

# RESTAURANTS

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# More polish on Pico

With Violet, a scruffy stretch in Santa Monica is becoming a mini restaurant row.

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A sweet little neighborhood bistro has just bloomed on Pico Boulevard at 32nd Street in Santa Monica. For those who still can't quite picture the location, suffice it to say it's just east of Valentino and a block away from the new 310 Lounge & Bistro — an offbeat stretch of Pico that is fast becoming a mini restaurant row.

The chef and owner is Jared Simons, 26, who moved up to Santa Monica from the San Diego area, where he had the French bistro Le Passage in Carlsbad. Nobody could say the name, let alone remember it, Simons says, so when he was thinking about naming his new restaurant, he knew he wanted something simple. One day, thumbing through a food encyclopedia, the word violet caught his eye. He named his cat Violet and everybody liked the name, and he thought it would work for a restaurant too.

Violet's setting is smart and understated, with polished stainless steel accents, cherrywood tables, a chocolate carpet and slim, stylish chairs. There's a violet banquette and a stretch of carpet the same color.

Simon's easygoing California menu is priced more for everyday than special occasions — for example, the peppered New York steak is just \$17.50 and most of the other entrees come in well under \$20, which is something these days. The chef, in fact, calls his menu "casual fare," though his cooking is polished and professional.

Almost everything several friends and I tried was appealing enough to order again. Glossy black mussels are steamed in



Photographs by KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times

**COOKING:** Jared Simons offers an easygoing California menu, with most entrees well under \$20.



**STYLISH:** The Santa Monica restaurant's setting features stainless steel accents, cherrywood tables and a violet banquette.

## Violet

Where: 3221 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica

Beer and wine. Valet and street parking.

## Corner gourmet

Serious cooking at a reasonable price? It can be done, and some of the city's best neighborhood restaurants prove it.

### Orris

Don't let the cafe looks fool you. The food at this newcomer, sister restaurant to Shiro in South Pasadena, is top notch. Consider a chilled salad of sweet Dungeness crab or golden halibut tempura served with house-made curry powder and salt. The menu is compact, exclusively of small plates. A handful of them make an exciting dinner for two.

■ Small plates \$5 to \$11. 2006 Sawtelle Blvd., West L.A. (310) 268-2212.

### Gina Lee's Bistro

The menu at this South Bay restaurant takes inspiration from Korean, Chinese and Japanese cuisine, and it turns out such starters as golden chicken dumplings in a beguiling spicy broth. Fans of whole fish preparations might try the crispy catfish.

■ First courses \$4.50 to \$9.95; entrees \$9.50 to \$19.95. 211 Palos Verdes Blvd., Redondo Beach. (310) 375-4462.

### Amuse Cafe

This Venice charmer in the yellow cottage has a pedigree: Brooke Williamson and Nick Roberts, formerly of Zax in Brentwood, are the owners and chefs. They have a new menu, but the food is still delicious and simple at heart: Try braised beef short ribs with parsnip purée and wilted rapini. Desserts such as cool maple panna cotta hit just the right note.

■ Small plates \$8; large plates \$14 to \$20. 796 Main St., Venice. (310) 450-1956.

### Pete's

At the base of one of downtown's trendy loft buildings, this bright cafe attracts a good mix of business and arty types. The menu runs from a fine burger and good shoestring fries (with or without a generous dose of molten blue cheese) to salmon over polenta. The vibe is cool, but not aggressively so, meaning they're genuinely glad to see you here.

■ Starters \$7 to \$10; entrees \$10 to \$19. 400 S. Main St., L.A. (213) 617-1000.

### Clementine

At lunchtime, this dream cafeteria is packed for a reason: sensational sandwiches such as hearty meatloaf or autumn chicken salad on pecan-raisin bread, soulful soups and lovely salads. And who can resist the oversized cookies and frosted cupcakes?

■ Salads \$3.75 to \$10.25.

nese chicken salad, but the most interesting has to be the "multi-colored" beets with slivers of smoked eel, grapefruit segments and ginger.

His sophisticated take on mac and cheese is made with Gruyère and flavored with serrano ham and leeks. Fish includes whole trout in brown butter or rare ahi tuna with wasabi potatoes. But what about those braised veal cheeks with polenta and wild mushrooms? Fall is on the way, and braised dishes are sending out their siren call. Duck confit sounds awfully good too. And it is.

Simons has put some effort into the wine list too. Violet's two-page list includes a number of "alternative" white and red wines. That would be a Dr. Loosen Riesling from Germany, King Estate Pinot Gris from Oregon and various Syrahs and Shirazes from around the world. He also offers six different tasting flights from \$6.50 to \$10.50, so you can study up on Merlot or alternative whites with your din-