

Taste of Travel

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Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto Today

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Alice Waters remains a presiding spirit over Berkeley's celebrated Gourmet Ghetto, where I happen to live. But there are newcomers also who enliven the scene.

Here are my 10 recommended stops if you want to immerse yourself in this remarkable stretch of six blocks on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley, California, from roughly the BART Station downtown to Rose Street as the northern terminus.

I start this walk near the north end.

1. Alice Waters' Chez Panisse restaurant (1517 Shattuck, www.chezpanisse.com, 510-548-5525) is in and will remain in a stratosphere all its own.

Alice began the restaurant in 1971. The vision behind her restaurant has been immensely influential. I expect a TV evening news report tomorrow that Alice is in the White House Food Garden with Michelle Obama extolling the virtues of kohlrabi as a vegetable.

At a recent charity event, I gave Alice, for reasons of nostalgia, a copy of my 1983 book on the organic gardening revolution. My publisher was Chronicle Books and the title was *Backyard Farming*. I was writing a lot for Rodale in that era and living out the vision, growing all the vegetables for my family of five on a sunny but small urban hillside lot in Oakland.

Meanwhile, Alice was transforming the landscape in Berkeley, such as the vegetable gardens at Martin Luther King Middle School, making an edible schoolyard garden a point of instruction on many matters, including the virtues of sustainable, local, organic, simple, tasty and fresh food.

The triumph of the entire organic and fresh/local

effort unleashed in America back in the 1970s and 1980s is evident partly in the relatively new Safeway in the neighborhood, at Shattuck and Rose, two blocks from Chez Panisse. This Safeway now has about half of its total produce section as organic, and possibly half of all the produce presented as grown "locally," meaning California in this case. California, with its gifted climate for year-round growing, is, of course, an unusual place.

Today I recommend either a casual lunch at the upstairs café or a more elegant full-course dinner downstairs at Chez Panisse.

2. Across the street from Chez Panisse, you can plunk down exactly \$12.05 of your hard-earned money at arguably the most popular restaurant in modern Berkeley. For that you will receive a large box with half of a vegetarian pizza, enough for two people. You can also get an inventive salad, which might have "spelt" in it. If you need to Google "spelt" for a Wikipedia explanation, you are in for a delicious new treat.

That restaurant is the Cheese Board Pizza (1512 Shattuck, www.cheeseboardcollective.coop/pizza, 510-549-3183).

Several aspects of this restaurant are extraordinary.

It is the offshoot of the legendary establishment next door, Cheese Board Bakery & Cheese, coming up next on my list.

Cheese Board Pizza makes only one kind of pizza every day and you can see the ingredients of the changing daily pizza on the website.

The pizza is always and only vegetarian, consisting of vegetables and cheeses. A vegan pizza is also possible, with nut "cheeses."

Music at lunch and dinner is an important part of the scene. On my last visit my friend Ian Carey was playing some of his marvelous modern California jazz. I wrote up Ian Carey last year after seeing him play at Yoshi's and buying a few of his CDs. I gave his CDs as Christmas presents. The website for Cheese Board Pizza indicates what musicians are playing daily, lunch and dinner.

The front of the restaurant opens onto a "parklet,"



Chez Panisse

a reclaimed rectangular section of the street, creating an outdoor café space that is safe, replacing a few parking places. Architecture helps create the community feeling at Cheese Board Pizza.

Somehow, Cheese Board Pizza has the magic. At a busy time the line may extend out to the corner as return customers arrive to buy pizzas, either consuming them there or taking them home. On a slow day they make and sell about 300 pizzas. On a brisk day that number rises to 1,200 pizzas.

A glass of wine is available to enjoy with your pizza, salad and music. There is no need to rush.

3. Next door is The Cheese Board Collective (1504 Shattuck, www.cheeseboardcollective.coop, 510-549-3183).

You may get a sense that you are indeed in Berkeley when the word "collective" is in the business name. This has been a "worker-owned collective since 1971," as the website asserts.

Be sure to click on the website to enjoy the endearing cartoon depicting this happy scene.

The people inside this establishment love cheese and they are in no hurry to sell you anything. Sample a few cheeses under their expert tutelage. Find something you like and they'll custom cut any size portion you wish.

A vast collection of worldwide cheeses is sold here, ranging in geographic origin from Europe to California to Wisconsin. Cow, goat and sheep milk cheeses are available. The knowledgeable palates of the career cheese-sellers here make the establishment one-of-a-kind.

Here you can also pick up a fresh house-made baguette, baked today, to go with your cheese.

4. The late Dutch coffee enthusiast, Alfred Peet, started his Berkeley "coffee revolution" in 1966 and eventually settled into a Vine Street location in the Gourmet Ghetto, one block off Shattuck, for the duration.

Be sure to stop in at his flagship store, Peet's Coffee (2124 Vine, www.peets.com/about-us/our-history, 510-841-0564).

Arguably, for the benefit of the fastidious, the

coffee beans present at this store will be ever so slightly fresher than in the Peet's packages so widely dispersed at coffee shops and supermarkets around the country.

Visit the special side-room display filled with coffee-milestone media memorabilia honoring Alfred Peet. Paraphernalia of the coffee roasting, grinding and serving craft are also presented.

Certainly other folks, such as the Italians in North Beach in San Francisco, knew a thing or two about roasting coffee and were carrying on in their enclaves to celebrate the maximum taste that each bean could provide. But cans of pre-ground coffee were the norm in America before the arrival of boutique commercial pioneers such as Alfred Peet.

The experience of taste had been somewhat suppressed by the need to distribute in the known preground-coffee-in-a-tin-can-technology of the day.

It took a few pioneers, such as Alfred Peet, to get the notion of quality coffee roasting and fresh grinding into the mainstream of America's highly caffeinated bloodstream. It took a couple of



English majors up in Seattle, on a parallel path, to get the Northwest and then the nation behind their vision in 1971. What would they name their company? They turned to a bible of modern American literature, "Moby Dick," and pulled out the name of a possibly coffee-loving sailor known to have a euphonic name, Starbucks. At least, it could be said, some of these whaling ships may have participated in some of the worldwide coffee trade and its romance. The defining sentence on the official Starbucks site today is, "The name, inspired by 'Moby Dick,' evoked the romance of the high seas and the seafaring tradition of the early coffee traders."

5. Consider the culinary complexity of being inspired by New York deli visions, yet placed in 21st-century Berkeley and sustained by local neighborhood patrons. That's the story of Saul's Restaurant & Deli (1475 Shattuck, www.saulsdeli.com, 510-848-3354).

The dish to savor here is a classic pastrami-on-rye



sandwich, perhaps with the split-pea or other soup of the day and a side of potato salad.

Saul's is a locals' favorite, especially on what are called Thirst Thursdays. On Thursdays the "parklet" in front of Saul's becomes a party zone as the robust farmers' market stretching from Saul's to Rose on a side street begins to wind down. If you enjoy farmers' markets, this one will delight you. In fact, come to see it midday if you can, when it is at peak activity. Fish, meat, produce, fruit, nuts, honey—the whole panorama of California food—is on display, and you can talk with the original producers.

At Saul's in the early evenings a "beer garden" scene, emphasizing "craft" brews or wines, helps quench the parched palates of Thirsty Thursday folks. Since this is Berkeley and the town is progressive, if not righteous, you are even encouraged to bring your own beer mug to cut down on trash.

Walking from Saul's south to the BART station along Shattuck, here are my second five recommended for culinary stops. Be aware that my sins of omission in this short list are great and there are many who will chide me for not including their favorites. The area business promotion entity known as the North Shattuck Association has a fuller presentation of restaurants and various food categories in the

business directory on its website—which is, you guessed it, www.gourmetghetto.org.

6. Walking south on Shattuck, my next recommended stop is Taste of the Himalayas (1700 Shattuck Ave, www.tasteofthehimalayasca.com, 510-849-4983).

This is a good example of the "ethnic" restaurant in the Gourmet Ghetto, this one featuring Nepalese and Indian fare. My recommended dish here would be lamb, with its subtle panoply of spices. Try the Lamb Tarkari, boneless lamb pieces cooked in a special sauce flavored with herbs and spices. The lamb is served with lentil soup and basmati rice.

One touching aspect of this restaurant is that the proprietor, Rajen Thapa, uses the profits to fund a school for girls in Nepal.

Proceeding south, one dramatic aspect of the evolving Gourmet Ghetto is what is now absent. There used to be an immense restaurant focused on the raw food movement, Café Gratitude, at 1730 Shattuck. The restaurant closed at the end of 2015 after a 10-year run. I remember an intense beet juice/carrot juice cocktail available there.

7. For rustic Italian fare, such as one might find in Florence, the recommended stop is Corso (1788

Shattuck, www.trattoriacorso.com, 510-704-8004).

Rabbit sausage pasta is an interesting exotic on the menu here, which can be paired with a nice glass of Italian wine suggested by the knowledgeable waitperson. The Crostini with Tuscan chicken liver pâté, sage, capers and anchovy is another intriguing dish.

8. The wise choice for classic French cooking in the Gourmet Ghetto would be Bistro Liaison (1849 Shattuck, www.liaisonbistro.com, 510-849-2155).

Consider beginning with a traditional French onion soup and then indulging in their most popular dish, which draws patrons from far and wide. That dish is their classic Boeuf Bourguignon, which has helped them earn some Michelin recognition.

Purists may call me out for including my final two mentions on this list as not respecting the proper "geographic" boundary of the Gourmet Ghetto. But with so many people coming to Berkeley now on BART, these two

downtown eateries on Shattuck on the walk north are worth considering as you step off the train. You may also find yourself heading back to BART from a Gourmet Ghetto walk so mesmerized by the plethora of excellent options that you haven't yet made a restaurant choice. These two final selections are also close to the Arts District and the Berkeley Rep, in case those attractions are part of your travel plans.

My final two choices are a perky Mexican restaurant and the newest kid on the block.

9. The perky Mexican restaurant is Comal (2020 Shattuck, www.comalberkeley.com, 510-926-6300).

This modern establishment can send your spirits aloft with "flights" of curated tequila and mescal if you want to venture beyond the basic margarita. The menu is extensive, and you might begin with guacamole and then proceed to the white shrimp ceviche and the wood-grilled rock cod tacos.

Dishes are closer to small plates than the overwhelming amount of food served at some Mexican restaurants. The menu can change daily,

offering a modern interpretation of classic Mexican dishes, with Oaxaca as the original inspiration. Menu details for the day of your visit are on the website.

The venue is large and chic, with subdued lighting inside, and a pleasing, secluded outdoor patio in the back.

10. The new kid on the block is B&B Kitchen & Wine Bar (2116 Shattuck, www.bandb-berkeley.com, 510-647-9329), which opened in May 2016.

This intimate, 40-seat restaurant patterns itself after the proprietors' successful Bourbon & Beef restaurant on College Avenue in Oakland's Rockridge area.

Besides the indoor area, there is a small patio dining section outside in front.

The menu emphasizes close farm-to-table relationships that the proprietors have with local farmers, fishermen and ranchers. The theme is "American cuisine with a seafood emphasis."

My first meal at the restaurant was pleasing, starting with the Dungeness California crab cocktail, all reward and no work. Then I tried the grilled octopus, artfully presented with miniature baked vegetables. Finally, the coffee braised beef short ribs were tender and juicy, with special flourishes, such as a sunchoke puree side dish.

Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto is a dynamic and changing entity. While Alice Waters and her Chez Panisse restaurant have flourished there since 1971, there is always a spirit of entrepreneurial delight in Berkeley, such as the new B&B Kitchen. The restaurant scene is not ossified. On the contrary, the Gourmet Ghetto in Berkeley is lively, accessible, progressive and open to innovation. This walk on Shattuck is always available for another pleasant stroll and a sampling of a new-to-you dining option.



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