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Star-Hopping: LA's Culinary Luminaries Honored at Gala Tasting



Bacon Wrapped Bacon from FIG (*Elise Thompson/LAist*)

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As the warm afternoon light gave way to the cooler notes of evening just steps away from the Pacific Ocean last Thursday night, Los Angeles' top chefs of today and tomorrow gathered in celebration of the city's finest food. The [StarChefs](#) annual [Rising Stars event](#) gave the recognized masters from local restaurants the chance to raise their glasses in honor of their proteges--and the next wave of talent cresting on our own shore.

For food lovers and food industry pros alike, the chance to meet up at the Fairmont Miramar Santa Monica under--and next to--the stars was a delicious opportunity, and a chance to help out Project Angel Food, to which a portion of the ticket sales were donated. A pre-event VIP reception welcomed many attendees who were able to mingle with chefs like Neal Fraser (Grace, BLD) and Ben Bailly (Petrossian) and to sip champagne and sample small bites to tease the palate. But the main event was in the front courtyard of the hotel, where guests made their way from table to table, star-hopping, and trying savory and sweet bites served on plates made of recycled leaves.

A welcomed balance of spirits and mixologists, wine and sommeliers, entree bites and chefs, and desserts and pastry chefs, there was just the right amount of food and drink being showcased so that guests could get a taste of it all (though being with good friends willing to share always helps).

Both the cocktails of the evening were stellar. There was the simplicity of The Varnish's Eric Alperin's The Highlander (Highland Park Scotch with a Twist) and the tongue-twisting adventure of Rivera's Julian Cox's Barbacoa (a wild mix of lime, ginger, red pepper, chipotle, Mezcal and bacon) to punctuate the evening, and, frankly, to dominate the available wine pairings, which we largely eschewed, mostly thanks to the combined struggle to snag a taste of each dish on offer and to balance plate and glass in the sizable crowd.

With trying all the food as a goal, we moved through the horseshoe of tables as the evening progressed, starting off with the lovely Roasted Beet Salad and Fresh Goat Cheese from BLD. Just as we are straddling two seasons on the calendar, the transition from the heft of winter ingredients to the youthful freshness of spring ingredients was evident in the dishes. The rich comfort of Animal's Poutine with Oxtail Gravy and Cheddar packed such a satisfactory wallop that it was tempting to seek out a quiet spot upon which to curl up in submission and slumber.

The two pork-centric bites were standouts, each teasing the sweeter side of bacon out with their pairings. First, a big surprise of the night came from San Diego's Nine-Ten, with their playful pork belly prepared Jamaican Jerk-style, served atop a sweet potato puree. But just down the way was the beckoning call ("Oink," maybe?) of Fig's Bacon-Wrapped Bacon. Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Yes they did. To cut the sweet-salty-fatty triumvirate of flavors were the cheeky little tomatoes served with the piggy in his own blanket.

Over by [Top Chef](#) winner [Michael Voltaggio](#)'s station, the foodies intersected with the, uh, shall we say, uneducated, as The Langham Dining Room's own star sliced into glorious, velvety-soft sous vide Wagyu beef for immediate serving. "Can I get some that's well done?" we overheard one guest inquire. Our eyes bugged out as round as the soft, buttery pillows of pasta we'd just tasted from Costa Mesa's Pizzeria Ortica. Voltaggio laughed, and kept serving up his sensuously rare meat that was melt-in-your-mouth good.

Not everything was a pure win like Voltaggio's meat, the Animal boys' poutine, and the tale of two pork bellies. Umami (who, incidentally revealed in conversation that their truck was not going to happen anymore) had mini burgers which drew a crowd, and mixed reviews for their calling card "5th flavor" (too salty), while Sona's seared foie gras was underdone and paired with a few too many sweet and distracting bites--one of which was as densely sugary as a Jelly Belly.

Of course, there was room for sweet in the form of dessert--and, yes, we saved room for it. There was a bite of childhood comfort in the form of a chocolate pudding pie from Huckleberry & Rustic Canyon, livened up and made grown up with the additional bite of cocoa nib sprinkled on top.

But the most mind-blowing moment of the whole night (forget seeing all those amazing chefs onstage for the ceremony) was courtesy Jordan Kahn, formerly of XIV by Michael Mina, who enchanted us with his tile-topped table of little boxes. Not made of tiki-tacky, mind you, but of white chocolate, and filled with compressed native strawberries, beet, cacao fruit, elderflower and violets. A Jackson Pollock-like splatter of purple syrup had Kahn and his dish pulling in crowds like a carnival sideshow, as the allure of his innovation--then, as we tasted--the palate-pleasing excitement of his creation stole the show.

Although this was a one-night only affair, for us Angelenos, we're lucky these honored chefs, and many of their mentors, call Los Angeles home. Our dining scene is an ever-expanding universe, and hopefully we can all go out and explore it.

By [Lindsay William-Ross](#) in [Food](#) on March 24, 2010 12:30 PM [1 Comment](#) [8 Likes](#)

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