

*Bye-bye, Berkeley. So long, San Francisco. A wave of new restaurants suggests that Oakland is now the Bay Area's dining destination.*

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## Oakland, America's Next Great Dining Town



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When James Syhabout bid adieu to his chef de cuisine post at four-star Manresa in Los Gatos last year, Bay Area foodies held their collective breath to find out just where this young haute-shot would launch his first restaurant. When the answer came, it was a surprise not only to them, but to some of Syhabout's friends and colleagues as well: Oakland.

Syhabout was resolute in choosing what some sneered was San Francisco's grittier, more urban, culinary stepchild. Even if he had all the resources in the world, he said he still would have picked Oakland. After all, it's been his hometown since he emigrated from Thailand 27 years ago. "People thought I was taking a risk," he said about opening Commis restaurant on Piedmont Avenue three months ago. "But you never know until you give it a try. I just thought if you build it, people will come."

And have they. Not only to Syhabout's establishment, but to legions of others that have opened their doors in the remarkable restaurant renaissance of the past few years. A host of talented chefs have transformed Oakland into what's now arguably one of the country's most vibrant dining destinations.

Consider the restaurants that have opened in just the past year or so. Grand Avenue is now home to Sidebar; Grand Tavern; and the acclaimed Camino, by Chez Pannisse alum Russell Moore. Just down the road at Broadway you'll find Picán, a branch of San Francisco's Ozumo, the new Mimosa Champagne Lounge, and a soon-to-open second location of Temescal's hip Bakesale Betty.

Just blocks from there in Uptown, stomachs already are growling in anticipation of the new restaurant planned by Sarah Kirnon, late of San Francisco's beloved Front Porch, whose Hibiscus restaurant will take inspiration from her native Barbados. One block from that, construction is underway on a new concept from Charlie Hallowell, the owner of Oakland's ever-crowded Pizzaiolo. And the Temescal neighborhood of Hallowell's first restaurant is also home to the low-key wine bar Marc 49; Barlata by

Chef Daniel Olivella of San Francisco's B44; and Burma Superstar, which already has locales in San Francisco and Alameda.

Over at Lake Merritt, the century-old boat house was recently revamped into the Lake Chalet Seafood Bar & Grill by the same owners of San Francisco's Beach Chalet Brewery & Restaurant and Park Chalet Garden Restaurant.

And the once-dowdy Jack London Square district has been infused with new life by the reborn Miss Pearl's Jam House, the newly opened Chop Bar, and the stylish Bocanova. More is set to come when Tanya Holland of West Oakland's Brown Sugar Kitchen opens a new Creole-inspired bistro. And in January, revered San Francisco Chef Daniel Patterson will unveil Bracina. The casual, seasonal restaurant, serving the likes of hardwood grilled duck with grapes and grappa, and gnocchi with smoked mussels and pancetta, will be headed by his business partner, Chef Lauren Kiino, formerly of San Francisco's Delfina.

Even the sleepy Glenview district has gotten in on the act, with Bellanico, from the owners of San Francisco's Aperto; a planned new offshoot of À Côté, whose construction is currently underway; and Marzano, which just opened a sister restaurant on College Avenue in Rockridge. Meanwhile, Piedmont Avenue welcomed not only Commis but Adesso, from the nearby owners of Dopo.

"Oakland is the Brooklyn of the Bay Area," says noted restaurant consultant Clark Wolf, who splits his time between the Bay Area and New York. "When the economy went through the floor and people wanted to have good, solid, no-big-deal meals, Oakland was a natural. It's a logical place where great people lived in good spaces at believable prices."

In fact, it might even be more attractive than Brooklyn, especially when it comes to downtown, with its profusion of architecturally distinct buildings. Of the 160 new businesses that have opened downtown in the past six years, 65 of them have been restaurants, according to Oakland's Community and Economic Development Agency. During that same time frame, the downtown vacancy rate, once a dire 25 percent, has dropped to less than 5 percent.

Brian Kendall, a project manager for that agency, says he hasn't been this busy in a decade. Every week, he's been leading walking tours of available properties to interested San Francisco restaurateurs. Recently, he even gave two tours to nightclub-restaurant developers from Manhattan who flew in just to scope out the area. "Interest just keeps ramping up," Kendall aid. "There aren't that many spaces left. I'm down to 'Brian's Top 15' great spots left in downtown."

What's fueling this culinary boom?

Most notably, it's cheaper to open a restaurant in Oakland than in other urban parts of the Bay Area. Rents per square foot in San Francisco for restaurant spaces are about two to four times that of Oakland, Kendall said. Add to that the cost of labor and a liquor license, both of which are more expensive in San Francisco. Indeed, restaurateurs estimate that they have saved 20 to 30 percent in operating costs by choosing Oakland over San Francisco.

Syhabou agrees. With only 31 seats and eight employees at his Commis, he says it would have been impossible to succeed with such a tiny, fine-dining restaurant in price-prohibitive San Francisco.

Oakland also has the advantage of having an experienced labor pool, Syhabou adds. So many restaurant waitstaff already live in the East Bay and commute to restaurant jobs in San Francisco. Like him, many new East Bay restaurateurs and chefs now live in Oakland, too, drawn by the more affordable housing prices.

Some of Oakland's success may also be the result of two programs established by the city's redevelopment agency. The first, begun a decade ago, allows businesses throughout the city to recoup half the costs of facade improvements such as outdoor seating and awnings. The second program, begun six years ago, gives tenants \$10 per square foot to spiff up their properties. The program proved so successful downtown that it has since been extended to other redevelopment areas in West, East, and North Oakland.

But beyond economics, Oakland has other attractions that have proved a lure. Among them, restaurateurs say, are the city's incredible diversity, thriving arts community, and old-fashioned sense of civic pride.

Even though Patterson — who runs San Francisco's mesmerizing Coi and rustic Il Cane Rosso — was not looking to open a third restaurant, he grew smitten with Oakland because his wife, an attorney, works downtown. "The city is underserved," he said. "There are a lot of sophisticated diners there. I liked the idea of being able to contribute to the development of an area, rather than just moving into an already established one. We hope the restaurant helps revitalize the area and becomes a real part of the community."

Executive Chef Rick Hackett and his wife, Meredith Melville, the owners of Bocanova in Jack London Square, lived in the East Bay for 25 years before moving to San Francisco to take over Enrico's in North Beach. After leaving that venerable landmark, the couple missed Oakland's warmer weather so much that they moved back four years ago, buying a house near Lake Merritt.

They considered Berkeley to open their Pan-American restaurant that serves up the likes of Yucatan seafood stew and strip steak with zesty chimichurri sauce. But they finally decided on Jack London Square after becoming captivated by the soaring, waterfront space. So much so that they poured about \$2 million into the construction of the restaurant.

"The East Bay is so rich in what San Francisco used to have," Melville said. "There's just not necessarily the same kind of raw artistic energy and creativity, and variety in San Francisco anymore."

Still, Oakland can be a hard sell to some diners hesitant to cross the bridge from San Francisco or drive in from the well-to-do 'burbs of Lafayette and Moraga. Deserved or not, there's still the stereotype that you take your life into your own hands when you roll into Oaktown. Kevin Best, the co-owner of B Restaurant in Oakland and San Francisco, and Boxed Foods Company in San Francisco, knows that perception all too well. In fact, he once harbored it himself. Five years ago, when developers approached him about opening his restaurant on 9th Street at Washington Street in Old Oakland, he initially refused.

"I bought into the old stereotypes of Oakland," Best said. "But when I saw the area, I was just amazed at how it felt like a small town. I got such a warm feeling from talking to people here. It's like everyone had a goal to make it work in Oakland. It becomes infectious, and you want to be a part of it."

Not only did he and his wife move from San Francisco to Oakland three years ago, but he's now partnering with the owners of Oakland's Tamarindo and Air Lounge to open a 5,000 square-foot art bar and lounge in mid-October. Era, at Grand and Broadway in the Uptown district, will serve bar snacks and cocktails, feature live music, and spotlight art from the West Coast.

To calm diners' perceived concerns about walking through what might be unfamiliar Oakland streets, Uptown's Picán and neighboring Ozumo restaurants went so far as to jointly offer subsidized \$5 valet parking.

New Orleans-native Michael LeBlanc, who has lived for the past eleven years in Oakland, his wife's hometown, grows amused when he thinks about the reactions he's had from diners who have driven in from other parts of the Bay Area to try his restaurant, Picán.

"So many people come here from San Francisco and Marin, and say, 'Wow, this really doesn't feel like Oakland!'" said LeBlanc, who was the first African-American corporate officer at Polaroid before becoming a restaurateur. "You wink and smile, and hope that maybe in a year they won't say that. I think the conglomeration of restaurants now here is reshaping the attitudes about Oakland."

The thriving restaurant scene has definitely made people take notice. But will Oakland ever usurp San Francisco as the top dining destination in the Bay Area?

LeBlanc concedes probably not, simply because San Francisco is such a tourism magnet. That's just fine by him, though. He believes Oakland is forging its own distinctive identity that's just right for the times.

"If you're a little bit hipper, if you've got more soulfulness to you, Oakland has a little bit more flavor to offer," LeBlanc says. "We are like a coupe versus San Francisco's sedan. And right now, people just seem to want to drive that coupe or convertible more."