



DINING WORLD DYNAMO Bill Chait at Picca in West L.A.

The Taste of Success

Restaurateur Bill Chait has mastered the ingredients for chef-driven concepts. | By Joshua Lurie | Photography by Melissa Valladares |

They may be the rock stars of the restaurant world, but like any great musician, a chef's success is often largely due to the team backing him. And in the case of some of L.A.'s top new eateries, it's one key player who, time and again, is turning them into must-visit attractions. Bill Chait, 51, co-founder of the Spark Woodfire Grill and the driving force behind the expansion of Italian chain Louise's Trattoria, has recently upped his gastronomic game by helping several premier local restaurateurs fulfill their dreams.

As of late, the savvy businessman and food aficionado's name is attached to some of L.A.'s most successful restaurant openings. He backed chef John Sedlar as a managing partner on pan-Latin restos Rivera and Playa, co-founded last year's Test Kitchen mega pop-up (currently on hiatus), and later filled the same Beverlywood building with southern Italian restaurant Sotto, starring chefs Steve Samson and Zach Pollack. Upstairs, the Laurel Canyon resident teamed up with Mo-Chica chef/owner Ricardo Zarate and Stephane Bomber as a managing partner on Picca, a contemporary Peruvian cantina, which made its debut to rave reviews this summer.

A native Angeleno, Chait's entrepreneurial roots can be traced back to his days at UC Berkeley, when he produced music festivals and resold concert tickets, spending proceeds at Bay Area restaurants like the iconic Chez Panisse, which is when he "got indoctrinated into thinking about food," he says. By age 25, Chait owned his first restaurant, which became the original Louise's Trattoria in Brentwood Country Mart.

Throughout the '80s he continued to grow his restaurant empire, his hires including two of his current business partners: Nancy Silverton, who

rethought the pastries at his Angel City Grill, and Amy Pressman, who baked the bread at Louise's.

An important turning point came in 1991, when legendary restaurant publicist Joan Luther introduced Chait to Mauro Vincenti, the late owner of famed downtown L.A. Italian joint Rex il Ristorante. "Mauro became sort of my mentor in the restaurant business," says Chait, who credits Vincenti with introducing him to chefs such as Sedlar. "Bill understands all aspects of restaurant operations like no one else I've worked with," says Sedlar. "He also understands the emotional effect: how everything from the interior design to the menu to the music can have an impact on the guest's overall experience."

Though Chait found financial success with his chains, he believes his new wave of one-off concepts fits better with the times, as older diners scale back due to the economy, "replaced by a younger diner who's clearly got a lot of food knowledge and a definite opinion," he says.

These days, Chait and Pressman have teamed with Mozza maven Silverton on Short Order, which will bring deluxe hamburgers to the Farmers Market later this month, and, in the same complex, a bakery called Short Cake, which will feature pies, pastries and an artisanal coffee program. Next year, Chait and his Louise's cohorts will also transform their Los Feliz branch into Mess Hall, with Pressman consulting on a concept Chait describes as a convergence of new-school-style meat meccas Publican in Chicago and Brooklyn's Prime Meats. "You need somebody that doesn't want to squelch creativity and makes it work," says Pressman. "Bill's involved with so many different kinds of restaurants and people and he sees the beauty in all of it." **A**