

# LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS .COM

BUSINESS, POLITICS, ARTS, CULTURE

Tuesday, April 13, 2004



THE LOS ANGELES  
ATHLETIC CLUB

Why stay with  
your bank?

Use  
Pacific Resource

The downtown  
credit union

SEARCH

HOME

NEWS & OPINION

CALENDAR

RESTAURANTS

LISTINGS

CLASSIFIEDS

HEALTH

SPECIAL SECTIONS

DOWNTOWN LIST

BEST OF

LANDMARKS

DEVELOPMENT

RESTAURANT GUIDE

VISITORS GUIDE

ABOUT US

## Counter Productive

*Local Diners Take You Back, Fill You Up*

by Joanna Lovinger

Nothing evokes the Los Angeles described by John Fante and Raymond Chandler quite like sidling up to a counter in one of its diners, a cup of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Counter patrons are unique: We're all anonymous loners, regulars and struggling artists, and there's a certain "we're in this together" feeling. Either that, or we pick the counter because the booths are full.

The best counters blend home-style cooking with friendly service. Not to mention the opportunity to knock back an entree, drink and dessert for less than an Andrew Jackson. While Downtown's high-rises don't hide as many diners as they used to, there are still a host of old school treasures, as well as a few new entries riding the retro train. Here are a few of our favorite members of the counter club.



Nick's Cafe. Photo by Gary Leonard.

### Nick's Cafe

Located in a bleak stretch of warehouses north of Chinatown, Nick's is a tiny, graffiti-covered spot next to the train tracks. Step inside and go straight back in time - and not to the 1950s, with all that faux jukebox kitsch, but further, before diner decor became an aesthetic. One long U-shaped counter fills the room, and the wood paneled walls are covered with photographs of old Los Angeles and friends of the diner.

Nick's Cafe was established in 1948 and is owned by an LAPD detective. Regular patrons are a mix of DWP workers, firefighters, policemen and artists who live in nearby lofts. The service is top-notch, friendly and attentive. On weekday mornings, Irma Frias rules the roost behind the counter; she knows all the regulars by name and calls them "honey."

The coffee at Nick's is strong and the portions are large, with no concern for doctor's orders. Scrambled eggs, buttered toast and crispy hash browns will set you back \$3.75;

regular favorites include ham for breakfast (\$5.75) and hot tri-tip for lunch (\$5.95).

1300 N. Spring St., (323) 222-1450. Mon.-Fri. 5:30 a.m.-2 p.m.; Sat. 6 a.m.-11:30 a.m. Cash only. Adjacent lot parking.

### **Yorkshire Grill**

The Yorkshire Grill is best approached on foot, with a large appetite. Parking is terrible (see below) and the decor desperately needs a woman's touch, but sandwich-making here is an art form. Two long counters surround an old-fashioned refrigerated case with milk and butter. Up front, a cook starts each day preparing stacks of enormous deli sandwiches with care.

The service is fast and friendly. For breakfast, order the corn beef hash (\$5.25). Everyone's favorite lunch is the Yorkshire Special, which is pastrami, turkey, coleslaw and Russian dressing on rye (\$7.95).

Yorkshire Grill has been serving lunch to Downtown office workers since 1947. If you can't get away from the desk, call in your order and you'll most likely get to meet Fitz Thomas. He's been delivering sandwiches on foot every day for 28 years.

610 W. Sixth St., (213) 629-3020. Mon.-Fri. 6 a.m.-4 p.m. Try your luck with metered spots, but for \$3 a day, you can park at Eighth and Grand.

### **The Original Pantry**

The Original Pantry is always packed. It was established in 1924 and has a perpetual line of locals and tourists waiting outside for a seat. The bakery next door is larger and boasts the same cholesterol-clogging menu. Old photographs of Los Angeles hang on the walls, along with hats and T-shirts for sale.

The counter at the space owned by former Mayor Richard Riordan is hot and crowded, but the servers call you "sweetheart" and tend to your every dining need with a smile.

At the Pantry, the eggs are scrambled loose (\$5.70) and the coffee is brewed strong (\$1.35). Late-night carousers love the rotisserie chicken, which comes with coleslaw, bread and veggies (\$10.38).

877 S. Figueroa St., (213) 972-9279. Open daily, 24 hours. Cash only. Parking lot across the street.

### **Langer's**

After you've plunked down on a Naugahyde swivel stool, the only thing left to do is order the pastrami that draws people from all walks of life to MacArthur Park, and gaze at the cake stands along the counter until it arrives.

Langer's opened in 1947, and regulars come from all over the city. Out-of-town tourists have been known to make the pilgrimage to Langer's in search of a life-changing pastrami experience. Even the New Yorker wrote about this sandwich.

The waitress might seem bored to the point of indifference, but the food arrives quickly. The home fries are giant, firm slabs of potatoes fried to perfection and the rye toast is chewy and flavorful. Along with scrambled eggs, the bill comes to \$4.15 and arrives with a wet-nap and a peppermint.

Those with heartier appetites order the No. 19 sandwich: Pastrami, coleslaw and Swiss cheese on rye with thousand island dressing (\$11.04 with tax). If you're in a hurry, take advantage of the curbside service that Norm Langer invented. Call ahead with your order, the kind of car you drive and what time you'll arrive. The pastrami comes right out to you.

704 S. Alvarado St., (213) 483-8050. Mon.-Sat. 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Parking lot one block east at Seventh and Westlake.

### **The Downtown Standard Restaurant and Lounge**

Though it opened in May 2002, this young entry is too fun to omit. Visitors must pass through the lobby of the Standard Hotel, which is swanky beyond compare. The restaurant is quirky fun: bright lemon yellow tiles, loud wallpaper and pinpoint lighting that emits a flattering glow. Groovy jazz aids digestion.

On weekdays, advertising and financial industry execs drop in for lunch. The restaurant is open 24 hours, so hotel guests can take a break from their reveling at the rooftop bar and refuel. I was waited on by two cute, attentive guys with rock star haircuts, but I have a sneaking suspicion they would have lost interest if someone more fabulous came along. Ah, the Standard.

The diner offers American fare that's slightly more glamorous than its old-school counterparts. Favorites are the buckwheat pancakes for breakfast (\$7) and chopped salad with apples, blue cheese, avocado, corn, tomato and bacon for lunch (\$9).

550 S. Flower St., (213) 892-8080. Open daily, 24 hours. Valet parking available.

### **page 14, 3/29/04**

© Los Angeles Downtown News. *Reprinting items retrieved from the archives are for personal use only. They may not be reproduced or retransmitted without permission of the Los Angeles Downtown News. If you would like to re-distribute anything from the Los Angeles Downtown News Archives, please call our permissions department at (213) 481-1448.*