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The search for America's best food cities: San Francisco

Second in a monthly series.

From touchdown, no other city in the country whets my appetite like San Francisco, where arrivals at Terminal 2 at SFO are welcomed with a feast. Calling to me as I disembark are Burger Joint, where the Niman Ranch patties are slipped inside toasted buns, and Lark Creek Grill, the source of breakfast omelets made with cage-free eggs. Coffee comes by way of a pedigreed local: Peet's, originally from Berkeley.

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Most impressive of all is the 5,000-square-foot Napa Farms Market, stocked with eats from Acme Bread Company and Cowgirl Creamery, among other local treasures, and alongside a wine bar where Northern California labels are poured. I'm tempted to cancel my lunch reservation in the city and assemble a picnic on the spot, except it's been years since I've seen Greens, one of the foremost vegetarian restaurants in the country, and the two of us need to catch up.

"The Bay Area is *obsessed* with food," says Joyce Goldstein, chef of the late, groundbreaking Square One restaurant and author of the 2013 book "Inside the California Food Revolution."

Talk about an understatement. San Francisco is the kind of place where locals like to introduce visitors to \$4 slices of toast — make that dark mountain rye slathered with cream cheese and sprinkled with black pepper and sea salt at the Mill, near Alamo Square — and to show off fashions that haven't yet made their way back East, let alone to flyover country. To the best of my knowledge, New York has yet to start serving non-Chinese food on dim sum carts, as is the practice at trendy State Bird Provisions, or to share a taste of Hawaii in the manner of the breezy new Liholiho Yacht Club.

Compared to the East Coast, "it's easier to cook out here," says Michael Tusk of the high-end Quince, thanks to "the raw product" in "a land of plenty" distinguished by vibrant micro-climates. That might help account for why at least one restaurant opened every week in the city last year, according to the San Francisco Business Times.

If it sounds as though I left my heart here, it's because I fell hard for the city when I called it home in the 1990s, charting trends and reviewing restaurants for the San Francisco Chronicle. I'm back now as I continue my tour of America's best food cities, 10 of which I'll rate at year's end based on criteria including creativity, variety and tradition. ([Charleston, S.C., was first out of the gate.](#))

With the exception of a certain restaurant in Berkeley that helped change the way Americans look at food, most of my time was spent eating, shopping, bar-hopping and cookbook browsing within city limits.

Where food 'isn't just fuel'

A passion for matters of the table is nothing new to San Francisco.

Think pop-ups are a recent phenomenon? The distinction could date to 1849, when a trio of Croatian immigrants sold charcoal-grilled fish from a tent on the wharf, an idea that evolved into the bricks-and-mortar Tadich Grill. "From the very first days of the Gold Rush, San Francisco earned a reputation as a restaurant town," writes Erica J. Peters in "San Francisco: A Food Biography." "Ships brought exotic ingredients from all over the world, as well as people used to many different cuisines. Early reports emphasized the diversity of restaurants, the fact almost all meals were either eaten in public or brought home ready-to-eat, and the vast amounts that San Franciscans were spending on food."

Since at least the 1930s, San Francisco had restaurants where diners could see cooks at work, but the design trend blossomed in the 1980s along with the rise of celebrity chefs. Sitting close to the fragrant wood-burning oven at Zuni Café or watching Ravi Kapur in his screaming-yellow kitchen, set smack in the center of the Liholiho Yacht Club, forges a bond between patron and restaurant.

Some of the most popular foodstuffs and dishes in the country originated in San Francisco: sourdough bread, the seafood stew called cioppino, crab Louis, the oyster omelet known as Hangtown fry, Ghirardelli chocolate, Rice-a-Roni. Yet another San Francisco treat is the mai tai, said to have been created in 1944 at the legendary Trader Vic's. (Coffee, in contrast, was so bad that in 1963, the subject got front-page treatment in the San Francisco Chronicle. "A Great City's People Forced to Drink Swill," the headline scolded. Thankfully, that hasn't been true for many years, and the city has been just as influential in coffee circles as culinary ones; the city's own Blue Bottle Coffee almost a decade ago imported the Japanese style of pour-over that has become de rigeur at high-end coffee shops from coast to coast.)

In recent decades, San Francisco produced such revolutionary restaurants as the now-shuttered Stars, an American — not French — bistro created by Jeremiah Tower; Square One, Goldstein's love letter to Turkey, Morocco and Italy-beyond-the-obvious; Zuni Café, the soulful, ingredient-driven Cal-Ital retreat nurtured by the late Judy Rodgers; and the Slanted Door, its menu by Charles Phan an exciting twist on Vietnamese fare. Five years ago, chef Corey Lee, a native of Korea and a veteran of the French Laundry in Yountville, Calif., advanced the cause of fine-dining with Benu, a serene East-meets-West proposition.

San Francisco — notably Chez Panisse, the temple of all things pure and local opened by Alice Waters in Berkeley in 1971 — has helped define the term “California cuisine,” celebrated for its focus on the fresh and seasonal long before those descriptors were expected by the masses. Among other national trends that were popularized in the area: small plates, communal tables in upscale restaurants and politics as part of the food conversation. (The unexpected benefit for a solo diner seated at the group table at the neighborly Nopa, I learned on a prior visit: strangers becoming friends as we exchanged tastes of some of the shareables.)

This country brims with fine farmers markets, but few capture their city as well as the sprawl — with a bay view — outside the Ferry Building Marketplace, where even “European chefs walk around with their mouths hanging open,” says Goldstein. She compares the stalls of artisanal goods and organic ingredients to the Rialto in Venice and maintains that her go-to market bests much of what's in France. Nancy Oakes, chef-owner of the beloved Boulevard, explains the bounty: People in San Francisco dig cooking and don't see the act as a mere “spectator sport.” Never has this shopper seen mushrooms in such an earthy rainbow of colors, or leaves in more shades of green: dandelion, mizuna, nettles, purslane, basil and mints for days, and fig leaves. And that's just the tip of the (organic) iceberg.

Lee says the backbone of his city's vibrant culinary scene is its audience. “San Franciscans, in general, are highly aware and supportive of not only our local restaurants, but also our local farmers, artisans, and growing areas,” he emailed while promoting his new cookbook, Benu, in Hong Kong and Seoul. “It makes for a dining scene in which people are fully immersed in our food culture.”

Locals aren't the only ones lapping up the scene. Where tourists in other cities go for the sun, the fun, the architecture or the arts, many visitors to San Francisco are drawn by the prospect of restaurant hopping. Last year, the city welcomed more than 18 million guests, according to the San Francisco Travel Association. For a lot of them, says longtime Chronicle restaurant critic Michael Bauer, “food isn't just fuel.”



Above: Inside the dining room at Quince in San Francisco.

Dining, fine and fun

Spend a few days here, and you learn that eating and drinking are to San Francisco what government and politics are to Washington. And that discerning millennials are eating swell across the board, whether they're picking up sausages made in-house from locally sourced meat in the Market in the Twitter building, smearing rice crackers with a spread of ground pork, shrimp and peanut butter at the hipster Kin Khao or ordering as if off a sushi list at the trendy Progress. That last restaurant, sibling and neighbor to State Bird Provisions, turns shaved cauliflower and pig “fries” into an unforgettable salad.

Moving on up — way up — “San Francisco is doing fine-dining better than any other city in the country,” says Kate Krader, who scouts talent for Food & Wine magazine’s annual Best New Chefs awards. The tastemaker points to Benu and the contemporary American Coi and Saison, helmed respectively by chefs Corey Lee, Daniel Patterson and Josh Skenes, as restaurants that are going beyond classical models.

I’d add to the list Quince, the hushed lair of Tusk, whose elegant tasting menus — a la carte has all but disappeared at this altitude — revel in such fine points as 10-inch-tall wineglasses that keep a full-time polisher employed and a mignardise cart bearing nearly 30 exquisite bite-size sweets.

For its part, Michelin bestowed its highest rating, three stars, on Benu and Saison. (The French guide publishes in only two other American cities, Chicago and New York.)

No matter what your thirst, the city can meet it, be it with a cold-pressed organic juice blend from Project Juice at the gleaming new Market in the Twitter building; a coffee at Sightglass, where the beans are roasted near the entrance; or a cocktail at Bar Agricole, where the kitchen performs as ably as the gents behind the bar. Brewing now, in the place that brought us Anchor Steam: a craft beer scene expected to see double the number of 20 breweries in 2016.

San Francisco's proximity to Napa and Sonoma might lead one to believe locals are invested in wines from North California, but the high prices of those wares, combined with the tastes of young money in the city, are creating more international, value-driven wine lists, says Rajat Parr, wine director of the local Michael Mina restaurant group and this year's recipient of the award for Outstanding Wine, Beer, or Spirits Professional from the James Beard Foundation. "The reality is, wine from Napa is getting out of reach." Craft beer, top-shelf cocktails and "sommeliers in the twenties" are siphoning attention away from state-made juice, too, adds the author and vintner.

Supportive media cheer on the scene. In the Chronicle Food section's glory days, under the direction of Bauer, the staff numbered 16, an herb garden graced the building's rooftop and the wine cellar held 20,000 bottles of wine. Just like Michelle Obama, Bauer could brag about honey being made where he worked. The critic credits a food-savvy audience for the rich coverage: The paper, he says, had to "keep up with the population." (The section lost its separate building and was subsumed into a Food + Home section last year.)

Paradise has its limits, naturally. Although a diner can find a lot of places for Chinese, few are great and none compare to the now-closed Mandarin, the elegant supplier of tea-smoked duck and sizzling rice soup opened by Cecilia Chiang in 1961. (Her design philosophy: "No gold. No red. No dragons. No lanterns.") Examples of Middle Eastern cooking are in short supply, too. Good luck finding family-friendly places or establishments catering to mixed ages, a problem some attribute to housing costs that make San Francisco a tough sell for families. And the NOISE! There's a reason the Chronicle added sound checks to its restaurant reviews — in 1998, the first newspaper to do so.

Still, the city remains, for me, more important than Paris in terms of tracking trends and watching the seasons go by on one's plate. This diner would welcome bread baked to match individual courses (think seaweed bread with fish — thank you, Quince) or dinners that are prepaid and segue from one room to another (as at the dinner party known as Lazy Bear).

That picnic I was contemplating when I landed at the airport? I managed a modified version in Terminal 2 on the way home, loading up at Napa Farms Market on local Equator coffee and a sandwich courtesy of Tyler Florence for the flight back to Washington.

Coming and going, San Francisco has me hooked.



An assortment of seasonal vegetables at Quince