

2010 ULTIMATE SUMMER DRINKS GUIDE

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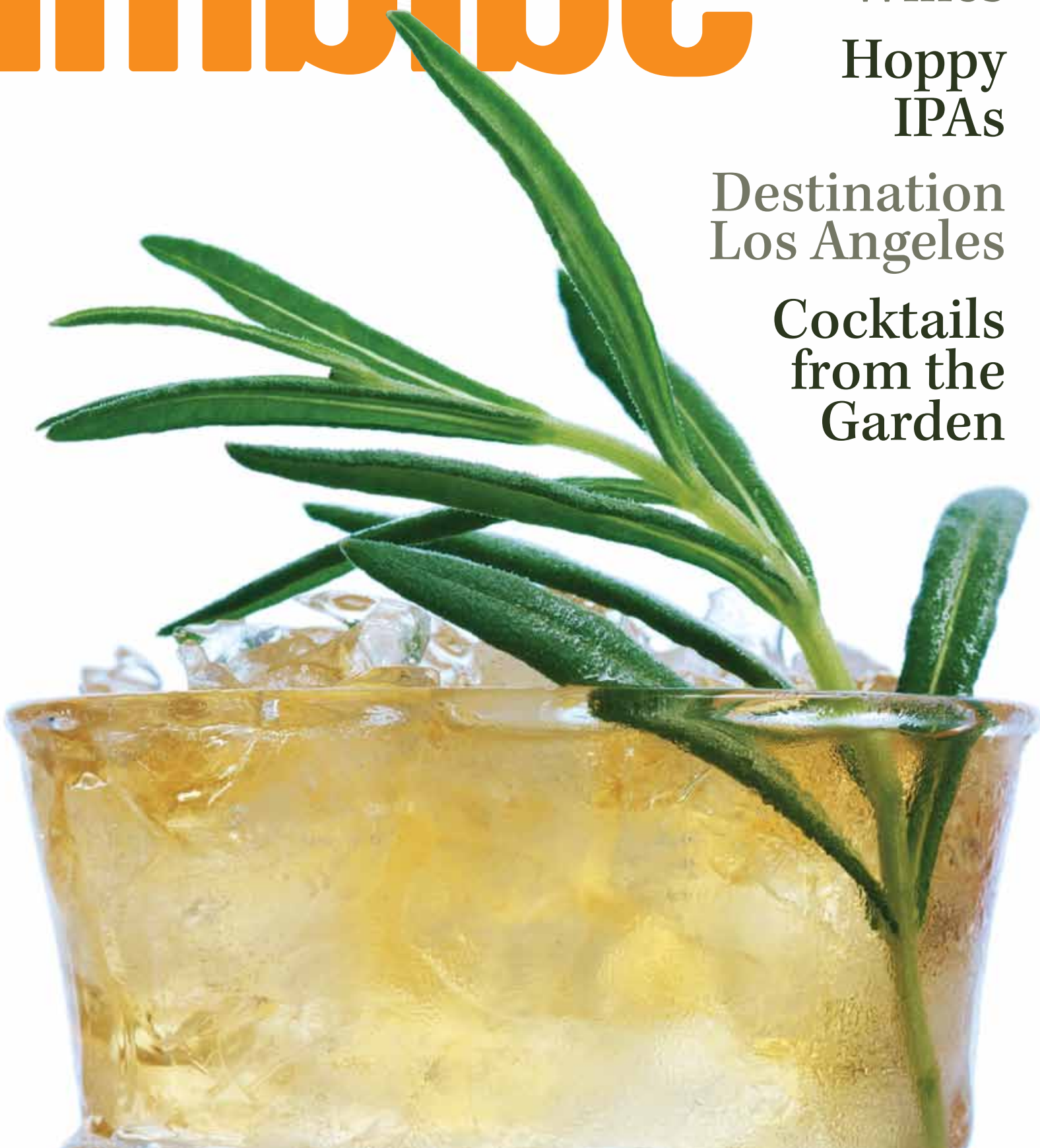
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# A STAR IS RE-BORN

L.A.'s cocktail renaissance  
is finally in full swing

Story by Paul Clarke — Photos by Dominic AZ Bonuccelli





n the movie *Chinatown*, set in 1930's Los Angeles, Jack Nicholson's private-eye character Jake Gittes dug into the corrupt, incestuous secrets that surrounded the fight for water, the element that made the ambitious notion of a huge city growing out of the California desert a reality.

While water may have enabled L.A.'s growth, liquor fueled the engine. During Hollywood's Golden Age, Los Angeles resembled a bibulous *Chinatown*, its social life seeming to float on rivers of gin and shimmering lakes of Martinis. At times, there was an atmosphere of one enormous party, with the Coconut Grove and Romanoff's packing them in at night, and the Cock 'n Bull on Sunset, the Brown Derby on Wilshire, and Chasen's and Don the Beachcomber in Hollywood serving drinks that left a permanent imprint on America's drinking history.

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, things had changed. While New York and San Francisco were rediscovering their liquid heritage, the mixological movie of Los Angeles was *Titanic*, the city's once-formidable cocktail scene a colossal catastrophe and its history of glamorous bars and style-setting drinks sinking in an ocean of Appletinis. "There's a great history here that everyone had forgotten," says Marleigh Riggins Miller, the L.A.-based keeper of the cocktail-oriented Slashed! blog. "We had Romanoff's and Chasen's, Don the Beachcomber, and all the weird little tiki bars and cocktail lounges that are now gone or turned into crappy dive bars. L.A. isn't just glitz and glamour and things that are new; we have a great cocktail history that can rival New York and San Francisco."

But change comes quickly in L.A., and while the city's craft bars have been slow out of the starting gate, today there's a cocktail renaissance underway that could make the City of Angels one of the world's most exciting drinking cities. "We're making up for lost time," says John Coltharp, head bartender at Caña Rum Bar, which opened in March. Coltharp notes that the large restaurant corporations and chains that carry a lot of weight in Los Angeles had been waiting to see the success of creative bartending before pursuing it in L.A. With craft bars in New York and San Francisco taking off, the time is finally ripe to jump in. "We emulate things here, and we're pretty good at it," he says.

## Extreme Makeover

The craft of the cocktail began to slide virtually everywhere in the 1960s and '70s, and in Los Angeles the change was particularly noticeable as the city's drinks devolved from a Hedy Lamarr-style glamour to the lipstick-smeared garishness of the city's contemporary celebutantes. Certainly, there were exceptions: In Silver Lake, the Tiki Ti, family-owned and staffed for three generations, has kept the tiki torches burning since the '60s; and while the craftsmanship may have slipped over the years, places such as Musso & Frank in Hollywood and the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel retain elements of an earlier era.

But things started to change around 2006, when bartenders such as Damian Windsor, Marcos Tello, Pablo Moix and Vincenzo Marianella began working with restaurants and bars like Providence, Comme Ça and The Edison. In 2007, Sasha Petraske, owner of the well-known New York bars Milk & Honey and Little Branch, partnered with bartender Eric Alperin to explore the L.A. market.



## LOS ANGELES COCKTAIL

Served at the Hi Ho Club in Hollywood in the 1930s, the Los Angeles Cocktail largely dropped off the city's mixological radar until Marcos Tello re-mastered the recipe to suit contemporary palates and match the classic-cocktail style at *The Varnish*.

1 ½ oz. bourbon (Tello uses Elijah Craig 12-Year)  
½ oz. sweet vermouth (Tello uses Carpano Antica)  
½ oz. simple syrup  
½ oz. fresh lemon juice  
1 dash Angostura bitters (may be omitted if using Carpano Antica)  
1 large fresh egg (pasteurized if you like)  
Ice cubes

Tools: cocktail shaker, strainer  
Glass: sour or wine glass  
Garnish: fresh-grated nutmeg

Combine ingredients in a shaker and shake very hard, without ice, for at least 10 seconds, until the egg is well mixed with other ingredients. Add ice and shake hard for at least 10 seconds; strain into a chilled glass and garnish.

Marcos Tello, *The Varnish*, Los Angeles





Bartender Eric Alperin  
at The Varnish.



Julian Cox double-strains a Poblano Escobar cocktail at Rivera.



That same year Cedd Moses, a downtown L.A. nightlife pioneer, opened Seven Grand, the first in a series of downtown bars that have played a significant role in reinvigorating L.A.'s once-slumbering cocktail scene. Riggins Miller notes that by concentrating his bars downtown, which is undergoing its own revitalization, Moses was avoiding one of the challenges that has always faced L.A. bars: Southern California's legendary car culture, which is understandably incongruent with the consumption of alcohol. "There's now a walking and public-transportation culture downtown, so there are ways to get around that don't involve a car," she says.

Its engine now running, L.A.'s craft-cocktail scene went directly from first gear into overdrive, and today even those who inaugurated the movement confess they're losing track of all the new places. What is clear is that between the homegrown talent in local bars, and the incursions by New York bartenders such as Pegu Club's Audrey Saunders, who partnered with chef Mark Peel to open The Tar Pit in late 2009 (Saunders left the project in February), or Death + Company's Alex Day and David Kaplan, who relocated to Los Angeles earlier this year with the aim of opening their own establishment, Los Angeles is once again in the cocktail spotlight.

## That's the Spirit

Though Los Angeles' craft-cocktail movement has exploded, it hasn't settled into an easily definable category. "Our cocktail scene is now as eclectic as our culinary scene," says Chuck Taggart, a cocktail aficionado who publishes The Gumbo Pages food-and-drink blog. "The cocktail culture is coming to reflect all the different tastes of our city. I like how our bars are exploring different areas; there's not an overriding L.A.-style cocktail."

Still, there are identifiable trends, such as the proliferation of bars that focus on a single spirit. At Seven Grand, for example, the drinks are all about whiskey. Its bookish, club-room décor replete with a hand-carved black-walnut bar and antique pool table is matched by more than 270 types of the spirit, including an extensive list of single malts ranging from Bruichladdich to Yamazaki. The cocktail menu is likewise whiskey-based and classically oriented, with drinks such as a Mamie Taylor and a Rye Fix, and an Old Fashioned with the option of using any of the bar's whiskies as the base spirit.

Coltharp oversaw the bar at Seven Grand before opening Caña Rum Bar with general manager Joel Black in the space that formerly housed The Doheny, another landmark bar in L.A.'s cocktail resurgence. He says having such an extensive selection of one type of spirit may seem limiting, but it actually affords greater opportunity to be creative and offer tasting flights and education programs. "You have many more paintbrushes in that situation; if you can serve an Old Fashioned with three different ryes, that's fantastic, but if you have six, seven or 10 different ryes, you can give a customer a different experience every time," he says.

Coltharp opened Caña with more than 100 types of rum and cane spirits, and the selection continues to grow. The drink menu covers the rum spectrum, with Cuban classics such as a Daiquiri and El Presidente; tiki standards, such as the Port au Prince and Three Dots and a Dash; and Brazilian touches, such as a Rabo de Galo, made with aged cachaça and the bitter liqueur Cynar.



## POBLANO ESCOBAR

Created by Rivera bar manager Julian Cox for the agave-oriented Las Perlas in downtown L.A., this cocktail pairs the bite of tequila or mezcal with the spark of poblano chiles, which is contrasted with the sweetness of fresh pineapple. The drink also features Royal Combier, a liqueur flavored with oranges and herbs; Cointreau can be substituted, though the final drink will be slightly different.

2 or 3 ¼-inch-thick rings of sliced poblano chiles, seeds removed  
¾ oz. fresh lime juice  
¾ oz. Royal Combier  
4 chunks fresh pineapple  
¼ tsp. ground cumin  
½ tsp. agave nectar  
2 oz. blanco tequila or mezcal  
Ice cubes plus large cube for serving

Tools: cocktail shaker, muddler, fine-mesh strainer  
Glass: rocks

Garnish: orange slices and rings of poblano chile, seeds removed

Muddle chiles in a shaker with lime juice and Combier. Add pineapple, cumin and agave nectar and muddle again. Add tequila or mezcal and fill shaker with ice; shake well and double-strain through fine-mesh strainer into glass filled with a large ice cube. Garnish.

*Julian Cox, Rivera, Los Angeles*





Fresh fruits and herbs ready for cocktails at the Library Bar.

This approach is also being taken at the newly opened Las Perlas, with its emphasis on tequila and mezcal, as well as at bars and restaurants that focus heavily, if not exclusively, on single styles of spirits, such as Malo and Rivera with tequila, Thirsty Crow with whiskey, and the Havana-style La Descarga with rum. “You couldn’t have a bar that had 200 whiskies, 200 tequilas and 75 gins—you’d have to have a real ninja behind the bar to tell you everything about every bottle,” Coltharp says. “This way you have something approachable, and you can give an experience that delves deep into a certain subject. It’s like when you major in something at college; you can get your mini-bachelor’s in rum after a few visits.”

## Mixing It Up

While many L.A. bars are all about exploring the depths of a single spirit, many of the city’s bartenders are all about off-the-cuff creativity. In a small space at the back of Cole’s French Dip is The Varnish, an intimate bar with a Prohibition-era vibe that opened in early 2009. There Alperin and a team of bartenders that includes Marcos Tello and Chris Bostick offer a spare menu that features mostly vintage and classically inspired drinks, such as a bourbon-based Talent Scout and a Casino, made with gin and maraschino liqueur. But in addition to the small list is an option of endless opportunity: the “Bartender’s Choice,” which encourages customers to let the

bartenders show them a unique drinking experience. “We’re doing Shakespeare cocktails—it’s the same program night after night, and that’s why it’s really dialed in,” Alperin says. “But the menu is just a launching pad; the bartender’s choice opens up an avenue for everything else, and so many people go with it that we take it from there.”

Other bars are elaborating on that theme, putting Southern California’s fruits, herbs and vegetables into an increasing number of custom cocktails. One trailblazer of the market-fresh drink experience is London-trained Vincenzo Marianella, who has worked in Los Angeles since 2004. At Copa d’Oro in Santa Monica, Marianella has a cocktail menu that functions as much as an open-ended suggestion of possibilities as it does a list of drinks. While house drinks, such as the Abuela, with pisco and port, and the Don V, with tequila and walnut liqueur, are created in a classic-cocktail tradition, Copa d’Oro features a Market Menu that lists spirits along with seasonal produce; guests pick a base spirit and a fresh ingredient or two, and let the bartenders mix a drink using those flavors. At least 70 percent of Copa’s drinks are selected from the Market Menu. “I came up with the idea because I was getting bored easily,” Marianella says. “I wanted to keep it different, fresh and interesting for my bartenders, and this keeps the creativity very alive.”

At the Library Bar at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, head bartender Matthew Biancaniello has dispensed with a drink menu altogether. “Everything is *omakase*,” he says of the bar’s





## SAGE HEAVEN

Fresh sage complements the herbal gin and spicy ginger beer in this seasonal cocktail from Matthew Biancaniello at the Library Bar. Biancaniello gets his inspiration from L.A.'s many farmers markets, which he visits several times a week.

6 fresh raspberries  
4 fresh sage leaves  
¾ oz. fresh lemon juice  
¾ oz. agave syrup  
2 oz. gin (Biancaniello uses Hendricks)  
Ginger beer (Biancaniello uses Bundaberg)  
Ice cubes (for shaking and serving)

Tools: shaker, muddler, strainer  
Glass: Collins  
Garnish: flowering sage

Muddle raspberries and sage leaves in the bottom of a shaker. Add remaining ingredients except the ginger beer. Shake and strain into an ice-filled glass. Top with ginger beer and garnish.

*Matthew Biancaniello, Library Bar at the Roosevelt Hotel, Los Angeles*



Bartender D. "Max" Maxey at a Sporting Life event at Cole's, where bartenders and aficionados from around town converge to talk shop.



approach, which is to use seasonal ingredients to create a tailored cocktail for each guest. "I'm able to change with the seasons and with what's available, and it gives the other bartenders a chance to create their own drinks—that way you're constantly growing and evolving."

Biancaniello visits farmers markets up to five times a week, selecting produce that may have a very brief season. At the peak of summer, the Library Bar may feature zebra heirloom tomatoes in a Mojito variation, or offer bourbon flavored with fresh black-mission figs. Biancaniello says the variety of available produce is simply astounding. "Where else can you buy three varieties of lavender?" he says, noting that one of the varieties is used to flavor honey for a mezcals drink, a second is muddled into cocktails and a third is used as garnish. "The diversity of what we have to work with is unbelievable. We have the luxury of this diversity, and that's influencing our style of drinks."

At the Latin-themed restaurant Rivera, bar manager Julian Cox likewise raids the kitchen for ingredients. The rye whiskey-based Blood Sugar Sex Magic is made with red bell pepper and fresh basil, and the tequila-based Barbacoa is fired by chipotles and fresh ginger syrup. The menu at Rivera also straddles the line between market-fresh and classics-driven, featuring vintage drinks such as a Vieux Carré alongside the cucumber-laced Rivera's Cup.

Cox says creating such a wide-ranging menu was prompted by the need for Rivera to stand out from the chain restaurants at the nearby L.A. Live complex. "We knew that at every bar you'd see the same drinks from the same spirits, so I said we'll carry smaller-batch spirits that people can't get anywhere else," he says. "There's such a following at Rivera that people come and say, 'Oh, they have food here?' Which makes me laugh, because it's a restaurant that's got a cocktail following."

## Strength in Numbers

In such a massive, sprawling city, it's remarkable that anything resembling a close-knit cocktail community could develop, but in Los Angeles the network of bartenders and cocktail aficionados is notably tight. The first glimpse of this came in October 2007, when Alperin took a road trip to San Francisco with a group that included Moses, Tello and several other bartenders. "We laugh now and call it the trip that changed cocktail culture in Southern California," Alperin says. "That's when we all got married together and realized we wanted to do the same thing."

Several months later, in the back room of Bar Keeper, a well-stocked bar shop in the Silver Lake neighborhood, Tello launched The Sporting Life, a group of bartenders and enthusiasts, including Taggart, Riggins Miller and *Imbibe* columnist Ted Haigh, that meets regularly for educational events and cocktail competitions. Over the past two years local bartenders have also revitalized the local chapter of the U.S. Bartender's Guild, electing Tello as the group's president.

And thanks in part to events such as the Radio Room nights at The Edison—which feature visiting bartenders from Seattle, Portland, Boston and other cities—word about L.A.'s rapid mixological revival is quickly spreading. It's quite a change from only a few years ago, but local bartenders find it fitting. "This little monster that we helped build is now out of the box," Alperin says. "Nobody can stop it now." ■

web extra 

Read about L.A.'s growing coffee scene and find more cocktail recipes from some of the city's best bars: [imbibemagazine.com/JA10](http://imbibemagazine.com/JA10)

## WHERE TO GO

### CAÑA RUM BAR

714 West Olympic Blvd., Downtown  
[canarumbar.com](http://canarumbar.com) // 213-745-7090

### COLE'S RED CAR BAR

118 E. 6th St., Downtown  
[colesfrenchdip.com](http://colesfrenchdip.com) // 213-622-4090

### COMME ÇA

8479 Melrose Ave., Hollywood  
[commecarestaurant.com](http://commecarestaurant.com) // 323-782-1104

### COPA D'ORO

217 Broadway, Santa Monica  
[copadoro.com](http://copadoro.com) // 310-576-3030

### PROVIDENCE

5955 Melrose Ave., Hollywood  
[providencela.com](http://providencela.com) // 323-460-4170

### THE EDISON

108 W. Second St., Downtown  
[edisondowntown.com](http://edisondowntown.com) // 213-613-0000

### FIRST AND HOPE

710 W. First St., Downtown  
[firstandhope.com](http://firstandhope.com) // 213-617-8555

### THE HUNGRY CAT

1535 N. Vine, Hollywood  
[thehungrycat.com](http://thehungrycat.com) // 323-462-2155

### LA DESCARGA

1159 N. Western Ave., Hollywood  
[ladescargala.com](http://ladescargala.com) // 323-466-1324

### LIBRARY BAR

at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel  
7000 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood  
[hollywoodroosevelt.com](http://hollywoodroosevelt.com) // 323-466-7000

### RIVERA

1050 S. Flower St., Downtown  
[riverarestaurant.com](http://riverarestaurant.com) // 213-749-1460

### LAS PERLAS

107 E. 6th St., Downtown  
[lasperlas.la](http://lasperlas.la) // 213-988-8355

### MALO

4326 W Sunset Blvd., Silver Lake  
[malorestaurant.com](http://malorestaurant.com) // 323-664-1011

### ROGER ROOM

370 N. La Cienega Blvd.,  
West Hollywood // 310-854-1300

### SEVEN GRAND

515 W. Seventh St., Downtown  
[sevengrand.la](http://sevengrand.la) // 213-614-0737

### THE TAR PIT

609 N. La Brea Ave., La Brea  
[tarpitbar.com](http://tarpitbar.com) // 323-965-1300

### THIRSTY CROW

2939 W. Sunset Blvd., Silver Lake  
[thirstycrowbar.com](http://thirstycrowbar.com) // 323-661-6007

### TIKI TI

4427 Sunset Blvd., Silver Lake  
[tiki-ti.com](http://tiki-ti.com) // 323-669-9381

### THE VARNISH

118 E. Sixth St., Downtown  
[thevarnishbar.com](http://thevarnishbar.com) // 213-662-9999