



The Best of Eat + Drink 2008

Absinthe lollipops, malted milkshakes, celery cocktails, crab noodles and piping-hot soup dumplings. You've got a full plate in SF. Prepare to indulge.

by [Sara Deseran](#)

posted May 14, 2008 5:03PM

Best Carnitas Taco

Naming a source for what we consider to be the best *carnitas* in the Mission could be considered fighting words. But hear us out—at both branches of **Taqueria Guadalajara**, the pork is fried so crisp, it's almost bacon-like. Then it's piled high and, if you ask for a super taco, crowned with *crema* and big slices of avocado. Punch it up with selections from the salsa bar, but beware the incendiary cantaloupe-colored habanero version—they aren't joking around. *3146 24th St., 415-642-4892; 4798 Mission St., 415-469-5480*

Best Shortbread

We're not saying **Arizmendi Bakery's** shortbread (plain and ginger are available every day, along with a "wild card" flavor like hazelnut) is the only reason to fight for Inner Sunset parking and brave the line at this worker-owned cooperative bakery—but it's a really good one. The rich cookies are made of only four ingredients (plus any flavoring): good butter, sugar, a touch of salt and just enough flour to hold everything together. *1331 Ninth Ave., 415-566-3117*

Best Absinthe Four-Way



Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

Ever since the 100-year US ban was lifted and Alameda-based St. George Spirits launched Verte—its legally made absinthe—in December, we've been rethinking what "green living" really means. Hayes Valley has turned out to be ground zero for absinthe everything: Get the liqueur in a refined chocolate truffle at **Christopher Elbow** (*401 Hayes St., 415-355-1105*), have it in a licoricey lollipop at **Miette Confiserie** (*449 Octavia Blvd., 415-626-6221*) or in one of our favorite cocktails, the absinthe daiquiri at **Jardinière** (*300 Grove St., 415-861-5555*). Then, of course, there's absinthe to be had straight at **Absinthe** the restaurant

(398 Hayes St., 415-551-1590).

Best Way to Bring the Boys to the Yard

Whiz Burger, the sweetly retro (or past-prime, depending on your level of nostalgia for Americana) "drive-in" burger joint on South Van Ness, has been around for 52 years—pretty much a lifetime in the mercurial world of Mission District real estate. We bet the Taylor's Automatic Refresher people are eyeing that space (we would, if we were them), but for now it remains resolutely ungentrified and *the* spot to get an old-fashioned chocolate malted (\$2.75) so thick, you become almost breathless trying to suck it through the straw. *700 South Van Ness Ave. 415-824-5888*

Best Unconventional Happy Hour

Coffee Bar is a kind of urban oasis, located in Media Gulch, a half dozen blocks from where you might expect to find a cool place to spend the hours between punching out and going out. Good coffee, yes—but from 5 p.m. on, the sunny patio becomes a hangout for creative self-employed types, with good food (including cheese and meat plates, baked long-stemmed artichokes with aioli and anchovies with blood orange and fennel), wine, beer and a relaxed vibe you're not likely to find at a FiDi bar. *1890 Bryant St., 415-551-8100*

Most Refreshing Reason to Put Your Name on a Waiting List

There are a lot of reasons to love SPQR, the Roman *osteria* opened by the A16 team that famously has hour-plus waits, but paramount among them is the **almond granita with espresso cream**. Pastry chef Jane Tseng freezes the base (almonds, sugar, anise seed, bitter almond) in ice-cube trays, then runs the cubes through the grater attachment of a food processor, resulting in light, snowy almond fluff that she tops with a cloud of barely sweetened, espresso-infused whipped cream. *1911 Fillmore St., 415-771-7779*

Best Reason to Drink Your Veggies

Keeping up with the latest libation can be a full-time job in this town, where bartenders are so beloved that we've even revived a special name for them—*mixologists*. Jackie Patterson is one of the best of the bunch, and for the time being she's calling the bar at Orson home. That's where you'll find one of her latest creations, the **celery gimlet**—an inspired mix of Martin Miller's gin, celery and lime agave. Refreshing, pleasantly vegetal and not too sweet, this cocktail is edgy enough to match Orson's avant-garde menu. *508 Fourth St., 415-777-1508*



Photo Credits: Frankie Frankeny

Most Noble Idea

Although his plan is just in the seedling stage, Trevor Paque (who has a permaculture background), along with five others, came up with the idea of offering the service of planting urban vegetable gardens in the backyards of SF—plus maintaining and harvesting them, forming a sort of ultrasustainable **farm box of one's own**—tentatively called My Farm. For its first garden, in Cole Valley, the team planted heirloom lettuces, braising greens, cardoons, artichokes and snap peas, and swears that diversity is possible—all the way down to the fickle (fog-hating) tomato. For about \$50 a week, plus the initial costs for the plants, you'll have the fruits of your own *terroir*. Now you just need to build your chicken coop. *415-544-0800*

Best Meet-and-Greet

There are 24 hours in a day, and 24 beers in a case. Coincidence? What began as a Steven Wright joke is something like a reason to live for the members of the **San Francisco Brewer's Guild**. This group of suds aficionados holds monthly "meet-the-brewers" events around the city—such as June 17's get-together at the Wunder Brewing Company—to taste artisanal beers, tour breweries and learn about the ancient art of fermenting grain.

Best New Neighborhood Market



When Tia Harrison (co-owner and chef of Sociale), Melanie Eisemann and Angela Wilson decided to move into the 1901 Cicero's Meats space in Bernal Heights, they did it with panache. Now a cool little butcher and fishmonger carrying grass-fed beef and sustainable fish, **Avedano's** (named after Harrison's grandmother) also



offers a petite-but-elite selection of everything from raw milk to high-quality pastas, as well as a handful of excellent house-made sandwiches. But for the bevy of working parents in Bernal, it's the nightly takeout dinners that are lifesavers: For instance, \$10.50 gets you a huge serving of braised brisket and soft polenta—and a chance to take a deep breath. *235 Cortland Ave., 415-285-6328*

Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

Best Jam

The first bits of press the **We Love Jam** team received so swamped owners Eric Haeberli and Phinaes Hoang that they spent apricot season on Hoang's mother's farm down near Santa Clara operating on two hours of sleep a night and watching a waiting list grow into the thousands. Now that they've recovered (and expanded their offerings beyond apricot jam to include pickles, barbecue sauce and cookies), we don't feel guilty telling you that this apricot jam—sweet and tart, just chunky enough and full of fresh-fruit flavor—is so delicious that you might lose sleep over it too. Pre-order a few jars now.



Photo Credits: courtesy of We Love Jam

Best Way to Carbo-load



Photo Credits: Justin Lewis

Given that the **Fifth Floor** is now under the watchful eye of Gascon-born chef Laurent Manrique, it only makes sense that the bread cart—an actual wooden trolley that is wheeled up to your table—is exceptional. Stocked with loaves from Bay Bread, the selection includes the expected sourdough and *miche* (a *levain* made with a sourdough starter), but also two breads made according to traditional Gascon recipes. The red-wine bread is a deeply flavored loaf made with red wine in place of water; the anise challah is soft and sweet. Your selection will be accompanied by two butters—a traditional cow's milk and a tangy goat's milk. *12 Fourth St., 415-348-1555*

Best One-Stop Shop for High-End Hooch

If you're trying to stock the ultimate home-bar-with-a-pedigree, head to four-year-old **Blackwell's Wines and Spirits** in the Richmond. The selection of wine is excellent and there are some 150 hard-to-find beers (including many Belgians and East Coast imports), but owners Dita and Gary Blackwell also carry bartender-endorsed spirits and liqueurs, ranging from *crème de violette* to vintage Armagnac and Mumm de Cramant. *5620 Geary Blvd., 415-386-9463*

Best Reason to Join the Club

Don't be deceived by the no-frills, big-box interior of the **Wine Club**, a SoMa institution: With more than 1,500 wines ranging in price from \$5.99 to \$599, it offers everything you need to host your next bacchanalian soiree. The supply of French wine is particularly strong, with an extensive selection of Burgundies, Bordeaux and Rhones. The biggest secret? The honor-system wine bar, where you keep a tally of the wines you taste and then pay up before you leave. *953 Harrison St., 415-512-9086*

Best Sunday-Night Supper

If you want to know where all the sushi chefs in town eat on Sunday nights, it's **Sebo**. Once a week, owners Daniel Dunham and Michael Black push all the tables together for family-style dining and give up their way with raw fish to serve an excellent and inexpensive *izakaya* meal. The weekly-changing menu is minimalist, and the simple food is beautiful and fresh: chewy fried squid legs, bright-green mustard greens, simmered pork belly with a swathe of spicy mustard and a slightly spicy-sweet marinated and grilled cod collar that we might just nominate for most delicious dish ever. *517 Hayes St., 415-861-2122*

Best Place to Pretend You're in Paris

Francophiles, start your engines. Periodically, French-food importer **Village Imports** opens its Brisbane warehouse to the public, hosting three-day sales of Gallic goodies: Petit Suisse *fromage frais*, St. Marcellin and St. Nectaire cheese, three-kilo bars of Valrhona chocolate, *merguez* sausages and duck confit, all at competitive prices. It's a treasure trove of ingredients and snacks, perfect for those who haven't (yet) bought that pied-à-terre in Paris. To receive an email alert about the next sale, visit the company's website and click on "contact us."

Best Market News

Patrick's Mountain Grown Fresh Berry Farm, based in Camino, CA, and selling, since last year, at the Alemany Farmers Market, has convinced us that berries aren't just a Northwest thing. Select from an amazing assortment of tayberries, blackberries, olallieberries, red and gold raspberries and blueberries, get yourself some thick Straus cream and you've reached summer nirvana. Day-trippers take note: The Camino farm is also a pick-your-own operation. *Saturday mornings, 100 Alemany Blvd.*

Best British Import

If the mere mention of cola cubes, British toffee and Double Decker candy bars makes you hopelessly wistful (or just curious for a bite), you'll want to make a beeline to tiny **Fiona's Sweetshoppe**. Opened last November by Brit Fiona Frie—who worked in England as a doctor and always kept candy in her coat pocket—the Union Square shop carries an impressive selection of UK-made sweets, displayed floor to ceiling in glass jars. Samples are generously dispensed. *214 Sutter St. 415-399-9992*



Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

Best Reason to Eat Frozen Food



Made by hand and then frozen in packs of 22 and selling for about \$6, everything from the Sunset's **Kingdom of Dumplings** is excellent: from pot stickers and wontons to steamed buns and even soup dumplings (pictured), for the *xiao-long-bao*-obsessed. Our favorite filling is the pork with green chives, but the choices are endless. The store even has a website, with cooking instructions in both English and Chinese, touting the merits of this ancient comfort food. *1426 Noriega St., 415-665-6617*

Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

Best Midday Snack

Lunch and dinner are such clichés. Try eating between 2:30 and 5:30 at such restaurants as Perbacco and the Slanted Door, both of which keep their doors open between shifts for impromptu (and much less frenetic) limited-menu dining. But not that limited: At **Perbacco** (*230 California St., 415-955-0663*), have a bite of *vitello tonnato* (chilled veal with tuna sauce) or salt-cod fritters with green-garlic aioli; at the **Slanted Door** (*Ferry Building Marketplace, 415-861-8032*), order oysters on the half shell, green-papaya salad or lemongrass pork over rice noodles.

Best Bar Food

At this Tenderloin hot spot, the narrow bar has some of the best **(bar) pizzas** in town. Starting with the 222 (mozzarella, blue cheese, pears and basil) and ending with the NiNiNi (which means 222 in Japanese—mozzarella, roasted peppers, goat cheese and basil), the small pies are only \$5 each during happy hour (Tuesday through Saturday, 6–9 p.m.). They're made with organic ingredients from the Civic Center farmers market to boot. The dance floor allows for calorie burning. *222 Hyde St., 415-440-0222*

Best Mix-Master

The drinks are pricey at Michael Mina, but they're worth it if they're made by **Borys Saciuk**, the lead bartender. As four-star as they come, Saciuk is knowledgeable enough about wine to work the floor as a sommelier, yet savvy enough about his spirits to run the cocktail program. Plus he's smart and funny and has a great bar-side manner—or maybe this impression has something to do with the effect he has on us after a couple of Persuasions, his appropriately named concoction made with Hendricks gin, yellow Chartreuse and cherry Heering with soda—all served over ice. *335 Powell St., 415-397-9222*



Photo Credits: Stefanie Michedja

Best Clean Sweep

Hear us out: There's a way to have your pork belly and eat it too, if you're willing to take a break now and again. For that, we recommend Sausalito-based holistic chef and health consultant **Adina Niemerow**, who can whip you up a daily dose of fresh wheatgrass, green juices, mineral soups and electrolyte shakes that might not make you forget Little Star deep-dish, but will clear up your skin, sharpen your mental focus and provide a boost of long-running energy that may surprise you. **Niemerow's five-day cleanse** is available through Café Gratitude. You can now also create your own version with the help of her book *Super Cleanse* (HarperCollins), hot off the press on June 17.

Best Way to (Food) Geek Out

You've read Michael Pollan, you've read Mark Kurlansky, you have every issue of *Gastronomica* by your bed. The **Culinary Historians of Northern California** are one step ahead. Since 2005, this group of academics, food writers and general all-around foodies has been reading together, attending food events and hosting local food writers (farmer Andrew Griffin) and historians (Andrew F. Smith, author of the *Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*). The monthly meetings are free and open to the public and are usually followed by an informal meal, of course.

Best Brunch

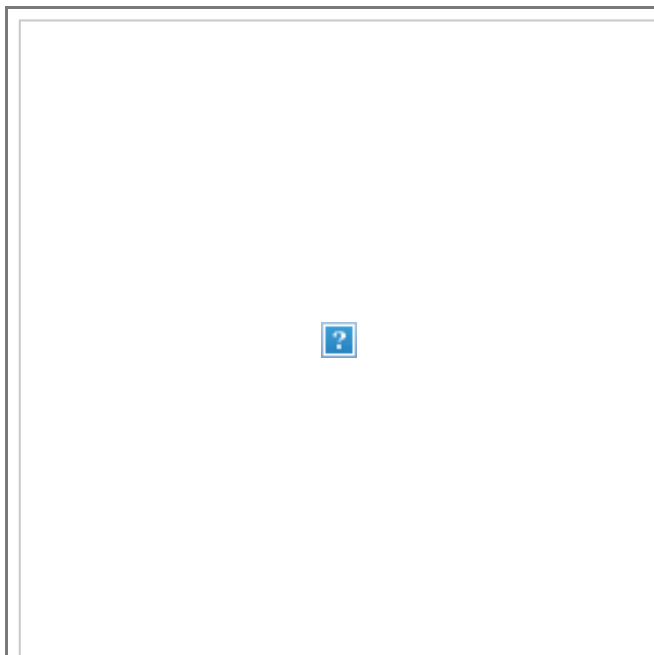


Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

You can thank us next Saturday when you're sitting at **Mission Beach Café**, tucking into one of the most civilized ways to start your morning in the city. Rarely is there a long wait (well, maybe there will be soon) and the menu is thoughtful. We adore the fried-egg sandwich on an aioli-slathered house-made sesame English muffin and the soufflé pancakes with blueberry cream and real maple syrup. Even the burger (grass-fed Prather Ranch beef with caramelized onions and cheddar cheese) is a fine way to begin the day. And the house-baked pastries and Blue Bottle coffee? Just icing on the cake. 198 Guerrero St. 415-861-0198

Home Fries

If last year was the year of the cocktail, this year it's all about bar food, and cooks all over town are developing long-term relationships with their deep fryers. Good news: the fry-o-lator's gone global.



Chickpeas at Piqueo's

The best things in life, in this case, do come free —one dish of the complimentary fried chickpeas (mixed with Peruvian corn, *cotija* cheese, red onion and cilantro), and you're off to a good start. 830 Cortland Ave., 415-282-8812

Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

Chickpea Croquettes at Laiola

We know we're not alone when we say that these Lincoln Log–like but delicately fried batons (\$7), served with black-olive aioli, are addictive. Pair them with a glass of sherry for the ultimate Spanish moment. *2031 Chestnut St., 415-346-5641*

Photo Credits: Bret Putnam



“Little Fried Fish” at Nopa

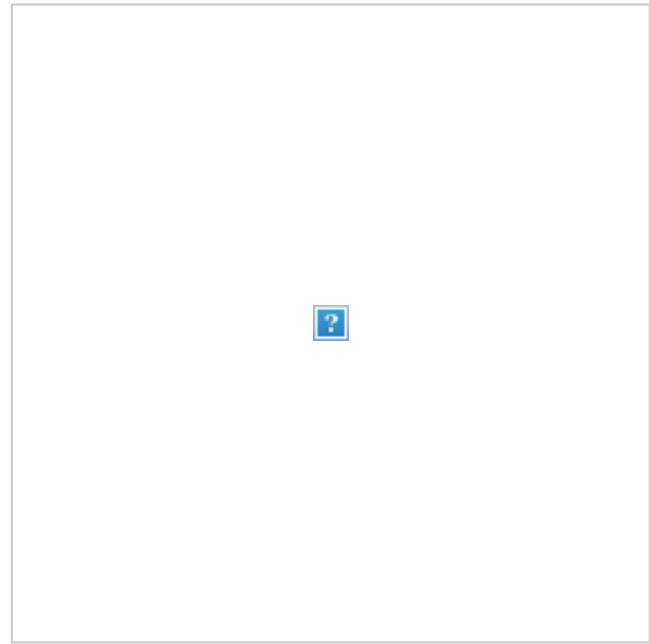
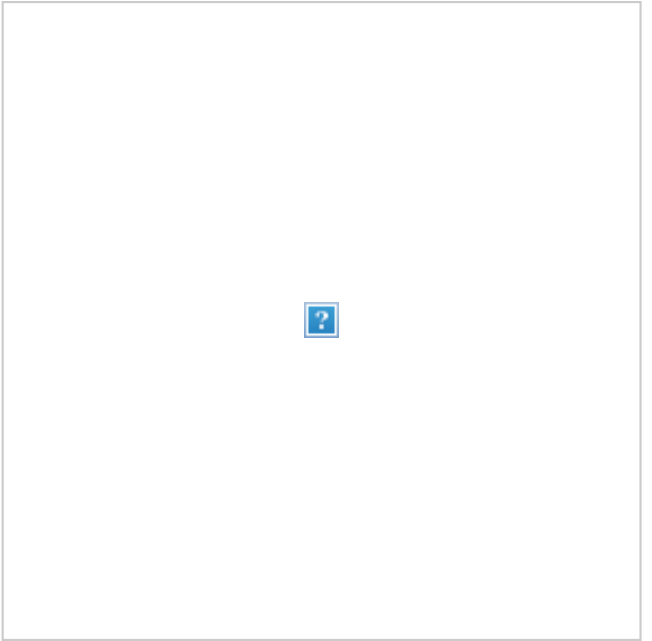
The whole fried fish (\$10) at Nopa, smelts or anchovies served with garlicky romesco sauce, may replace the restaurant's french fries as the city's midnight snack of choice. It's definitely ours. *560 Divisadero St., 415-864-8643*

Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda

Arancini at Ducca

Super-crunchy on the outside, with a molten, creamy Parmesan-and-*sottocenere*-cheese center and a showering of fried sage, the risotto balls (\$7) here set the standard. One order will not be enough. Trust us. *50 Third St., 415-977-0271*

Photo Credits: courtesy of Ducca



Spiced Chicken Wings at O Izakaya

The wings (\$9) here are tossed with rice flour and fried until crisp, then set on a sauce made from Marshall Farms honey, serrano chiles, cilantro and lime juice. Cold sake is the obvious chaser. *1625 Post St., 415-614-5431*

Photo Credits: Stefanie Michejda