

Los Angeles
RESTAURANTS

Text Katherine Turman

**Lucques**

8474 Melrose Ave.; 323.655.6277

"Trendy" by no means equals "good" in food or service. Fortunately, in the case of Lucques (named after an olive, not a person, though it's pronounced Luke's), hip and trendy DOES equal fine food and service, plus a none-too-shabby-clientele.

Owned by Caroline Styne and chef Suzanne Goin—the former chef of Campanile—the space is next to the equally tony and popular Ago on Melrose, and getting into Lucques is allegedly difficult. A phone-machine message left on a Tuesday for a reservation that evening was returned promptly. I asked for 8 or 8:30. They offered 7:15. Not possible from my end. The accommodating hostess said "let me move some things around" and we were graciously granted an 8:15 seating.

Dark, airy, and comfortable, the restaurant, which apparently was once silent screen comedic actor Harold Lloyd's carriage house, is highlighted by a large, central fireplace, plus an outside patio and a reasonably sized bar on one side of the room. It has the cozy but not overstuffed atmosphere of a mountain lodge.

The comfy ambiance was matched by the cuisine and service. My companion pronounced the menu "American comfort food with a French touch," and indeed, the small-ish but varied menu bore his observation out. A classic Caesar was surprisingly sharp in flavor with freshly baked croutons, while the retro salad with Green Goddess dressing was simple and fun. For familiar main courses, the veal chop proved tasty, with the sauce not overwhelming the nicely charred meat. It was paired with homestyle carrots and potatoes. The chicken was simple and exceptionally tender and tasty. For bolder palates, there's grilled quail with dates and a Mediterranean-influenced leg of lamb cooked with eggplant, currants, and pine nuts.

The wine list is a bit pricey with some adventurous entries. Our waitress was particularly personable and helpful when it came to food and wine choices and pairings. For dessert, there's a cheese plate, but why bother when you can have a mug of Valrhona hot chocolate with cookies to dip into it, or the decadent chocolate tart? After-dinner drinks completed the picture—and our nice server brought an expensive glass of port at a discount, a rare good-will gesture. Our meal was a major splurge—two bottles of wine, appetizers, main course, dessert AND

after-dinner drinks—and the price, at quite a bit over \$200, reflected that indulgence. It was worth it, though, and of course, it's not necessary to break the bank for a wonderful culinary experience. While currently "hot," Lucques' unpretentious, unaccommodating service and food will ensure the restaurant's longevity.

Steak Joynt

4354 Lan kershim Bl.; 818.761.9899

Despite the quaint spelling of the Steak Joynt's name, this down-home neighborhood, er, "joint," is not as clever as the moniker tries to indicate. While it's a bit brightly lit and lacking in serious ambiance, the restaurant proved a pleasant, if mostly uninspiring experience in the food department. A basic menu, featuring "only Eastern USDA choice beef aged 21 days" was rounded out with two chicken dishes, a salmon offering, plus porkribs and a pork tenderloin. At \$16.95, the allegedly "boneless marbled and succulent" ribeye was a bit

too marbled, while the parmesan chicken was a tad dry and featured a Shake 'n' Bake-style breading. Delicious, however, was the "famous" sautéed mushroom appetizer, served with garlic-cheese toast. A full bar and the usual spate of salads round out the Steak Joynt experience. Though it rates about a C+, or maybe a B-minus on nearly every level (though the service was fine), the Steak Joynt is worthwhile if you're in the neighborhood and want a low-key steak dinner after 10 p.m. Plus, there are some entertaining and hardcore neighborhood drinkers at the adjacent bar at all times.

Rebecca's

101 Broadway; 310.260.1100

Rebecca's is the third restaurant to occupy this prime, ocean-view locale in the last couple years. For some reason, a branch of the Beverly Boulevard success story Red flopped, as did a subsequent Mexican restaurant. Now, however, Rebecca's, moved



north from its longtime location in Venice, is giving this airy Santa Monica location a shot. Long known for Mexican-California cuisine and potent, delicious margaritas, Rebecca's is upholding that tradition with varying degrees of success. On a Sunday afternoon, folks lounge on the streetside patio or sit at the large, semicircular bar with a beverage or two (skip the sangria), and perhaps a tasty vegetarian tamale appetizer.

Service is fair—on one trip no maitre'd appeared and a bus boy seated us, while on two recent visits, the food was delivered barely more than lukewarm, which matched the service. One item chosen from the menu was out, although the replacement shrimp enchilada proved delicious, the mahi mahi fresh and succulent. The prices are average, the food slightly above, the decor a bit Cali-dated, so if you're wandering around this prime Santa Monica walking area, the best bet is a margarita and appetizer at the bar before moving on to more serious eating elsewhere.