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The Best of the East Bay 2017

San Francisco magazine | Photo: Courtesy of Retailers | July 7, 2017

From breakfast pop-ups to underground dance parties: East Bay gems hidden in plain sight.



SLIDESHOW

Duchess.

Photo: Courtesy of Duchess

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EAT

Breakfast Sandwich: Cracked

4901 Telegraph Ave. (at 49th St., inside Blackwater Station), Oakland, 510-520-4265

As tempting as it is to throw in the kitchen sink, breakfast sandwiches are best when distilled to their simplest form. At this Temescal pop-up, each sandwich (\$7) has no more than five ingredients, threading the needle between savory and sweet—say, bacon, mashed avocado, tomato jam, and a runny-yolked egg on sweet Filipino pan de sal bread.

Runner-up: the Gastropig, Oakland

Pizza: Bluebird Pizzeria

496 E. 14th St. (at Euclid Ave.), San Leandro, 510-562-1199

The East Bay has no shortage of pizzerias that claim to offer a real-deal East Coast slice, but only one that fully delivers on that promise. Bluebird has all the outward trappings: the Bruce Springsteen paraphernalia, the cozy booths, the low-key vibe. But the main thing is the pizza itself, with its crisp-bottomed but foldable crust, upward-curved pepperoni slices, tangy-sweet tomato sauce, and glorious slick of grease.

Runner-up: Nick's Pizza, Oakland

Pasta: Belotti Ristorante e Bottega

5403 College Ave. (at Hudson St.), Oakland, 510-788-7890

Michele Belotti's restaurant is steeped in the flavors of his home province of Bergamo, in northern Italy, which is known for its casoncelli (\$15.75)—a kind of meat-stuffed ravioli that's tossed with sage and brown butter. Belotti's ultra-savory version alone is worth the trip to Rockridge. But really, so is any dish featuring the chef's pasta dough, which is rich, toothsome, and wonderfully delicate, and which he makes fresh each day with more egg yolks than you could dare imagine.

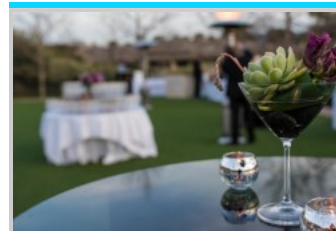
Runner-up: Oliveto, Oakland

Sandwiches: Pal's Take Away

478 25th St. (near Telegraph Ave., inside Forage Kitchen), Oakland, 415-203-4911

Jeff Mason's sandwiches were a fixture in the Mission until he moved Pal's to Uptown Oakland, where the lunchtime pop-up has taken up residence at Forage Kitchen's onsite café. But there's almost no distance that fans wouldn't travel to satisfy their cravings for Mason's bread-encased creations. Between the chef's

Scene In...

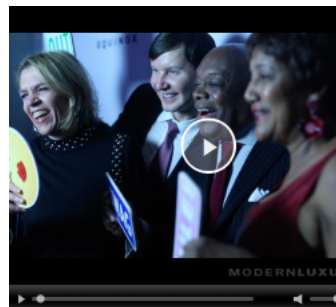


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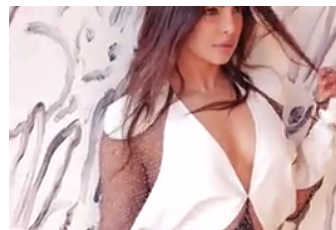
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Now Playing



(san-francisco/videos/power-party)



idiosyncratic ingredients (Lao sausages, sprouting broccoli, corn chips) and his tinkerer's knack for assembling them in just the right way, you won't find sandwiches like these anywhere else.
 Runner-up: Stay Gold Deli, Oakland

Hot Pot: Tastee Steam Kitchen

329 11th St. (near Webster St.), Oakland, 510-628-0888

OK, so Tastee should technically be categorized as "steam pot" rather than hot pot, since everything—from assorted dumplings to whole fish and live spot prawns—is cooked to order at the table in a custom-designed steam chamber. But the overall effect is similar to the very best hot pot experience, with everyone reaching their chopsticks in to share the communal meal. The crowning touch: a rice congee (\$11 to \$20) that has soaked up the flavors of the meats and vegetables you've been cooking over the course of the meal.

Runner-up: Tasty Pot, Berkeley

Thai: Larb Thai Food & Tapas

10166 San Pablo Ave. (near Central Ave.), El Cerrito, 510-524-8988

This little strip mall spot specializes in the food of Thailand's Isan region, which means its strength is its Lao dishes—including some half dozen versions of the eponymous lime- and fish-sauce-spiked meat salad. What distinguishes the restaurant is that it doesn't hold back on the cuisine's characteristic funk and spice: Boat noodles (\$9) come loaded with offal in a blood-thickened broth. Papaya salad (\$7), requested "Thai spicy," might be hot enough to make you cry. For those who've acquired a taste for the real deal, this is heaven.

Runner-up: Chai Thai Noodles, Oakland

Cocktails: Duchess

5422 College Ave. (near Kales Ave.), Oakland, 510-871-3463

When Caroline Conner and Chris Strieter opened Duchess, they were hoping to re-create the feel of a neighborhood watering hole—except for the cocktails, which are far more sophisticated than the boiler-makers and Buds you'll find at your local. Try the Bastogne (\$12), a honey-colored full-body massage of a cocktail made with earthy rye and a battery of nutty, obscure Italian liqueurs, or the bright, refreshing Rocinante (\$12): summer in a glass, no sticky floor required.

Runner-up: Revival Bar + Kitchen, Berkeley

Bar Food: Good Time Fixins

3758 Piedmont Ave. (at W. MacArthur Blvd., inside the Lodge), Oakland, 510-707-1556

These days so much of the elevated bar food genre consists of things like charcuterie potted in mason jars and full-on \$30 entrées. Cheers to the folks behind this permanent pop-up for dishing out bar food that, well, actually looks like bar food—and tastes damn good. At Good Time Fixins, you can feast on rice bowls and burritos stuffed with tater tots (\$12). And the house burger—a McDonald's-inspired number with fast-food-style "special sauce"—is better than any \$7 burger has any business being.

Runner-up: Blind Tiger, Oakland

SHOP

Wine Shop: Bay Grape

376 Grand Ave. (near Ellita Ave.), Oakland, 510-686-3615

You know the kind of buttoned-down wine shop where novices are made to feel bad for not knowing the difference between a malbec and a merlot, and where upselling and condescension are de rigueur? This is the opposite of that. Not only is Bay Grape's sweet spot the affordable \$20-to-\$40 price range, but the shop's down-to-earth staff have a knack for picking exactly the right wine to fit the occasion, food pairing, and budget.

Runner-up: Ordinaire, Oakland

Bookstore: E.M. Wolfman

410 13th St. (at Broadway), Oakland, 415-250-5527

E.M. Wolfman is one of those bookstores that feel like an old friend whose recommendations you know you'll love. Here you'll find the smartest national bestsellers and the most daring local zines and self-published chapbooks. And the shop's packed calendar of marathon readings, film screenings, and book-release brunch parties makes it as important a cultural incubator as a bookstore.

Runner-up: Moe's Books, Berkeley

Record Store: 1-2-3-4 Go! Records

420 40th St. (near Webster St.), No. 5, Oakland, 510-985-0325

At first blush, 1-2-3-4 Go!—also HQ to a punk label and an all-ages venue (Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong dropped in to play a Ghost Ship benefit)—might seem a niche enterprise. But while the punk selection is indeed a strength, the shop is also home to four bulging new-arrival bins that cover every genre; a plenitude of cheap records, tapes, and books; and, after nearly a decade in business, the kind of laid-back vibe that comes to those who've earned it.

Runner-up: Vamp Vintage's Not Another Record Swap, Oakland

Vintage: Clothing Down at Lulu's

6603 Telegraph Ave. (at 66th St.), Oakland, 510-601-0964

Down at Lulu's is a retro hair salon that doubles as a finely curated walk-in closet. Other vintage clothing stores require hours of sifting through racks. Here, all of the garments are stylish, in good condition, and still reasonably priced. What sets Lulu's apart, though, is the possibility of getting a glam-rock updo—remember, there's a salon onsite—and a matching John Waters-inspired ensemble all in one place.

Runner-up: Mars Mercantile, Berkeley

Sex Shop: Feelmore Adult Gallery

1703 Telegraph Ave. (at 17th St.), Oakland, 510-891-0199

The Bay Area long ago dispensed with the notion that all sex shops are seedy places filled with frosted windows and self-loathing. Even so, visitors to this "adult gallery" may be surprised at how much it resembles an arty boutique bookstore, with its ornate chandeliers, vintage Playboys, and vibrators arranged on sleek display shelves as if they're in a museum. More important, owner Nenna Joiner has created a



(san-francisco.com/digital-edition)

place where “sex positive” is more than just a catchphrase—where gay and trans erotica have pride of place, and where even the most prudish among us can walk in and feel comfortable asking the questions we want to ask.

Runner-up: Good Vibrations, multiple locations

PLAY

Family Outing: Roberts Regional Recreation Area

10570 Skyline Blvd. (near Joaquin Miller Rd.), Oakland, 888-327-2757

Here’s a park that offers something for everyone. Start with a grove of soaring redwoods intimate enough to be a popular outdoor wedding destination and expansive enough to keep day hikers coming back. Tucked in among these giants is one of the East Bay’s best playgrounds—a sprawling, wheelchair-accessible, Chutes and Ladders–esque structure propped up on stilts. If that isn’t enough to keep the kids occupied, try the 75-foot heated swimming pool.

Runner-up: Tilden Park Steam Train, Berkeley

Date Night: Victory Point Café

1797 Shattuck Ave. (near Francisco St.), Berkeley, 510-982-6325

Why settle for dinner and a movie when you could impress that Tinder score by destroying him or her at Settlers of Catan? At Victory Point, \$5 gets you unlimited access to a vast collection of board games—including classic and “heavy strategy” games and five different versions of Trivial Pursuit. The snack-bowl-heavy menu is tasty enough to sustain you through a six-hour Risk marathon, and the beer list is long enough to make you a relatively pleasant opponent.

Runner-up: Berkeley Ironworks, Berkeley

Beer Garden: Arthur Mac’s Tap & Snack

4006 Martin Luther King Jr. Way (at 40th St.), Oakland, 510-823-2509

Oakland’s newest trendy beer garden hits all of the genre’s prerequisites, then blows right past them. Arthur Mac’s doesn’t just have food—it has arugula-and-goat-cheese pizza created by a chef with a fine-dining pedigree. It doesn’t just have beer—it has a rotating list of more than 15 local craft brews. It doesn’t have a piddly square of outdoor space—it has a massive, sunny yard with room for 10 picnic tables and six booths (!). And it doesn’t just tolerate kids. It has a freakin’ sandbox.

Runner-up: Temescal Brewing, Oakland

Dance Party: Club Chai at Starline Social Club

2236 Martin Luther King Jr. Way (at W. Grand Ave.), Oakland, 510-593-2109

Club Chai is the near-monthly concoction of Oakland producers and DJs Foozool and 8ulentina, and it’s the perfect party for people who want to hear electronic music that’s actually interesting. The founders weave Armenian and Turkish folk music into high-energy dance sets, and guest DJs spin genre-mixing beats that don’t just rely on hip-hop or house. Another perk: Those who don’t practice respectful dance floor etiquette are simply asked to leave.

Runner-up: Witches on Wax, featuring B-Side Brujas, Oakland

Art Gallery: Thelma Harris Art Gallery

5940 College Ave. (at Harwood Ave.), Oakland, 510-654-0443

Thelma Harris has been dealing artwork since 1987, when she took out a \$5,000 loan and began collecting pieces from Africa. Since then, her gallery has become a treasure trove of contemporary black art with luscious color palettes, and iconic works of the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. In a recent show, an Elizabeth Catlett lithograph set the entire gallery in motion: five figures dancing with limbs in jazzy composition, dark skin glowing as if illuminated by moonlight. Pop in and experience history.

Runner-up: Vessel Gallery, Oakland

Kids’ Birthday: Museum of Children’s Arts

1625 Clay St. (at 17th St.), No. 100, Oakland, 510-465-8770

Less museum than interactive arts and crafts studio, this airy Downtown Oakland space hums with activity during drop-in sessions, when pint-size Picassos don aprons to do a stint of mask making or freestyle painting. The museum’s resident art teachers also throw amazing kids’ parties, with multiple stations that can be customized to account for Junior’s abiding love of pirates or Pokémon. Parents might appreciate the fact that hosts have the option of bringing along a cooler of beer.

Runner-up: High Scores Arcade, multiple locations

Group Activity: Diving Dog Brewhouse

1802 Telegraph Ave. (near 18th St.), Oakland, 510-306-1914

In many ways, Diving Dog is your typical nouveau beer bar, with its Edison bulbs and reclaimed wood. The bar’s singular feature is its brew-your-own-beer program (\$350/session), which is the ideal group activity for your next bachelor or bachelorette party, team-building exercise, or for-the-hell-of-it Sunday funday. Pick from over 20 recipes—from lagers and IPAs to more obscure styles—and a staff member will walk you through the brewing process. Return in a few weeks to bottle up your brew, affix custom-designed labels, and—the best part of all—taste the sweet fruits of your labor.

Runner-up: Dragon Gate Bar & Grille, Oakland

HELP

Cannabis Delivery: C.R.A.F.T Collective

bayareacraft.org (<http://bayareacraft.org>), 855-563-2738

C.R.A.F.T is a far cry from the way you bought weed in high school. Unlike many delivery operations, this women-owned collective places an emphasis on quality. Most of its flowers are Clean Green certified—meaning they’re farmed via sustainable practices—and all are potency tested, making for a smooth, surprise-free high. Delivery averages about an hour and is available just about everywhere within the greater East Bay.

Runner-up: Eaze