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## Fine Dining in Oakland

**You can find good food anywhere. But great food? Join the diners who've discovered the other city by the bay: Oakland, Calif.**

By [Josh Sens](#) | [March/April 2012](#)

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amenities and services:

Cities change faster than their reputations, none more so than Oakland, a vibrant urban center that ~~Before the Bay, what of its past and how~~ ~~has been~~ ~~seen~~ as San Francisco's scruffy stepchild—a place of rough neighborhoods and rowdy Raiders fans—Oakland is more like an upstart sibling rival, with an energetic pulse behind its cultural life. You feel it in the markets, museums, and music venues. And you taste it on the menus, vivid testaments to a culinary scene that equals that of San Francisco, a city more than twice Oakland's size.

Granted, I'm biased, having lived in Oakland for 20 years. But before you dismiss me as a shallow civic booster, consider that I'm the restaurant critic for San Francisco magazine, paid to dine and

opine. Over the past decade I've eaten at more than 600 Bay Area restaurants, and I've watched my town emerge as the region's most exciting food frontier.

As early as the 1980s, Oakland had iconic restaurants such as BayWolf and Oliveto, both inspired redoubts of Cal-Med cooking that still operate today. More recently, however, an influx of young chefs, many of them San Francisco transplants, has enriched the mix. They find in Oakland all the ingredients anyone could ever ask for: a sophisticated audience, access to pristine products, and relatively affordable rents. Toss in the city's remarkable diversity—more than 100 languages and dialects are spoken in Oakland—and you've got the makings of a wondrous smorgasbord.

"There's a reason chefs like me want to be in Oakland," says Charlie Hallowell, who started off his career at the fabled Chez Panisse in nearby Berkeley. "It's young, it's hip, and it lacks some of the pretense you find in San Francisco. It frees you up to do your own thing."

Hallowell is the chef and owner of **Pizzaiolo**, in the Temescal District, a hotbed of Oakland's culinary bloom. True to its name, the restaurant deals in beautiful wood-fired pizzas, topped with everything from house-made sausage to cherry tomatoes and Monterey squid. The pies share space on the menu with inventive antipasti, roasted seafood, and robust braises such as slow-cooked oxtail, the tender meat seasoned with tomato vinaigrette.

The restaurant sits on Telegraph Avenue, the neighborhood's central artery, flanked on one side by **Doña Tomás**, a high-minded Mexican restaurant with refreshing margaritas and mole as layered as a Maya citadel.

Up the street just a few doors sits **Bakesale Betty**, a hopping bakery and sandwich shop. The buttermilk fried chicken sandwich with spicy slaw is a pop star, drawing crowds worthy of a sold-out show.

Follow Telegraph Avenue south for 1.5 miles to the Uptown District, another great grazing zone. Here, in the shadow of chic new condos, you'll find **Picán**, which puts a West Coast gloss on Southern classics (think crawfish étouffée laced with thyme oil), and **Trueburger**, a classic joint gone to finishing school.

Uptown is also home to Daniel Patterson's **Plum**, a casual-chic offshoot of two-Michelin-star Coi, the chef's marquee restaurant in San Francisco. But the hottest newbie is, to my mind, **Hawker Fare**, a Thai rice bowl restaurant run by James Syhabout, who earned a Michelin star of his own at **Commis**, his first Oakland haunt. While Commis is a triumph of technique—that's edible "soil" on those roasted carrots, composed of hazelnuts and cocoa—Hawker Fare is a tribute to the dishes Syhabout's Thai mother made for him. Try the slow-poached chicken with mung bean dipping sauce.

No matter where you dine in Oakland, the next memorable meal is never farther than a stone fruit's throw away. In West Oakland you can find great soul food, like chicken and waffles at **Brown Sugar Kitchen**; but drive just 10 minutes and you'll come upon great Seoul Food, on a stretch of Telegraph Avenue north of 27th Street called Koreatown. My favorite stops here include

**Pyeong Chang Tofu House** for roiling hot pots of silken bean curd stew, and the **Casserole House**, where my wife and I fight over the pork-and-cabbage-dumpling soup, though a bowl holds plenty for two.

From Jack London Square on the waterfront to the Oakland-Berkeley border is about four miles, but the trip amounts to a global tour. You start at **Bocanova**, a Pan-American outpost for Peruvian-style ceviche or Brazilian feijoada; then wheel through town to **Pho Ao Sen**, where for a pauper's price you can get a princely bowl of Vietnamese beef noodle soup; and continue on to **Dopo** on Piedmont Avenue, where Jon Smulewitz puts out plump agnolotti and other artful pastas that would make the pickiest of *nonnas* proud.

Before Smulewitz opened Dopo he cooked at **Oliveto**, the landmark restaurant that has anchored a corner in Oakland's Rockridge District for 25 years. The kitchen here favors local purveyors, but the spirit of the cooking is Italian. Crisply executed dishes run the gamut from pancetta-wrapped sea scallops with corn and onion cream to calf 's-kidney ravioli spiked with aged balsamic vinegar.

It's no wonder that when people ask me, as they often do, where they should go out to eat in San Francisco, I often direct them east over the Bay Bridge to Oakland.

Photography by [Mitch Tobias](#)

This article was first published in March 2012. Some facts may have aged gracefully. Please call ahead to verify information.

### If You're Going:

Area code is 510. **Bakesale Betty** 5098 Telegraph Ave., 985-1213, [bakesalebetty.com](http://bakesalebetty.com). **BayWolf** 3853 Piedmont Ave., 655-6004, [baywolf.com](http://baywolf.com). **Bocanova** 55 Webster St., 444-1233, [bocanova.com](http://bocanova.com). **Brown Sugar Kitchen** 2534 Mandela Pkwy., 839-7685, [brownsugarkitchen.com](http://brownsugarkitchen.com). **Casserole House** 4301 Telegraph Ave., 601-6001, [casserolehouse.com](http://casserolehouse.com). **Commis** 3859 Piedmont Ave., 653-3902, [commisrestaurant.com](http://commisrestaurant.com). **Doña Tomás** 5004 Telegraph Ave., 450-0522, [donatomas.com](http://donatomas.com). **Dopo** 4293 Piedmont Ave., 652-3676, [dopoadesso.com](http://dopoadesso.com). **Hawker Fare** 2300 Webster St., 832-8896, [hawkerfare.com](http://hawkerfare.com). **Oliveto** 5655 College Ave., 547-5356, [oliveto.com](http://oliveto.com). **Pho Ao Sen** 1139 E. 12th St., 835-5588, [phoaosen.com](http://phoaosen.com). **Picán** 2295 Broadway, 834-1000, [picanrestaurant.com](http://picanrestaurant.com). **Pizzaiolo** 5008 Telegraph Ave., 652-4888, [pizzaioloakland.com](http://pizzaioloakland.com). **Plum** 2214 Broadway, 444-7586, [plumoakland.com](http://plumoakland.com). **Pyeong Chang** 4701 Telegraph Ave., 658-9040. **Trueburger** 146 Grand Ave., 208-5678, [trueburgeroakland.com](http://trueburgeroakland.com).

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