

Best Fries

Benita's Frites
1000 Universal CityWalk
Universal City
818-505-8834

Have no fear, all you frites-philes running around like chickens with your heads cut off after Benita's mysteriously disappeared from the Santa Monica Third Street Promenade -- they've popped up again at, sigh, CityWalk, a somewhat less urbane and alluring locale, to be sure. But what's the problem with paying for parking when it gets you crisp, salty Belgian twice-fried frites, with your choice of 20 different dipping sauces? Garlic mayonnaise rules, but we're also partial to any of the green, herby sauces, as well as the Thai peanut sauce, the spicy Indonesian sambala, the Mexican jalapeno, and, and, and...

Readers' Choice: McDonald's

Best Ice Cream

Charley Temmel
Food court, Santa Monica Place
Broadway at Third Street
Santa Monica
No phone

Recently relocated from further up the Third Street Promenade, Charley's new location doesn't have quite the same ambience (no flying saucers hanging from the ceiling any more!), but it does have more flavors, and is easier to find. Plus it replaced a lame ice cream stand that served mainly Dreyers prepackaged flavors. Some of the colors are a little too bright to be natural, but the flavors (mostly basic fruit, though they do have tiramisu as well) are incredible: Italian-style taste that's damn near exactly what the fruit itself tastes like, if perhaps a little sweeter. Banana and blueberry are the best of the bunch, but it's hard to go wrong with any choice (beware only the pineapple-coconut, in which the dairy flavor tends to overpower the fruit).

Best French Toast

Marston's
151 E. Walnut St.
Pasadena
626-796-2459

They also do fab pancakes here (with blueberries or macadamia nuts, or seven-grain). But Marston's signature dish (and you'd be a fool not to get an order for the table to share) is their modestly (if accurately) named "Fantastic French Toast," whose special touch is that the sourdough bread is rolled in crushed cornflakes after soaking in egg batter, before it's grilled. The place has been around for a dozen years, but it was only recently that they let us in on a big secret: They do half orders of French toast: one piece of sourdough, cut in half, instead of two. So now even a solitary diner can indulge in a meat-and-eggs breakfast and French toast!

Best Breakfast

(Tie) Marston's, Julienne

Marston's:

151 E. Walnut St.

Pasadena

626-796-2459

Julienne:

2649 Mission St.

San Marino

626-441-2299

Marston's and Julienne are separated by only about a mile in distance, but much more in attitude: Marston's is a Midwest country farmhouse that somehow wandered over to Pasadena, while Julienne is a French caf  that similarly woke up on a tony San Marino shopping street. But both places shine at breakfast, where a similar attitude toward quality ingredients and careful cooking results in delicious food on the plate. The omelets at Marston's are huge, and you can have your eggs with the expected bacon, sausage, and ham, of course, but also the less-expected Canadian bacon, andouille sausage, kielbasa, chicken cilantro sausage, or kippers. All are served with "special potatoes," which are sliced russets cooked with onions, green and red peppers, and Romano cheese. At Julienne, the omelets are cooked softer, French-style; there's a special smoked candied bacon; and the roasted potatoes are dusted with fresh rosemary. Our only quibble? They're both closed on Sunday -- so get in line on Saturday!

Best Restaurant

Campanile

624 South La Brea Ave.

Los Angeles

323-938-1447

Careful readers of this guide will note that we think Campanile has the best picnics, bakery (and more!), grilled cheese sandwiches, and prix-fixe meals. Nancy Silverton and Mark Peel also employed (and inspired) such other Best cooks as Sumi Chang (Europeane) and Suzanne Goin (Lucques). We're fools for their brisket hash (served at Saturday and Sunday breakfast), their airy courtyard complete with vintage tiled fountain, their extensive wine list, their interesting cheeses, and the fact that there's always something on the menu that we want to eat. We also think Campanile has improved the L.A. restaurant scene by example: better bread, more emphasis on seasonal produce, and a constant evolution. In short, we think it's L.A.'s best restaurant.

Best Home Electronics

Bang & Olufsen

Beverly Hills

369 N. Rodeo Dr.

310-247-7785

Beverly Center

8500 Beverly Center

310-652-9933

Old Town Pasadena
17 E. Colorado Blvd.
626-564-0800
Pasadena

If you scour newspaper ads for deals on stereos and big-screen TVs, skip this item. There isn't a damned thing in a Bang & Olufsen store that will interest you. Two years ago, this Danish-based firm actually pulled its products out of any store that wanted to carry other lines, believing that -- as one company official put it -- its "high-brow customers are uncomfortable shopping in big-box electronics stores" -- in other words, rubbing elbows with the commoners. Check out the merchandise and you begin to understand -- this is the stuff you'd buy if you hit the lottery, and you'd probably still wince at the bill. But who could resist a television set that, when switched off, turns itself around and huddles against the wall, all for a mere \$8,500? How about a flat, glass-faced CD player that hangs on the wall like a painting? You have to understand, this place is about design with a capital D; several of the company's products are in the New York Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. And the stores are designed accordingly -- there are no walls of television screens, no stacks of VCRs. They are tasteful and understated, sort of like the living room of someone who could afford a home-theater setup costing anywhere from \$40,000 to \$100,000. Even if you're not into merely ogling gorgeous stereo equipment that sounds fantastic, check out one of these stores. If you ever have to resort to robbing homes, you'll know exactly what to take.

Best Way To Find A Public Toilet

www.besttoilets.com

A frantic search for facilities can absolutely ruin the best day or evening of wandering around your favorite neighborhood or nightlife boulevard, such as Westwood or Old Pasadena. And let's face it, the portable toilets that most event organizers truck in for things like parades, street fairs, and free concerts in the park leave a lot to be desired -- like, say, interior conditions fit for humans. But a little foresight can leave you warm and cozy while others fight for space behind a bush or struggle to convince the restaurant owner that they are, indeed, a paying customer. Check out www.besttoilets.com, which bills itself as "The Place to Go Before You Have to." Wandering through Old Pasadena on a packed summer weekend evening when nature calls? You want Barnes & Noble, according to the reviews sent to the Web site by volunteers whose recommendations are based on their own research. Stuck downtown? The New Otani Hotel offers a couple of rest stations. Yeah, it may seem like a little thing, but knowing where a decent head is can make you the hero of the day among your friends.

Best 99-Cent-Store Knock-Off

Shim's Bargain Center
3075 San Fernando Rd.
Atwater
323-255-1199

735 S. Vermont Ave.
Los Angeles
213-385-5059

At first glance, Shim's seems to be stocked with recognizable 99-cent goods: plastic housewares, cheap

toiletries, and the like. But since their buyer doesn't have to feed the maw of what is now 99 99-cent stores, you're much more likely to find eccentric close-out goods, and there's an interesting Korean connection, too: we've found intriguing, oddly evocative stationery here, with the requisite mysterious, sometimes oddly spelled mottoes ("running through the faffodils," anyone?) The Glendale-adjacent San Fernando Road location also boasts a fresh produce outlet; in between the two is an unrelated store, Han's Gift Shop, which features many items over 99 cents, but enough at that price point (including fancy lipsticks and tons of key chains) to keep us happy.

Best Parking

Beverly Hills' extensive free parking spots
Beverly Drive and elsewhere

Loud with honking horns, reeking of manured lawns, full of tacky architecture and shallow, overdressed people, Beverly Hills is a lot of L.A.'s least appealing qualities jammed into a tiny, well-policed stretch of real estate. But one thing makes it all worthwhile: the parking scattered around Beverly Drive and other thoroughfares in the Golden Triangle. Free for two hours during the day, these lots allow the tourists and overpaid to duck into pricey boutiques, and the unwashed among us to check out Peet's Coffee, Koo Koo Roo, Banana Republic, the Gap, and the excellent newsstand on Beverly, and to get our hair cut. The parking staffs are always courteous and kind. And on the way home, we try to cut off as many Jags, Beamers, and Rollses as we can -- adding up to a purely satisfying afternoon out. L.A. is full of pockets of nouveau riche; only in Beverly Hills can you conveniently park and walk among them.

Best Movie Posters

Hollywood Book & Poster
6562 Hollywood Blvd.
Hollywood
323-465-8764

If you wanna talk classic posters, they got 'em. Wanna talk foreign posters? Got them too. But what really makes Hollywood Book & Poster stand out is that they get the new posters first, often before even the L.A. multiplexes. Need the first teaser poster for the Planet of the Apes remake? They have it. Harry Potter: The Movie? They have that too. And they don't just stock popular favorites -- they actually carried both versions of the Battlefield Earth movie poster, along with the official movie magazine. Meanwhile, as a reminder of more vintage models, the older posters are often hung in themed window displays: Christmas movie posters in December, horror movies in Halloween, spy movies when a new Bond film comes out, and so forth. Cult film buffs should have a blast -- not only does the back wall feature a vast array of T-shirts featuring the likes of the Saucer Men and El Santo, but there's also a shelf of video copies of obscure cult movies that might stump even a well-rounded movie critic, whether it be really old porn, Mexican cheapie actioners starring masked wrestlers, or vintage European exploitation films. Actually, some of the titles will leave you guessing as to what they are. Another specialty of the place is wrestling. Need a near-life-size cut-out of the Rock cocking his eyebrow? It's here. Recent Playboy cover girl Chyna? Here too. Best of all, the place is a good source of information (and sometimes tickets) for up-and coming wrestling promotions, from Johnny Legend's Incredibly Strange Rock N' Roll Wrestling, to XPW (whose stars occasionally stop by for autograph signings), to a promotion called ACW, which recently advertised a match featuring a pit of live rattlesnakes.

Best Newsstand

World Book & News
1652 N. Cahuenga
Hollywood
323-465-4352

No real competition here. World Book & News is open 24/7 and sells international newspapers, pulp sci-fi novels, black fiction by the likes of Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, quickie celebrity biographies, and even copies of the Hollywood Blu-book (the guide to production company addresses and phone numbers that aspiring industry folk can't do without). The stand's diversity is best summed up by some of the magazine titles it sells, which include the following: Computer Pilot -- "The magazine for desktop pilot's [sic] and flight simulator enthusiasts"; Blue & Gray "For those who still hear the guns"; Fly Fishing & Tying Journal; Miniature Quilt Ideas; Murder Dog (about rap music); Terrorizer (about heavy metal); True Black Passions; Louisiana Cookin'; Black Tail; Fuck Me Deep; Black Inches; Free American (cover story depicts Al Gore as "The Grinch Who Almost Stole the Election"); Bead & Button; Weekend Decorating Ideas; Buttlust; and The Kitchen Specialist -- "The only official magazine of the kitchen specialists association" (to clear up the confusion caused by all those unofficial mags).

Best L.A. Guidebooks

Glove Box Guides
Available at bookstores throughout the city, or online at www.ReallyGreatBooks.com

First came *Hungry? A Guide to L.A.'s Greatest Diners, Dives, Cafeterias, and Coffee Shops!* Then came *Thirsty? Los Angeles: A Guide to the City's Greatest Cocktail Bars, Coffeeshouses, and Juice Bars!* Possible future titles include *Bored?*, *Sleepy?*, *Stressed?*, and *Horny?* "The theory behind it was to produce guides to what we thought was the "real" Los Angeles, the Los Angeles of ethnic diversity as opposed to the convertible-driving, cell-phone toting Los Angeles," says editor Nina Weiner. Contributors were encouraged to write about places they like to go, and to consider price as a major factor. *Hungry?* highlights places where a meal can be had for \$10 or less, and gets into neighborhoods usually overlooked by more mainstream guidebooks, especially ethnic eateries. After all, Los Angeles has the biggest population of Koreans, Filipinos, Mexicans, and several other nationalities outside of their countries of origin. "We hope in some small way these books will encourage people to explore other neighborhoods and break down those barriers," says Weiner. The books cost just \$12.95.

Best Map Store

California Map & Travel Center
3312 Pico Blvd.
Santa Monica
310-396-6277

This local institution revered by L.A. travelers changed hands last year, but new owner Jon Eckstrom pledges to continue to improve its vast inventory of maps and travel books. The store began in downtown Los Angeles 50 years ago as a retail outlet for cartographer Jack Renie, a competitor of the renowned Thomas Brothers. Today, in Santa Monica, the California Map & Travel Center carries Thomas Guides and a dizzying array of other maps, travel guides, globes, and CD-Roms. Like birds migrating every spring, travelers can be counted

on to start snapping up guides for their summer travels, with France and Italy the most requested destinations. But CM&T is ready for those more exotic needs. An employee was prepared for the fellow who stopped in recently, needing a detailed map of the North Pole in his quest to find some lost World War II airplanes.

Best Stationery

Soolip Paperie & Press
8646 Melrose Ave.
West Hollywood
310-360-0545

Walk through Soolip and you'll see that you have simply not explored the joys of paper as fully as you should have. This store has stunning handmade wrapping paper from Japan so beautiful you'll want to tack it up on your wall. All that beauty doesn't come cheap, though. Single sheets of wrapping paper can run as high as \$30 each. The store sells stamps and sealing wax, notecards from around the world, and an impressive array of silk ribbons. Soolip also does gift wrapping for anywhere from \$10 to \$250 a package--depending on the size of the present and what materials are used. (The wrapping is so beautiful that the recipient may have trouble even opening the gift.) Soolip also does a big custom-design business in baby announcements, wedding invitations, personal stationery, and business cards. After a visit to Soolip, drug-store-bought wrapping paper and run-of-the-mill invitations really look bad.

Best Pornography

Circus of Books
4001 Sunset Blvd.
Silver Lake
323-666-1304

8230 Santa Monica Blvd.
West Hollywood
323-656-6533

Given the idiosyncratic nature of the turn-on, it's difficult to establish a set of criteria by which to rate a porn shop. We originally set out to identify the best selection of gay porn, yet quickly realized that we were far more excited by the stores that did not limit the range of our fantasies. Circus of Books remains truest to the old-fashioned definition of pure pornography by focusing on print and visual media, not novelty items such as toys and accessories. In addition to a wide array of glossy magazines, there's a huge stock of videos (some rentals) containing all the usual suspects, including the Fetish Fanatics series (e.g. Girls Who Cram Toys in Their Twats) and "My Dad's Home Movies." There are categories for gay, straight, she-male, bisexual, lesbian, transsexual, and the more overtly animalistic gangbang and buttman kinks. However, Circus of Books also caters to those stimulated by the literary with an impressive array of erotica, non-fiction, and art books. The more obscure, low-budget, and amateur fetish mags geared toward raunchier tastes (pardon the judgment) are found under the same roof as a vast assortment of everyday periodicals and reference books, including our favorite cooking and fashion rags. There's only a rudimentary selection of vibrators and other devices, however; we'd advise a visit to one of those sex-cum-gift shoppe venues like Drake's on Melrose, which deserves honorable mention here for its imaginative assortment of artificial cocks and orifices. Otherwise, we'll stick with Circus of Books -- conveniently located on both the East and Westside, and altogether more democratic in their recognition of fetishistic diversity. Vive la difference! Eastside: Sunday through Thursday, 6 a.m. to 2a.m.; Friday and Saturday, 24 hours. Westside: 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. every day.

Best Strip Club

Jumbo's Clown Room
5153 Hollywood Blvd.
Hollywood
323-666-1187

This was a tough decision, folks. L.A.'s strip clubs run the gamut from the plush and expensive to the downright cheap 'n' nasty. Indeed, there are so many out there that it's really the ones with a little personality that stick out. Cheetah's in Los Feliz is always great for laughs, and we don't even want to tell you how much dolo we've dropped at Sam's Hofbrau downtown, which took last year's title. But sometimes you've got to go with Old Reliable, and that's the way we feel this year about Jumbo's, which regains its title for the first year of the new millennium. Where else can you stroll in at 1:30 a.m. any day of the year and grab a couple of brews for last call? (Most places in L.A. are kickin' you out the door at that time.) Jumbo's illustrious history makes it a true tourist destination, a hangout for big shots like Mick Jagger, when he's in town, or Courtney Love, when she's visiting the place she once stripped at. There's the odd clown dZ'cor, the cheap drinks, the unusual clientele (it's not uncommon to see a midget talking up a pre-op transsexual), and the girls -- lusty, rock & roll chicks who love to party and get as raunchy as the law allows. Also, there's never a cover and the doorman's actually a swell guy. We love you Jumbo's, we really do!

Readers' Choice: Cheetah's

Best Place for Just Weird Stuff, Cheap

A.N. Abell Auction Co.
2613 Yates Ave.
City of Commerce
323-724-8102 or 800-404-2235

If you've ever wanted to experience the thrill of a live auction without mortgaging your life, go to Abell's, which at 9 a.m. on a Thursday is like Sotheby's poor country cousin. And that's not a bad thing. Get there early, register, and start digging through what seems like 189 yard sales' worth of furniture, art, objects, fabric, and books. (You can preview the offerings the day before.) The quality varies -- but who cares, if it strikes your fancy? (Someone we know was thrilled when her winning bid of \$70 got her a big cardboard box filled with an odd selection of garments and fabrics -- she feels she got a deal.) The Abell's auctioneers keep the bidding moving at a fast pace, doing their best to describe the items (often hilariously) to the public. Huge cartons filled with books are wheeled out. What titles are in there? Who knows! But they could be yours for \$5, \$10, or \$20. In some cases, items that are not bid on are offered for free (an ancient Beta machine, for instance) if you'll just take them off their hands. Even if you end up with an original Moskowitz instead of an original Monet, you'll have enjoyed yourself at the end of the day. (P.S.: Abell's also auctions off "real" art and antiques -- give them a call beforehand to see what's on the block.)

Best Used Magazines

Santa Monica Trading Co.
2705 Main St.
Santa Monica

310-392-4806

At first blush, this Main Street storefront looks a bit like a magazine recycling warehouse -- and in its own way, that's exactly what it is. But to a magazine lover, the Santa Monica Trading Company is so much more. The boutique-sized zinery feels as if owner Burt Blum just moved in, what with the narrow paths cleared between waist-high (and higher) stacks of old issues of every magazine you ever heard of. But Blum's been there for more than 20 years, adopting unwanted Times and Newsweeks and Lifes from dusty garages all over L.A. and organizing them according to a topic-based system understandable, well, only to him. Doing research for a film and need news magazines from the '30s? No problem -- Blum has just about every Time magazine ever published, and he can take you right to the issue you're looking for. Want to read a first-hand account of the Spanish-American War? Piece of cake -- Blum's got magazines going back to the 1860s. Just looking to unload all those Esquires that've been clogging your closet for the last 25 years? Blum gives cash or store credit. Just don't ask him for this week's U.S. News; for Pete's sake -- that's what 7-Eleven's for. Open Wednesday through Friday and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.. Also by appointment.

Best Holy Stuff

Cotter Church Supplies
1701 James M. Wood Blvd.
L.A.
213-385-3366

1960 Del Amo Blvd.
Long Beach
562-424-0963
cotters@cotters.com

Christian bookstores and gift shops are a dime a dozen. Catholic ones are not. Cotter's two stores have had the market cornered for as long as any of us can remember. They have anything you could possibly need for church or home worship, from vestments to rosaries to scapulars to holy-water bottles to reference books to medals of every saint ever canonized. Watching Catholic schoolchildren excitedly picking out their first rosary is a nice antidote to the prevailing image of parochial school as torturous. Cotter's extensive section of religious books (on everything from stigmata to marriage encounter) would satisfy many serious theologians. For the kids, there's a great selection of Sunday school materials -- even Catholic comics and coloring books. If you're buying for a group, you'll be happy to know that many items are cheaper by the dozen. And even if you're not devout (if you are, you've probably been here already), there's plenty to appreciate as kitsch -- from dashboard Virgins to Jesus keychains. The videos encompass everything from the vaguely religious (The Trouble with Angels) to accomplished documentaries (at least a couple on Padre Pio are always in stock). Cotter's merchandise runs from the very low end (50-cent brochures, medals, and postcards, 90-cent rosaries) to the very high end (a \$10,000 altar crucifix). A trip here is more fun than going to mass any day. Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.; closed Sundays (naturally).

Best DJ Record Store

Wax Records
7201-A Melrose Ave.
Hollywood
323-932-6211

Every other teenager these days is a DJ, and you don't want the same records that the kid next door has. Solution: DJ Doc Martin's Wax Records offers white labels, promos, and indie gems for the house music fanatic. Just don't ask if they carry trance.

Best Club For Freaks

California Institute of Abnormalarts
11334 Burbank Blvd.
North Hollywood
818-506-6353

Nestled in the butthole of North Hollywood, ever so close to the carnal delights of peep-show emporium Venus Faire and a vast number of carnicerías (Mexican butcher shops to you, paleface), is that little patch of "Twin Peaks" known as the California Institute of Abnormalarts. The CIA's unusual décor includes a dead fairy; the severed arm of long dead French nobleman Claude de Lorraine; a Mexican mummy (no racial jokes, please); the disembodied head of Sasquatch; the skull of the world's smallest Freemason; the burnt body of a two-headed "pickle punk" named Lumpy and Mumpy; and tons of other art and artifacts culled from authentic circus sideshows all over the world. And you get to see some really cool acts, like the Ebola Music Orchestra or Kung Fu Chicken. If you've got any questions about L.A.'s high shrine to freakdom, just ask the Master of Ceremonies, Carl Crew, also known for his starring role in the 1993 flick *The Secret Life of Jeffrey Dahmer*.

Best Place To Get In Touch With Your Inner Edith Piaf

Brasserie des Artistes
8300 Wilshire Blvd.
Beverly Hills
310-655-6196

An authentic French bistro serving authentic French food and wines, without that...um...l'attitude des Français that many of us find so distressing. The maitre d' is charming and helpful, and the back room is romantic. All that's fine and dandy, but the real capper is, there's karaoke! Folks are lining up near the door or sitting at the bar, getting ready to sing -- not "La Vie en Rose" as you might have guessed -- but Motown, show tunes, and other surprising numbers in a cultured European atmosphere. Some nights, the singers have been uniformly good, and once, a guy singing a Temps song was a knockout. The place is chummy, fun, and, most shocking of all, it will give you a whole new positive perspective on the French...and karaoke.

Best (Awful) Open Mic Night

Open Mind Night
Highland Grounds
742 N. Highland Ave.
Hollywood
323-466-1507

This specific level in the evolution of entertainment is much maligned -- usually for very good reasons. But this is no excuse to skip your opportunity to attend a richly textured open-mic experience, both to discover how the term "open sore night" came about, and to happen upon the occasional entertainer who actually wants to give

you more than they're taking away. Output varies insanely at these Wednesday night showcases, and many have screamed in terror at this utterly unique violation of the senses, but among the atrocities fine musicians (and the odd comedian/enne) are often concealed. One visit paid off quite grandly, as a big guy in a latex mask (lifted directly from Babylon 5) rattled off lyrics from a sheet of paper while another guy pounded out the chords of "Bad Moon Rising" on guitar. But it's not always so subtle. Covers from both Devo and Tori Amos have been known to erupt in the same evening, and there are also a lot of original songs on offer, with themes ranging from hating one's parents, to hating one's job, to hating one's partner, to really liking aliens a lot. Karen Fields will be your M.C. each week, and she usually manages to wring some sense of creative achievement out of just about any situation. If a certain act becomes utterly intolerable, however, smile politely, order a drink, and mosey out to the patio where you can observe the, um, entertainers from a safe distance.

Best Video Arcade

The Reagan Years
122 E. Commonwealth Ave.
Fullerton
714-525-1984

Back in the actual Reagan years, the gaming selection at this tiny storefront arcade in Fullerton's Old Town section would have been considered less than spectacular. After all, there can't be more than two dozen consoles here, and they take up most of the floor space in this odd, U-shaped room, leaving barely enough clearance for the crowd of '80s-era nostalgics who wander in from the adjoining Hub Cafe. But then, these aren't the Reagan years, they're the Bush years (again), and the PS2 years, and classics like Dig Dug, Punch Out!, Tempest, Karate Champ and Q*Bert (not to mention a cocktail-table versions of Centipede, Pac-Man, and Ms. Pac-Man in the cafe) are awfully tough to come by nowadays. With foamcore-mounted posters of the likes of Max Headroom and Kajagoogoo on the walls, plus a step-by-step how-to diorama for budding breakdancers, The Reagan Years will remind you of the eighth grade in ways you're probably not comfortable with -- only now, four plays for a buck seems so much more affordable. So have a latte. Play some Galaga. The Reagan Years is the finest excuse we've ever found to brave the Orange Curtain.

Best Place To Spot Celebrities

Nobu
3835 Cross Creek Rd.
Malibu
310-317-9140

If you've got family coming in from out of town, and they're requesting a real, live celebrity spotting, this is the place to take them. On a recent Saturday night, Nobu (named after chef Nobu Matsuhisa, of Beverly Hills' Matsuhisa fame) was as thick with A-list stars as a Swifty Lazar Oscar party of old. In the front room alone (and it's a small, casual, elbow-to-elbow situation) were the movie swells: Steven Spielberg, Kate Capshaw, and Jude Law eating dinner; Gwyneth Paltrow having beers with some friends; and Stacy Keach just hanging out. In the side room were the art and architecture folk: Frank Gehry, William Wegman, and Billy Al Bengston. It don't get better than that. (Of course, now that we all know about the place, the glitterati will probably never come back again.) Plus, while you're star gazing, you'll be drinking great premium sake and eating some of the best sushi this side of Japan. Open daily from Sunday through Thursday, 5:45 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5:45 to 11 p.m.

Best Reincarnation Of A Cop Bar

The Short Stop
1455 W. Sunset Blvd.
Echo Park
213-482-4942

If you ever dropped in for a cold one at the old Short Stop, you know the place was like a scene in a Joseph Wambaugh novel come to life. Off-duty dicks downing boilermakers and complaining about some head-up-his-ass lieutenant, badges festooning the walls, a hard-eyed woman bartender named Mickey cracking wise with the flatfoots. The bar hit the papers last year when rogue cop Rafael Perez said it was the unofficial headquarters for the nearby Rampart Division's out-of-control antigang CRASH squad. But after more than 25 years of slinging suds to LAPD's finest, owner Mike Balmer sold out earlier this year, saying his bar's business had plunged as scandal-chastened cops stayed away in droves. LAPD old-timers threw boozy parties to mourn its presumed passing, but the Shortie has been resurrected as -- of all things -- a hipster hangout. It was purchased by an investor group that includes several music-industry guys, an entertainment attorney, and a film and TV production worker. They intend to keep it a "low-key, neighborhood bar," according to co-owner Dave Neupert, and to retain one of the pool tables and the old gun lockers, now used to stow purses and such. They'll have an occasional weeknight DJ but no live music. The jukebox was painstakingly stocked with "the most eclectic music you'll see in the whole city," from rare soul to classic jazz to '70s-'90s rock. The bar will offer more premium booze, including good Scotches, tequilas, vodkas, and brews including Anchor Steam, Sierra Nevada, Guinness, and Bass. And Neupert swears no sissified stuff like apple martinis will be served. Daily 4 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Best Place To Dump A Body

Angeles National Forest
In the San Gabriel Mountains, north of L.A.

The L.A. County coroner's office has a saying that if it ever rains hard enough, the Angeles National Forest will have so many bodies floating around its peaks that it'll look like a surfers' convention. And truly, each week it seems the decomposed remains of some poor schmuck or schmuckette are discovered by hikers or campers out to enjoy the vast scenic beauty of the forest's 643,656 acres. Dense vegetation, profuse wildlife, the Castaic Lake reservoir, and the rugged San Gabriel Mountains all combine to make this a serial murderer's paradise. But you don't have to be as prolific as Ted Bundy or John Wayne Gacy to utilize the natural resources of this, one of the oldest national forests in the nation. Say you want to cap someone's ass? Sure, you could steal a car, stick the stiff in the trunk, and abandon it in some cracker neighborhood in the Valley. But that's so gauche, not to mention a health hazard. (Pee-yew!) Instead, drive up the 5 Freeway to Castaic, drive deep into the bush, and dump the bastard. After about a month, the animals, birds, and insects will have picked the body clean and strewn the bones so far and wide the cops'll never figure out who the hell it is, much less who offed him. Think of it as recycling. Plus, it's nice up there, and you can camp out a day or two and drink some brews while you look for that perfect spot.

Readers' Choice: (tie) Angeles Crest/L.A. River/Santa Monica Pier

Best Place To Pick Up (Straight) Guys

L.A. Comic Book and Science Fiction Convention

Shrine Auditorium, 700 W. 32 St.
Los Angeles
818-954-8432 or www.comicbooksci.com

You've complained that all the good men are gay or spoken for. You've had it with loud clubs where no one can hear anybody. You're tired of getting pawed by drunks in bars. Well, guess what? There are lots of single guys out there, and they congregate monthly right across the street from USC, at the Shrine Auditorium (except for this month's gathering, which will be at the Pasadena Convention Center on March 18). Lured by the promise of cheap comic books, bootleg wrestling videos, and the latest hard-to-find action figures, the available dudes are out in droves. Oh, they may have a penchant for dressing in black, and it's doubtful many of them have a six-pack of toned abs (though you never know -- buff rocker Glenn Danzig is a frequent attendee). And avoid the supercrowded shows featuring "special guests" like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Jackie Chan, because they attract many mainstream folks. Wait for a show when the guest is "that third guy on the right during the space marines briefing in Aliens," or "the guy with the weird voice who guest-starred in two episodes of Highlander: The Series." Here's why: Notice the large number of visitors who are willing to shell out \$25 for an autographed photo of these virtual unknowns. Then think about it: If they'll spend that much on a cheap likeness of some minor character actor, imagine what they'd lavish on a real live woman. To find out, brush up against one and ask them to explain the physics of a warp-core breach. Just don't ask too simple a question, like "Who's better, Kirk or Picard?" Chances are you'll be met with a derisive snort. (The answer is Kirk, of course).

Readers' Choice: Dublin's

Best Behaved Nightclub Audience

Largo
432 N. Fairfax Ave.
Los Angeles
323-852-1073

On a good night inside L.A.'s intimate and hip nightspot Largo, chatty tourists and barhopping nightlifers are usually singled out to the point of embarrassment: Resident genius Jon Brion once offered to return a loudmouth's cover money personally if he left the club (he did), while proprietor Flanagan's constant presence in the faces of incessant babblers is intimidating, to say the least. But ya gotta give it to the club's regular clientele -- a cultish pack of Westside chic and clique-ish KCRW cool -- for maintaining a well-behaved facade. One of this model audience's notorious habits is erupting into laughter at just the right moment when the comedians from the club's comedy night show up on the wrong day and shout cryptic references and inside jokes to performers that only a rabid Largo-ite would understand. During a recent set by Brion, one underwhelmed audience member repeatedly whispered the phrase "the emperor's new clothes" to a group of companions only to be quickly shushed by a nearby table of regulars who appeared to be immersed deep in the groove. C'mon people, relax -- it's only rock 'n' roll. Well, at least at most places it is...

Best Ice Cream Treat

Diddy Riese Ice Cream Sandwich
926 Broxton Ave.
Westwood
310-208-0448

Situated as it is just a drunken stumble from UCLA -- and right in the heart of Westwood's movie mecca -- Diddy Riese is hardly L.A.'s best-kept secret. Nonetheless, its greatness justifies brand-new testimony, especially for those Eastsiders who think West L.A. has nothing to offer past Starbucks and SUVs. For two decades, they've served up warm, gooey, fresh-baked cookies (white chocolate chip, chocolate chocolate chip, macadamia nut chocolate chip...pick your poison) to the post- and pre-movie throngs, and they've never bothered to raise the price from the original 25 cents apiece. But that's only half the attraction. Throw down an additional 75 cents -- that's right, cheapskate, it's a whole buck -- and Diddy Riese will sandwich two of those cookies around the ice cream scoop of your choice for one of life's few remaining true bargains. Look, God may or may not be a Bruin -- but we know where he gets his ice cream sandwiches...
Readers' Choice: Ben & Jerry's

Best Diner

Johnie's Broiler
7447 E. Firestone Blvd.
Downey
562-927-3383

Anyplace that calls itself a diner isn't. So Johnie's makes the grade on that front. But what makes it the best diner in L.A. County is its authenticity. There's nothing retro about this joint; the stuff here looks old because it is old. Check out the worn spots on the tiles beneath the seats that are bolted to the counter. Check out the vinyl upholstery that hasn't been manufactured since the 1970s. Check out the waitresses; those beehives aren't kitsch, they're for real, and when they call you "hon," they mean it. The atmosphere is so authentic that local hot-rod clubs hold Cruise Nights there, and there's usually a big rig or three hogging much of the spacious parking lot; truckers know where good road food is to be found. The menu doesn't disappoint, either, with Johnie's serving one of the best \$4.99 steak-and-egg breakfast specials around. And to top it all off, it's open 24 hours a day, so if you're starving and the wee morning hours aren't quite surreal enough for you, Johnie's is like a drug dealer -- it's got what you want, and it's always waiting.