bar, J's Tapas, for the spanakopita and the polenta with grilled vegetables and breaded goat cheese. We've paired the tapas with cocktails from the martini bar, or with one of the more than 30 wines offered by the glass, and relaxed to the live entertainment. One recent night we listened to a smooth-jazz combo as it played "It's De-Lovely." Yes, it is.

— *Nancy Ransohoff*

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## Inland Empire and the Desert

### **Centro Basco**

13432 Central Avenue  
Chino; (909) 628-9014

**Dinner for two, food only:** \$25–\$45

**Setting:** Convivial, festive, and homey

**Service:** Warm and accommodating

**Best dishes:** Pickled beef tongue; rack of lamb; roasted chicken

California has a proud Basque heritage. In fact, in the early part of the 20th century, many Basque shepherders left their homes in the Pyrénées Mountains between France and Spain and settled in what is now Chino. They brought their passion for food with them, and today, Chino's Centro Basco offers a great introduction to their best dishes.

Centro Basco specializes in wholesome, unfussy country cooking, and the rambling restaurant, founded in 1940 as part of a boardinghouse for shepherds, provides a homey place in which to enjoy it. The main dining room, dominated by a colorful mural of a mountain village in the Basque country, offers a sea of candlelit tables topped with white linen. Another room is devoted to traditional communal tables.

There's no need to agonize over an appetizer selection, because everything is included with the entrées. The first course is a massive tureen of soup (most often potato-leek, onion, or beef noodle) that even parties of four have trouble finishing. The next course consists of a huge bowl of iceberg lettuce dressed in oil and vinegar and a plate of pickled beef tongue with marinated tomatoes and Jack cheese. (The ultratender meat, cut razor-thin, may seem unusual, but it is refreshing and tasty, and worth a try.)

The third course is a mountain of pasta. Then, finally, the entrées arrive: perhaps shrimp scampi, grilled entrecôte (rib-eye), 16-ounce prime rib, or two whole Idaho rainbow trout in a garlicky lemon-butter sauce. The best are the roasted chicken, which has a deep golden crispy skin, and the rack of lamb, which is roasted with plenty of garlic. It's devoid of fat and doesn't require any of the overly sweet mint jelly that's served with it.

Although not part of the deal, modestly priced desserts include a flan made in-house and a decent cheesecake. The wine list is not particularly interesting; it's probably best to bring a bottle, which the restaurant will open for a nominal fee. But who could complain about that, given the value of a meal at Centro Basco? It's hard to believe that the proprietors, the Berterrectche family, can serve all this good food for less than \$20 per person.

— Roger J. Grody

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## The Valleys

### Olé Tapas Bar

13251 Ventura Boulevard

Studio City; (818) 986-3190

**Dinner for two, food only:** \$40–\$60

**Setting:** Spanish flair with a contemporary edge

**Service:** Can be harried, with all the small plates flying in and out of the kitchen

**Best dishes:** *Calamar vasco* (fried calamari); *camaron con ajo* (shrimp with garlic); *cordero con ajo* (lamb chops with garlic)

For all the attention paid to Spain's culinary prowess, I've always found it odd that there are few true Spanish restaurants in Southern California. So when a Spanish-style eatery called Olé Tapas Bar opened in Studio City in February, I lost no time heading there.

Olé occupies the space where the Provençal restaurant Tournesol used to be. The interior has been artfully updated with suede cubes providing lounge seating; murals depicting Spanish bullfighting adorning the blood-red walls; and a long, curved, black banquette linking the dining area with the bar. It's attractive, chic, and so comfortable that groups can while away hours nibbling on tapas and sampling the offerings from the bar.

Olé's menu covers all the bases with a lengthy list of hot and cold tapas, as well as a selection of main courses and desserts. The tapas range from authentically Spanish (tortilla Española) to bizarro-fusion (grilled eel with pineapple), but there are more hits than misses. Among the hits are the crisp-fried calamari drizzled with a fiery chili-garlic sauce; the plump and tender sautéed sweet shrimp with garlic; and the grilled flatiron steak, a generous portion of flavorful steak slices that could have used a bit more of the anchovy butter mentioned on the menu. There's also a salad of crisp-tender *haricots verts* with dried figs and chopped walnuts. It's tasty, although a few crumbles of Spanish Cabrales blue cheese would make the dish really sing.

For heartier appetites, there are several poultry and fish entrées, such as the restaurant's signature dish, black cod with a *beurre blanc* made with Spanish Cava sparkling wine. The garlicky lamb chops and truffled mashed potatoes are another good choice. But I can't recommend the somewhat gummy paella, nor the aforementioned eel and pineapple appetizer, which is simply odd.

Despite those missteps, there's enough here to satisfy the appetite, and plenty to slake thirst, too. In addition to a full bar, Olé offers a selection of California and Spanish wines by the glass (and bottle), which can make for a fun evening of food-and-wine pairing.

— Jean T. Barrett

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## San Diego

### LG's Prime Steakhouse

789 Sixth Avenue

San Diego; (619) 239-7899

**Dinner for two, food only:** \$70–\$120

**Setting:** Clubby and comfortable

**Service:** Calm, professional, and on occasion quite gracious

**Best dishes:** Caesar salad; steaks; prime rib

With locations in Palm Desert, Palm Springs, and La Quinta, LG's Prime Steakhouse, one of the best-known restaurants in the desert, loaded up the wagon wheels this past December and rolled over the mountains to San Diego. The urge to go West came when a sizable new restaurant space was made available in downtown's Gaslamp Quarter, which in regional terms has become the center of the universe for dining and entertainment.

"Wagon wheels," by the way, is the name given to LG's famous thick-cut onion rings. High rollers order these alongside the monumental Gold Strike 49'er Porterhouses with which the restaurant stakes its claim to prime status. Dry-aged for at least 15 days, custom cut to a bone-in weight of 30 ounces, and served, by necessity, on oversized plates, these marbled steaks cost a coy \$54.49 and approximate Mount Everest for beef eaters.

Which is not to say that LG's consistently challenges appetites, or even demands allegiance to red meat (al-though the thick-cut prime rib with creamed horseradish is reasonably irresistible). A "petite" filet mignon can be dispatched at one sitting, and red-meat alternatives, such as the crisp beer-battered shrimp and the oven-roasted chicken breast, have the double virtues of juicy succulence and relatively low price tags (both go for \$23.95).

But generally, LG's takes the big view, and even the tables in the two spacious dining rooms seem oversized. Two of the walls are lined in stacked stone, like canyons betraying their age, and the recorded jazz that plays above conversations is of a certain generation, too. Guests dress as they wish, but linens are so crisply starched that napkins folded like palm trees stand

stiffly in wine glasses.

Openers are filling, from the mountain of fried clams to the crab-stuffed portabello mushrooms and the escargot served alfredo-style. The menu designates the Caesar salad "very special," and if the tableside construction of one of these is fun to watch, the luxurious dressing coats the chopped Romaine like liquid gold. The culinary opulence extends to hefty rib-eye and New York strip steaks served sizzling in butter on red-hot plates, a fancy eight-bone rack of lamb, rich side dishes like creamed spinach and sautéed wild mushrooms, and, for those who think too much is never enough, cappuccino ice cream from McConnell's of Santa Barbara.

— David Nelson

## L.A. and Environs

### Osteria Latini

11712 San Vicente Boulevard  
Brentwood; (310) 826-9222

**Dinner for two, food only:** \$35–\$65

**Setting:** A small storefront warmed with floor-to-ceiling wine racks, pine paneling, greenery, and candlelight

**Service:** Friendly, informed, and attentive, although occasionally runners will blurt out, "Who has the risotto?"

**Best dishes:** Caprese salad with burrata cheese; salad of artichokes and hearts of palm; wild venison with cranberries; osso buco

Why do Italian places make such successful neighborhood restaurants? Is it because they are better than others at exuding a lust for life? Or maybe it's because they suit all budgets: One person can order a simple plate of pasta, while another can splurge on seafood and quality meat. Or perhaps it is simply because most of us never tire of Italian cooking — especially when it's as diverse and accomplished as that of Paolo Pasio, the Trieste-born owner/chef of Brentwood's Osteria Latini.

One might assume that

Brentwood needs another Italian trattoria like it needs another mansionized faux-Tuscan villa. But Osteria Latini has quickly attracted a horde of regulars — everyone from retired aircraft engineers who bought their Brentwood three-bedrooms in 1954 for \$12,000 to young TV producers who are putting new kitchens in their \$2-million fixer-uppers. They are united in their devotion to this warm, bustling restaurant, and many of them get the same dish, week in and week out. Some are loyal to the *branzino*, a simple but gorgeous sea bass that's roasted in the kitchen, then filleted tableside. Some live for the lobster risotto, which comes in a light but vividly flavorful tomato sauce. Me, I could happily dine weekly on specials such as the tender osso buco on a bed of saffron risotto — but then I wouldn't get to enjoy the intensely flavorful wild venison with cranberries, the decadent *spaghetti alla carbonara*, or the homemade gnocchi.

I've yet to be disappointed with a dish here. True, some are just basic Italian standards. And although the complimentary lemon sabayon that concludes meals is swell, the desserts are nothing too exciting. But everything is competently prepared, and a great many dishes shine. The wine list is good, too, with worthy Italian selections in all price ranges.



**A toss up:** The Caesar salad at LG's Prime Steakhouse, in San Diego, made here by server Aarón Rojo, is labeled "very special," perhaps because of the ultrarich dressing.

My only complaint: the huge selection of daily specials, which are recited at interminable length by the servers. If you can remember the preceding 11 specials by the time they get to the 12th, then you're ready to go on *Jeopardy*. Hey, chef! Can't you get one of your kitchen staff to type up the list every day? Just make sure to keep that osso buco on there.

— Colleen Dunn Bates

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**Dining, Italian-style: Brentwood's Osteria Latini proves to be the ideal neighborhood restaurant, with its cozy dining room (top right) and great food, such as the salad of artichokes and hearts of palm (bottom right) and the caprese salad with burrata cheese (left).**

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