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## L.A.'s gourmet kosher makeover

### Pricey, elegant restaurants feed the observant community's appetite for upscale dining

*By Amy Klein, Religion Editor*

At the new Shilo's steakhouse on Pico Boulevard, concentric circles of color surround the caviar: green onion on the outside, yellow egg yolk sprinkled on the inner rim, followed by chopped egg whites peppered with blinis and tortillas and topped ceremoniously by a mound of glistening fish eggs.

The Ikura caviar is red, which indicates that it's kosher -- culled from salmon, not the non-kosher black beluga that comes from sturgeon.

At The Prime Grill on Rodeo Drive, the short ribs are braised for 12 hours and then served with wild mushrooms and spicy mustard. The chopped Wagyu Steak Sliders look like little hamburgers but are eye-opening delectable, made from hand chopped steak, while the Oh Toro sashimi is smooth and silvery and almost swims down the throat.

At Tierra Sur at the Baron Herzog Winery in Oxnard, venison is one of the most popular dishes, and the white bean soup is topped with "bacon" -- a crisp, salty, flavorful meat that's made from lamb so it will be kosher.

Welcome to Southern California's new world of Gourmet Kosher. As America has fallen in love with food over the last decade, the kosher world has not been too far behind. Kosher products and kosher gourmet ingredients abound, as do kosher cookbooks and cooking classes and a general interest in food, entertaining and all it entails. The kosher market has proved a profitable one, appealing to the religious, the newly kosher and others who may want nondairy, halal or simply food that is perceived to be cleaner.

New York, the capital of fine dining, boasts a number of established top-caliber kosher restaurants, among them Le Marais, Abigail's, Tevere and The Prime Grill, which opened there in 2000 and has just opened in Beverly Hills, as well.

The arrival in Southern California of The Prime Grill -- a trendier, classier place than its New York counterpart -- and other restaurants, signifies that Los Angeles, a city that often lags foodwise behind New York, San Francisco and Chicago, might finally be catching up when it comes to kosher food.

In the second-largest U.S. Jewish city (behind New York) Los Angeles has a fair number -- about 50 -- kosher eateries, from bakeries to pizza stores to ethnic food and a number of fancier restaurants.

New restaurants are appearing that don't ladle up the chicken soup and pastrami sandwiches of yesteryear, though delis with that fare still abound, more often known as "kosher style" and consumed by the non-kosher crowd in the mood for a good knish.

This gourmet kosher trend is aspiring to create a whole new world of fine dining, with chefs trained at top culinary schools (some of them do not observe kashrut themselves) who offer high-end cuisine and extensive wine lists in dining rooms designed by famous decorators.

Pricey and elegant, the hope is to bring high-quality dining to the kosher consumer and, at the same time, attract all the other food connoisseurs that vie for tables at Los Angeles' top eateries.

But are Los Angeles' kosher consumers ready for high-class dining? And is the mainstream "treif" world ready to patronize a kosher restaurant as a prime destination?

What does it take to be a kosher restaurant?

No. 1, of course, is adherence to the laws of kashrut, a complex system with innumerable subtleties and exceptions, but which at its most basic elements prohibits pork, shellfish and some other animals and fish and their byproducts. There are also restrictions regarding alcohol and produce and laws prohibiting mixing meat and dairy products. Any kosher restaurant must choose to be either fleishig or milchiks (the Yiddish words for meat or dairy), which means choosing between steakhouse or Italian, a deli or a pizzeria. Not both.

To be certified glatt or suitably kosher for the Orthodox (there are also some Conservative certifications), a restaurant cannot be open on Sabbath or Jewish festivals. And, further, to get a hashgachah -- the outside certification provided for a fee by organizations such as the Rabbinic Council of California, Kehilla and Rabbi Yehuda Bukspan, to name a few of the top L.A. certifiers -- the venue must have a mashgiach onsite -- a supervisor versed in the laws who will ensure complicity.

Rabbi Yaacov Vann, director of Kashrut Services at the RCC, one of the top kosher certifiers in California, describes the need for a kosher restaurant to be a "secure system," and he uses specific criteria to assess the risks of each establishment.

"How likely is there to be a problem?" he said.

Bakeries, like the famous Schwartz's, for example, have a low-risk assessment, because there's little differential between ingredients for kosher bakeries and non-kosher bakeries -- flour, sugar, eggs -- are all pareve. "There's little risk to cheat," he said.

Meat, by contrast, must come from a certified shohet, or butcher, and is more expensive than regular meat. (In September, a scandal rocked Monsey, N.Y., when a butcher was discovered selling non-kosher meat to the ultra-Orthodox community.)

All restaurants, of course, need more oversight than any bakery or pizzeria, and the

bigger and busier the place, the more supervision it requires. Depending on the facility, the mashgiach may be the owner or someone who works in the store or an outsider -- although the RCC is hoping to require all restaurants to have outside supervisors to minimize corruption.

All this can cost the establishment thousands of dollars a year. But the assurance of strict observance is the only way to bring in people who eat kosher.

There are no statistics on the number of Jews who keep kosher in Los Angeles, though an estimated 10 percent of the L.A. area's roughly 600,000 are said to be Orthodox. But even those numbers don't mean much to restaurateurs, because not all religious Jews eat out, some do but only infrequently, limited by such reasons as money, time, family values or weekends spent at home for Shabbat. Many Jews who care about kashrut will also eat at non-kosher restaurants but limit themselves to nonmeat meals, allowing themselves more flexibility on the weekends, when kosher restaurants are closed.

In other words, it's impossible to gauge the size of the market for kosher dining, except to say that the clientele, until now, has been mostly Jews, friends of Jews or colleagues of Jews taken there for business meals. And everyone agrees, that despite many choices until now among kosher restaurants, there haven't been enough good kosher restaurants here.

Some argue that Los Angeles' kosher restaurants have not been sufficiently challenged by the forces of competition. People complain about the service (rude, rushed, the customer is not always right), the ambience (often they are loud, crowded and brightly lit), the price (costly) and the food ("For this I have to go out? I could make better at home!")

But all this hasn't cut demand, which makes sense if you only eat at your neighborhood restaurant, and it's probably a family restaurant, and it's not open on Friday night and maybe not even Saturday night, and you probably wouldn't go out Saturday night, because you're tired from Sabbath entertaining, so you end up going out to eat the same Sunday or Thursday nights as everyone else, and you go where you run into a million people you know, and while it might be crowded and noisy, it's a family a scene you might enjoy.

That, for many, has been the extent their kosher dining experience. Until now.

At A Cow Jumped Over the Moon, a new French gourmet shop and café that opened last fall, a large hunk of real parmesan cheese (\$40 a pound) sits atop a glass counter filled with more gourmet cheeses and chocolate truffles from Normandy. The right wall of the small shop is lined with wines that range in price from \$25 to \$175 per bottle and come from private kosher reserves in Europe. A glass wall is lined with gourmet kosher products from around the world and overlooks the seating square outside the shop, where half a dozen people pop in for lunch.

What could be bad about a Savoy fondue for two made with melted Gruyere, Emmental cheese, white wine and garlic? Or a Brie sandwich with apples, walnuts and honey on toasted French baguette? And a sweet crepe topped with pralines, melted chocolate, strawberries and whipped cream? Aside from a tighter waistband, nothing.

The cheeses are creamy, pungent, smooth, imported and kosher. The bistro almost could be straight from France, and if you look at the cobblestone floor, the black and orange décor, you might almost believe you are in Paris, except for one thing: The restaurant is located underground in the Rodeo Collection in Beverly Hills, next to the valet parking.

That's the thing about kosher restaurants, they don't always seem to get all the elements right: Food, location, service, ambiance. But still, the food -- foreign, different, gourmet -- might be enough to bring in customers, at least for takeout, and the owner hopes that restaurant will serve as a testing ground for future locations. If it can survive underground, it will prove that kosher consumers are ready for gourmet food.

Are they?



There's an asterisk next to the steak list on the menu at both Shiloh's and The Prime Grill: "We are not responsible for well-done steaks." The steaks range from rib eye to Black Angus to entrecote, and as many foodies know are best eaten medium rare. But not all the customers know that -- or know what medium rare is.

According to the chefs, a kosher diner measures meat on a different cooking scale than most other diners.

"Food has to be cooked on temperature up from what people say," said Aaron Bashy, chef de cuisine at The Prime Grill. When they request rare, they mean medium rare; when they request medium, that's the chef's well done.

"The medium here, they really want it well done," said Bashy, who studied at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, and was raised in a Sephardic kosher home.

What do many mean by well-done? Charred. Till all the juices are dried out. Steak is not meant to be eaten well done, and certainly not that well done.

"Any time you cook meat you reduce the juice," said Michael Ayetkin, executive chef

at Shilo's, which opened in late fall. He insisted on the inclusion of the addendum on the menu.

"It's not very pleasurable to eat steak well done," he said. "If you want it well done and juicy, there's no such thing."

Ayetkin, Shilo's chef, went to culinary school in his native Turkey and has served as a food and beverage executive at hotels and restaurants around the world. This is his first venture with kosher cooking and religious diners.

"Eating is different than dining," Ayetkin said. "Eating is to fill up because you are hungry, but dining is enjoyment with pleasure. If I dine, it's different than when I eat. When I eat, I may have a hamburger and french fries, but when I dine, I want different food and ambiance."

The chef thinks that many of Shilo's diners come for good kosher steak, but don't come for the dining experience.

"These people are sophisticated, but they don't believe in that lifestyle," Ayetkin said.

Limited availability of upscale dining experiences has certainly limited many kosher palates, yet, the religious world -- especially Modern Orthodox -- has always been influenced by the outside world, from trends in fashion to education to parenting. No less so with food. In the last decade, as America has fallen in love with food -- food preparation, food presentation, food consumption -- the kosher world also has taken note. Even if they can't eat all the ingredients featured on the food network, they can still make something that will taste -- and look -- similar.

Consider the popularity of cookbook author Suzie Fishbein's "Kosher by Design" series, which first came out in 2003 and has become a kosher empire: her four books have sold more than 300,000 copies and her tours and classes around the country are always full. Although there are hundreds of kosher cookbooks on the market, Fishbein, an entertainer more than a chef, has brought concepts of style and food arrangement, as well as gourmet ingredients, into the kosher home.

The truth is, the kosher world is not as insulated as it used to be.

Ba'aeli teshuvah, returnees to the faith, and people who are "kosher-flexible" -- who eat at regular top restaurants but go to kosher restaurants to eat meat -- have brought their fancy-shmancy tastes with them.

Among these are the Ghanems, brothers Fabrice and Jeffrey, Shilo's founders, who owned a restaurant -- not kosher -- in the south of France with their parents and were used to dining out three or four times a week.

"In France, the kosher business is much more open than here," Jeffrey Ghanem said.

They were surprised when they came to Los Angeles.

"There's not enough restaurants, not enough variety, not enough dining," he said.

They set about creating that dining experience with a steak-centered menu, featuring entrecote, French bistro beefsteak, prime rib and lamb. The food is sometimes exotic (chicken Wellington with kosher foie gras), munificent (five steak sauces, including truffle, peppercorn and bordelais) and innovative (molten chocolate chip cake).

Ghanem is betting it will take, and they are expanding next door, hoping to double their somewhat cramped seating of 65 by spring.

The décor of cool whites and pale grays that seem bland in the daylight transforms the restaurant at night into an aura of candlelight, hushed tones, moonlight -- of France. But you're not in France, you're on the busy Pico, next to a bank, across from Jeff's Gourmet Sausage.

"To us it's the best location," Ghanem said. "The point of coming to Pico is not to be impressed by the street. Most of our clients live in mansions in Beverly Hills. You want to be in this area, especially if you're religious."

Not every kosher restaurateur agrees. When Joey Allaham, owner of The Prime Grill steakhouse in New York set his sights on Los Angeles, he didn't pick Pico but Beverly Hills. That's because he wanted to create something different, distinct even, from his traditional, boisterous steakhouse in midtown Manhattan, which opened seven years ago. (He plans to open another upscale kosher restaurant in New York.)

The Prime Grill experience begins on Rodeo Drive with valet parking, a descent down the grand stairway of the Rodeo Collection (less a mall than a two-story courtyard with luxury stores), an outdoor waiting area (low, modern leather seats) and a dark, fully stocked lounge where a DJ spins tunes. All this precedes the restaurant part of the restaurant, which has two main rooms -- indoor and cabanas -- a few private rooms, and seats more than 200.

"I wanted to create a place where Jews can have a whole night out, instead of going out to eat at a kosher restaurant and then finding someplace else to go out. I want people to have the whole experience."

The whole experience, viewed from behind the plum gauze curtains in one of the four cushioned booths -- Larry King's favorite spot -- can rival many of Los Angeles' top trendy restaurants.

And that's what Allaham is going for: The mainstream diner. Kosher diners comprise only 20 percent of their clientele, he claimed. "I don't advertise it as kosher. We are a restaurant that happens to be kosher," said the Syrian-born Jew who came to the United States in 1994. "If you bring in a non-kosher person to eat here, I bet anything they'll never even know this is kosher. The only way they'd know is if they see people with beards and yarmulkes."

Of course, there are other ways a non-kosher person could detect differences -- that it's not open on Friday nights and Saturdays, the busiest night for dining out; that the nondairy desserts leave a slight aftertaste of margarine or nondairy creamer, and some vegetables -- fresh broccoli and cauliflower -- are not available because they might contain bugs, which would make them non-kosher.

And whether one might choose to spend a night out, for example, amid diners that include a Chabad couple, an Israeli family of seven, a Modern Orthodox rabbi and some businessmen, rather than with scantily clad celebrities and wannabees, is definitely a consideration.

But where it counts the most, the food, especially the steaks, are probably some of the tastiest -- kosher and non-kosher -- in the city. The meat is flown in from New York, where it has been dry aged for 32 days or wet aged for 45 days (soon to be available on the Internet), and the steaks are crisped in the 1,800-degree infrared broiler and served alone, steakhouse style (side dishes, like pesto mashed potatoes or wild mushrooms with truffles are extra).

A meal at The Prime Grill, with wine or a cocktail or two from the trendy bar -- could run between \$60 and \$100 per person. For a certain type of kosher diner, that's a major drawback.

"The steak was really good," a friend said. "But for that price would I go back? Not unless someone else is paying."

But Los Angeles has no shortage of wealthy Jews -- as well as Jews who may choose to eat kosher or non-kosher.

"This is my target," Allaham said. "People who choose to go to non-kosher restaurants who think they are better -- and have them come here a few times a week."

One kosher restaurant that must rely on non-kosher consumers is Tierra Sur in Oxnard, some 60 miles north of Los Angeles, pretty far from most of the Orthodox community, save for Chabads in Oxnard, Ventura and Camarillo. But that's OK, because the restaurant was created as part of a branding effort to market the Baron Herzog kosher wines to mainstream consumers.

"We were thinking of doing a café," Joseph Herzog said, when they first planned the winemaking facility. But then they realized the tasting room, as well as the eatery, must be luxury, if they wanted to market themselves to upscale to non-kosher consumers, as well as make themselves a "destination" for kosher consumers.



From afar, the place looks like a squat industrial building "in the middle of strawberry fields," as Herzog said. But inside the tasting room/gift shop is like a kosher luxury goods museum, with wines, brandies, ports, champagnes, cigars, cookbooks, tapenades, sauces and more. The 44-seat restaurant, whose ceiling stretches to the second floor (where a self-guided tour of the winery is available), is decorated in a modern, industrial style, with duo-tone yellow and brown walls, where a crescent shape aperture creates a semi-open kitchen.

From that kitchen comes: lamb bacon, salt cod fritters, lamb with couscous, venison, caramel pot de cr?me -- whatever strikes chef Todd Aarons fancy. For a kosher restaurant trying to market itself as mainstream, Aarons is an ideal chef: He wasn't raised kosher. He trained at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco and has worked at the famous Zuni café there and later the Savoy in New York. Then he went to study in Israel and decided to become religious -- and kosher.

Although he could still "cook a pork chop with my eyes closed" i.e., without having to taste it, "being a shomer Shabbos chef was a problem." He thought about changing his career, but after a stint in kosher catering ("I thought I'd kill myself"), he opened up his own restaurant in New Jersey -- which is where one of the Herzog brothers found him and made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

"I don't walk in the morning and say, 'I want to make kosher food today!'" Aaron said.

He makes what he calls Mediterranean- and Spanish- influenced food, using local flavors and seasonal produce. He tries to avoid margarine -- using soy milk when he can for desserts, and attempts to replicate some treif food, such as the lamb bacon, maple cured and smoked for six hours, like regular bacon would be.

"Kosher has gotten a bad rap," Aaron said. "For a long time it meant deli. No one knew what it was. It was dominated by the Ashkenazic Eastern European flavors. But Jews ate the food of whatever country they were in. Kosher doesn't delineate the type of food it is. If it's cooked in a kosher style, it's kosher."

As to kosher clients, he believes they're the same as non-kosher. "You know, look at the non-kosher world, there are people who don't care about food, and there are people who are foodies," Aaron said.

"There are people who care about artistry, people who care about getting what they paid for. You have to appeal to everyone."

He considers himself fortunate. "It's nice to enable myself to enjoy what I love to do and remain kosher myself. I just happen to be at this time in history that there's a market for it."

Any discussion of fine kosher dining in Los Angeles must include Pat's, one of the first and best-known upscale kosher restaurants in Los Angeles. The trajectory of their owners -- chef Pat Fine and her husband, Errol, who runs the business -- mirrors the transformation of kosher dining in the city.



Twenty-five years ago, the South African-born, Modern Orthodox couple started Elite Cuisine, with both a deli and takeout in Santa Monica and near Hancock Park.

Then about 15 years ago, they decided to close up shop and open a real restaurant. "We felt our skills were more toward restaurant than deli," said Pat Fine. She felt her culinary talents were wasted on a deli.

She likes to tell the story of an early dissatisfied walk-in.

"Where's the chicken soup and matzah balls?" he demanded. Today, she said, this same man calls in his order for the ravioli of the day.

"He never asked for chicken soup again," she said. "From gefilte fish and matzah balls, in many respects we educated the customers."

"We wanted to make people proud to come into our restaurant, not to feel it was kosher," she said, echoing many of the new restaurateurs.

"We wanted to take kosher out of the dinginess into the limelight, to show that kosher can be delicious. In those days, it was falafel, stuffed cabbage."

When they opened the eponymous Pat's in what now seems like a prime location on Pico Boulevard and Doheny Drive, Pico wasn't the "hood" it is today. The center of L.A. Modern Orthodoxy was just first beginning to bloom, and there were only a few kosher places. "It was sparse," said Errol Fine.

There were a few other kosher places: The Milky Way preceded them, as did a smaller Pico Kosher Deli, but Nagila pizzeria and schwarma, a local teen and family hangout, came later. Nowadays, Pico is to kosher what Rodeo Drive is to luxury.

"We're the anchor for the restaurants around here," he said. Pat's is also a catering business, with exclusive contracts to the Ritz chain and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and subcontractor for many events in the city, for example, if a Spago event needs to be kosher or have kosher food, which increasingly occurs nowadays. The catering business accounts for about 65 percent of their revenue and serves as a

model for many new establishments in the city that hope to offer catering, as well.

The restaurant seats about 120 and has been redecorated twice to keep up with the times. That's very important to Pat Fine. "We keep up with the current food trends," she said, talking about health, portion control, elegant presentation and the latest food demands. For example, Tuesday nights are sushi. Seared tuna is an appetizer.

Avocado graces the salads. For the most part, Pat's can be called fusion, with options of meat, chicken, fish and pasta. "The customer has become more sophisticated," Errol Fine said.

"People are becoming ba'al teshuvah and they know what to eat, but everyone's excited to try new things."

Today one probably wouldn't call Pat's cutting-edge kosher. Pat Fine is a self-taught cook (trained as a pharmacist), and many describe the restaurant as more of a day-to-day place, rather than an "event" restaurant. But the Fines said they welcome the new arrivals.

"In a way it just underlines the fact that we're good, and it gives our customers another choice. The community has grown," Errol Fine said.

Besides, Pat's has been around for a while.

"Restaurants have come and gone," he said. "It all takes the test of time."