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**BITE CLUB** From top: M Café de Chaya on Melrose; Bev Hills' Greenleaf Gourmet Chopshop; Leaf Cuisine in Culver City; Tender Greens' Salad in the Raw.



## Fast Foodies!

*Haste makes waist? No longer. L.A. is in the midst of a quick-serve, gourmet-meets-healthy revolution, thanks to a bumper crop of new mini-chains*

| By Lesley Balla |

We are deep in the land of car culture, living in a place so spread out that eating on the run has become the norm. Indeed, ever since the first burger joint that would become McDonald's opened in San Bernardino in 1940, SoCal has been a prime launching pad for new fast-food ideas. But look at what convenient, cheap, mass-produced food has done to our guts—it's so bad, there's even a current, one-year moratorium on new fast-food spots in South L.A.

Now a new generation of restaurants is proving that good food (organic, free-range, macrobiotic, local) and convenience aren't incompatible. The best part: They're on the road to becoming mini-chains (most with several local outlets) and looking at regional or even national domination. Wouldn't it be great to have as many green leafy options on every corner as we do fried?

Lunch lines spill out on to the sidewalk every day at **Tender Greens** ([tendergreensfood.com](http://tendergreensfood.com)) a casual, quick-turnaround café founded by Erik Oberholtzer, Matt Lyman and David Dressler (two chefs and the former food/bev director from Shutters on the Beach).

"Everything we use you could find in the luxury dining market—locally grown produce and sustainably farm-raised cattle and chicken—but it wasn't really available for the daily, neighborhood consumer," says Oberholtzer. Tender Greens offers a relatively simple concept: Choose a protein—free-range grilled chicken, marinated Angus flank steak, fresh albacore—and put it on top of a salad, in a sandwich, or on a hot plate with mashed potatoes and Oxnard-grown veggies. All for \$10.50, almost as much as a Biggie Meal at your nearest drive-through.

Open since last year, **Greenleaf Gourmet Chopshop** ([greenleafchopshop.com](http://greenleafchopshop.com)) also fills the gap for entrée-sized salads—like the Antioxidant Orchard—served from its open-display kitchen in Bev Hills' Golden Triangle. "This is the way L.A. eats now," says owner Jonathan Rollo. "If people like the concept and quality of food and can make it part of their routine, then places like this can last."

The time was ripe for this sort of dining—convenient, healthful, eminently affordable— CONTINUED ON PAGE 127...

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...**FOOD DRINK TREND** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 112 and L.A. couldn't be a better vortex. It's a city built on name-dropping and recognition, where everyone obsesses over the next best thing. "People just latch on to brands here," says Tender Greens' Oberholtzer. But, he adds, a good concept still needs a soul to sustain itself: "Places like Sprinkles or Pinkberry, all they need is Paris Hilton to walk in, and it's great for six months. But remember, she won't be around forever."

But that celebrity factor doesn't hurt. Stars like Natalie Portman and Jake Gyllenhaal are often spotted at **M Café de Chaya** (*mcafedechaya.com*), the macrobiotic spots on Melrose and in Culver City (with a third soon in Beverly Hills). M Café had immediate brand recognition when it opened in 2005—the Chaya name has been a mainstay on the L.A. dining scene since the '80s—but the mini-chain is helping demystify macrobiotic cuisine with its glass cases full of scarlet quinoa salad, shiitake/avocado rolls and desserts (like banana millefeuille and chocolate sacher torte) that look and taste sinful without the use of any dairy, egg or refined sugar. "I just couldn't stand the macrobiotic cafés that forced the medical side of the diet first and taste came second," says founder and president Yuta Tsunoda. "We just wanted it to taste good."

Need another excuse to go healthy in '09? Another brand-in-the-making, **Leaf Cuisine** (*leafcuisine.com*) breaks the tofu-eating, tempeh-loving, sprout-filled stereotype some people still associate with L.A. (circa Annie Hall) by offering vegan and raw food that even die-hard carnivores could live with. Leaf owner Rod Rotundi developed the concept so it wouldn't "be weird for people" and his menu is composed of all certified organic ingredients. The bright Culver City café—which offers nondairy chocolate milkshakes and hearty, flavorful wraps stuffed inside collard green leaves instead of tortillas—was the first of many: There are locations in Sherman Oaks and Redondo Beach, and Rotundi is just now opening a state-of-the-art production facility downtown that will help franchise and expand the concept.

For most of these restaurants, expansion was in the biz plan from the start. When Oberholtzer, Lyman and Dressler thought up Tender Greens, they foresaw opening at least 30 locations throughout California, and now there's one in San Diego, a third in West Hollywood (which just opened last month) and a fourth skedded for Hollywood in May. Rollo contends the Greenleaf model is also scalable, and he's eyeing Century City, Santa Monica or Pasadena next.

But getting the rest of the country to eschew radiated burgers for organic salads might not be that easy. "For one of these startups to truly be a national player, they will probably need to team up with an established company—like Chipotle did with McDonald's," says restaurant consultant Jerry Prendergast, whose company was involved with the recent openings of Animal and Akasha. "Acquiring locations is a time-consuming and expensive infrastructure to set up... and startups can only afford to tie up their capital for so long."

Not everyone, however, wants to go too big too soon. Bryce Rademan and Robert Wicklund—who opened **Spitz** (*eatatspitz.com*) in Eagle Rock in 2006—serve European street-food-style döner kebab, thin sliced rotisserie meats with yogurt sauce and vegetables on lavash or focaccia. "It's Turkish by way of Germany by way of Spain by way of California," says Rademan. "But we kind of de-ethnicized it, made it lighter." (Read: less greasy and less garlicky.) The two just opened a larger, more full-service Spitz in Little Tokyo that also serves beer and wine, and will start seeking financing for three more locations in neighborhoods like Los Feliz and West Hollywood, places packed with young, health-conscious urbanites.

For now, Rademan is happy to stay relatively small. "We talked about franchise possibilities," he says. "But as we come to love what we've created, it would feel like a sellout. There's no way to keep the soul if we franchise, so we want to continue to open our own spots to make sure everything is special." **A**