

FOOD

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RESTAURANT JOURNAL

Westside story

FOR a while, it seemed as if all the cool new spots were opening in West Hollywood and Hollywood, which was good news for residents in the 323. But for the Westside crowd, crossing that critical 405 Freeway boundary meant yet another half an hour traffic battle (one way, on a good night). Now a gaggle of smart new restaurants have opened in West L.A., Santa Monica and Venice. And more are on the way.

It started this summer with 310 Lounge & Bistro on Pico Boulevard in Santa Monica, where chef Nick Coe is serving Cal-Med cuisine in a setting that looks at first like another trendy bar but turns out to be quite grown-up.

Then last month, a few doors to the west of 310, Violet appeared. What Violet's menu calls "casual fare" — peppered New York steak served with pastis butter, barbecued onions and fries; trout with balsamic brown butter, cauliflower purée and raisins — is served in smaller-than-average portions, designed to keep pricing moderate.

Also new on the scene is Orris on Sawtelle Boulevard in L.A., sister restaurant to Shiro in South Pasadena, but with a more free-spirited attitude, thanks to the small plate format. Chef Hideo Yamashiro's intriguing menu leaves behind geographic boundaries. Where else can you order a platter of charcuterie along with fried chicken *à la japonaise*?

And then there's Nook Neighborhood Bistro, tucked almost out of sight into the corner of a Los Angeles mini-mall, thus the name. The affordably priced eatery (nothing over \$18) offers

such dishes as ginger-brew pot roast or curried lentil salad with fresh baby spinach, apple fig chutney and pickled red onions.

Kai Lounge, in the former Rebecca's space at Broadway and Ocean avenues in Santa Monica, opened earlier this month with a menu that includes island tapas and \$40 steaks. The sexy setting for sipping fresh-fruit cocktails features porch swings, fire pits and waterfalls.

Expect more openings by the end of the year. The guys behind the Boa Steakhouse (formerly Balboa) on Sunset Strip are opening another Boa in November in the former Crocodile Café space on Ocean Avenue. Unlike the original, this Boa will be open for lunch and dinner.

In December, a restaurant called Wilshire will open in the space that for years was home to Knoll's Black Forest Inn. The design, by Thomas Schoos, the man behind the look of Koi and O-Bar, will include water elements, fireplaces, a communal table and what co-owner BK Kennelly calls a "cigarden." Chef Chris Blobaum, formerly of the Surf & Sand Resort in Laguna Beach, will serve American fare with a focus on organic products.