

JONATHAN WILSON GOES IT ALONE IN A *DIXIE BLUR* • FOR FREEDOM'S CONGRESS DRIVES ANGELENOS TO THE POLLS

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ROAD TRIP: LOS ALAMOS

The future of food is in an old Western town

BY ANN HEROLD

On the cover: Norman
Restaurant, courtesy
Skyview Los Alamos

The Skyview Motel,
courtesy Skyview Los
Alamos



Babi's Beer Emporium,
photo by Michele
Stueven



Skyview Motel,
courtesy Skyview Los
Alamos



Full of Life Flatbread,
Jeffrey Bloom
Photography

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Los Alamos is the kind of trapped-in-amber place where a well-traveled street splits around a towering sycamore tree that might have seen the first stagecoaches rattle through in 1874. The stagecoach route was a huge boon to the folks opening businesses in this tiny hamlet named for the cottonwoods that turn a golden yellow in the fall. The Bank of Santa Maria was among them, erecting a sweet little branch that, more than 100 years

later, is Bell's, a destination restaurant where star chefs Daisy and Gregory Ryan preside.

Weekends are a busy time in Los Alamos, founded not long after the Civil War, when Dr. J.B. Shaw and San Francisco financier Thomas Bell bought 28,000 acres of prime ranchland. As long as stagecoaches and then the train went through, life was good. But rail service ended in 1940 and Los Alamos sort of fell off the map. More than one spot reverted to biker bar as rural highways like the 135 (a.k.a. Bell

Street) lured a new breed of daytripper.

Today's visitors to this Santa Ynez-adjacent locale — and they are legion — generally arrive by car, making the quick jog off Highway 101 to Bell Street, where the curious now have their pick of crazy good restaurants and wine-tasting venues. Among the former is Bell's, where the Ryans, who met while working for Thomas Keller at New York's exalted Per Se, turn out such French classics as moules frites from a kitchen that began life as a bank vault.

The mussels — which hail from Santa Barbara's Hope Ranch — have their own story to tell. They were supplied by Stephanie Mutz, a diver whose skills as an uni and seafood supplier are featured in *The Delicacy*, the latest Jason Wise (the *SOMM* series) documentary. If there is a celebrity in the seafood world these days, it's Mutz, a Los Alamos resident whose sea urchins appear at such L.A. hotspots as Michael Cimarusti's Providence and Niki Nakayama's n/naka.

Bell's also has a knockout gnocchi with a Parisian twist — hazelnuts and a savory soubise — but what neighboring chef Clark Staub

and his chef wife Jill Davie (The Mar Vista) come for is the steak tartare. Staub would never admit this, but he's critical to Los Alamos' emergence as a food mecca. Sixteen years ago, the former professional skateboarder-turned record company executive-turned baker settled in town, built a pizza oven with local river rocks, coveted white sand from Two Oaks Ranch in Los Olivos and adobe from Central Coast wine legend John Alban — maker of world-class viognier — and launched what is now Full of Life Flatbread.

On a typical Saturday night, all the tables in the main dining room and on the wide porch at Staub's restaurant are full (he doesn't take reservations). Equally packed is the bar, where would-be diners wait patiently and French wine barrel staves, recast as skateboard decks, dangle from the ceiling. The menu at Full of Life Flatbread changes weekly based on what's fresher than fresh, and sometimes based on what cultural benchmark Staub's dialed into.

In late January, there was a celebration of the Chinese Year of the Rat, when Staub took salmon caught by the Quinault tribe in Washington and prepared it two ways: poached in



Top: Full of Life Flatbread, Jeffrey Bloom Photography

Bottom: Off-the-menu marshmallow brownies at Full of Life Flatbread, photo by Michele Stueven



View from the Skyview, photo by Michele Stueven



Clark Staub at Full of Life Flatbread, Jeffrey Bloom Photography

a miso broth and as a spicy poke, the latter evoking the ancient Hawaiian way, the meat stripped from the bones. Heads also got to turning at the sight of the off-menu dessert, a brownie topped with a housemade marshmallow — toasted in the same oven in which the exquisite flatbreads are cooked and loaded with, say, locally grown veggies or handcrafted sausage.

Also buzzing on weekends is Bob's Well Bread, a bakery down the street from Staub, where newcomers pulling open the door to the 1920s motel, gas station and cafe might be a bit startled by the line inside. The foodie jungle telegraph has been buzzing for Bob's since former Sony TV executive Bob Os-waks reinvented himself as a bread maker extraordinaire (Staub's kitchen was his first training ground), garnering raves in *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Travel + Leisure* within a year of opening.

Those standing in the queue eye the display

of one-of-a-kind mustard, honey, olive oil and bread knives as they wait for their chance to scoop up a loaf of sesame sourdough (sells out quickly) or olive fougasse (Saturdays only) and perhaps order (for breakfast) the egg-in-a-jar (purple potato puree, Gruyère, poached egg, lardons, crème fraîche and chives) or the avocado toast tartine. If the weather's fine, they head out to the tables under the oaks, where they might tuck into the croque monsieur or the BLT tartine (for lunch). Bob mans the register most days, keeping the line moving along nicely (check out the tattoo on his arm of the bakery logo, a three-pronged Victorian bread fork that belonged to his great-grandmother).

Perhaps the most striking structure on Bell is the old-timey 1880 Union Hotel & Saloon — all weathered wood and milky glass windows — which isn't even the original stagecoach stop (that burned down in 1893), but its replacement. Darned if it didn't spring right out of a John Ford Western, down to the creaky

wood floors and taxidermied wildlife — not so much a case of Hollywood magic, but a 1970s restoration by Dick Langdon. (We love the fact that filmdom's most fetching Wyatt Earp, Kurt Russell, briefly leased the saloon to show off his wines). Now you can park your denim-clad body on a stool behind the mirrored bar, order a glass from the barkeep, and take in the massive moose and buffalo heads.

Current trends mix comfortably with time travel at Casa Dumetz Wines (going back to early days in Malibu, where proprietor Sonja Magdevski and then-partner Emilio Estevez first produced wine). The period tasting room was originally the site of C.H. Pearson's Cheap Cash Store, early 1900s supplier of everything from shoes to poultry to chewing tobacco.

At this former mercantile you'll also find Babi's Beer Emporium (modern craft beers and ciders) and Dim Sama, a dim sum operation from Santa Barbara's Sama Sama Kitchen. Try such fare as the red bean bao, steamed sausage

rolls, and pork and shrimp shumai during a tasting of Magdevski's Feminist Party line of blended reds, or eat on the patio under a crystalline sky. Think about attending Magdevski's speaker series — Los Alamos' answer to the TED talks — that can range from a global Ebola update to California's sourdough infatuation (the latter scheduled for February 28).

Longtime winemaker Stephan Bedford acts as de facto historian, mushroom king and all-around cheerleader for Los Alamos' culinary wonders. In January, Bedford stages a mushroom festival (plan now, it always sells out) that this year drew the likes of Betty Fussell, the James Beard Award-winning cookbook author, who held forth on the corn fungus huitlacoche (a.k.a. the Mexican truffle). Meanwhile, Branden's Gourmet Mushrooms did a brisk trade selling oyster and pioppino varieties from grower Branden Janikowski's Orcutt greenhouse. Fungus expert Bob Cummings manned a gorgeous mushroom-laden table

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Bell's Restaurant, 406 Bell St., Los Alamos, bellsrestaurant.com.

Full of Life Flatbread, 225 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-4400, fullloflifefoods.com.

Bob's Well Bread, 550 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-3000, bobswellbread.com.

Union Hotel & Saloon, 362 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-2744, 1880union.com.

Pico Restaurant, 458 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-1122, losalamosgeneralstore.com.

Casa Dumetz Wines, 388 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-1900, casadumetzwines.com.

Babi's Beer Emporium and Dim Sama, 380 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-1900, babisbeeremporium.com.

Bedford Winery, 448 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-2107, bedfordthompsonwinery.com.

Lo-Fi Wines, 448 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-0179, lofi-wines.com.

The Station, 346 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-1960, thestationlosalamos.com.

Skyview Motel, 9150 US-101, Los Alamos; (805) 344-0104, skyviewlosalamos.com.

Alamo Motel, 425 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-2852, rememberthealamo-motel.com.

Victorian Mansion, 326 Bell St., Los Alamos; (805) 344-1300, thevick.com.

(looking not unlike a Dutch Baroque tableau) to explain what was safe — and not so safe — to eat. And pours of Bedford wines (we are partial to his chenin blanc) accompanied mushroom appetizers in the tasting room's shady garden.

Bedford shares a wall in the Depression-era building with Lo-Fi Wines, where there's a minimalist vibe in the tasting room's décor and in owners Craig Winchester and Mike Roth's low-impact sensibilities: The chardonnay (from a vineyard planted by actor James Garner in the 1980s) was aged in concrete, while biodynamically farmed grapes are used in the syrah. A turntable supplies all the background music, a nod to the winery's name, inspired in part by its creators' considerable record collections.

Curvy gas pumps that serviced Model A's and T's and other Roaring Twenties transport still grace The Station (formerly the Scolari California Garage), a multiroom space and leafy garden that's now a tasting room for James Ontiveros' wines and for the tacos and other edible delights of the Cisco Kid catering company (we especially crave the shrimp and greens tacos).

Ontiveros' roots here run hyper-deep: His grandfather took ownership of the Rancho Tepusquet Land Grant — God's country for

anyone who's driven to far north Santa Barbara County — in 1781, before California was even a state. Most of the land was sold over the ensuing decades, but James still farms a portion as Rancho Vineda, whose grapes go into an exceptional chardonnay named for his grandmother Martina. On weekends, you can taste that along with a host of other Santa Maria Valley wines and a nicely curated list of beer, cider, kombucha and hard seltzer while listening to live music outdoors.

From the moment the 1950s Skyview Motel opened, with its distinctive palms and bold sign, it promised a vacation like no other, perched high above the scenic hills. Fast-forward to 2017, when the long vacant site, which had acquired the (depending on how you view the film) spooky nickname of the Bates Motel, is purchased by the Nomada Hotel Group. Nomada's Kimberly Walker had already pulled off a masterful renovation at San Luis Obispo's Granada Hotel & Bar, and after more than a year of ministrations surpassed the Skyview's early charm: the pool with a view even more inviting, the wood-clad rooms decorated in a just-right mix of designer tile and minimalist furniture, the private patios warmed by their own firepits. Even the Norman restaurant — gotta be a tongue-in-cheek reference — is an oasis of midcentury modern glamour.

In downtown Los Alamos, overnighters can also choose to stay at The Alamo, another classic 1950s motel given its own contempo makeover. The Shelter Social Club hospitality group channeled New Mexico with its bleached cattle skulls, rustic wood touches and plentiful cactuses at the parklike spot.

Or the weary can opt for the Victorian Mansion, an 1864 gem of a building that was transported in five not-so-easy pieces from the town of Nipomo by the same Dick Langdon of the Union Hotel. Hiring local artisans and tile makers, Langdon remade each room with a lifestyle in mind. In the Gypsy Suite, visitors sleep in an actual caravan, and in the '50s Suite, in a topless Corvette. There's a room that evokes Rome, another Egypt, another the French countryside, while the penthouse celebrates a pirate's life. Out back is a World War I-era sailboat once owned by the King of Denmark that's well on its way to joining the themed accommodations.

"You are exactly where you are supposed to be," says a sign on the pole outside Pico, the beloved restaurant slated to reopen next month once new chef John Wayne Formica rides into town from his latest posting at Tao in Los Angeles. Staub was the first to bring the chef with the cowboy name to Los Alamos, and JW reportedly fell hard for the Old West town. In the meantime, the building is worth a visit if only for its incredible history: Built in 1880, it started life as a general store and was renamed — in grand fashion — as The Emporium in 1900 by owner Max King.

After all, how many 140-year-olds can you say you know?

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