

HELLA PROPER!

BY CATHERINE WARMERDAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCUS MEISLER

Nash & Proper in Elk Grove



RESTAURANTS

A CRAZY YEAR OF PANDEMIC DIDN'T STOP THESE NEWCOMERS FROM OPENING THEIR DOORS.

OPENING A NEW RESTAURANT is one of the most formidable tasks a chef or entrepreneur can set out to do. A multitude of elements—many of them out of one's control—must come together before the doors can even open: building out the kitchen, finding the right help, wading through permits, devising a menu, securing vendors and more. Even with the best planning, it can be a dicey endeavor. Leases end. Kitchens catch fire. And these days, everyone's a critic.

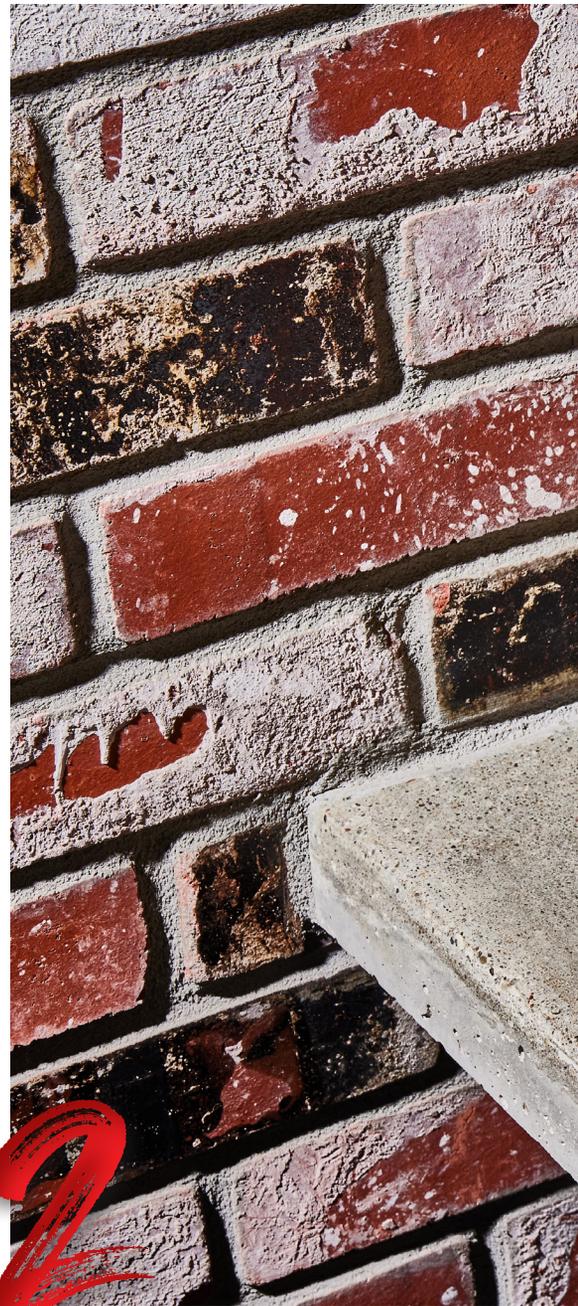
That's why it's even more incredible that dozens of new restaurants opened across Sacramento during the pandemic, when gathering indoors was forbidden for months, regulations changed on a dime and uncertainty gripped nearly everyone. But restaurateurs are a special breed: Their abiding dedication to hospitality drives them to supply the rest of us with a chance to escape, if even momentarily, and savor a delicious break from the worries of the world.

Here we introduce you to a sampling of notable new eateries in and around Sacramento—places that aim to delight diners with their creativity and inspire them with their optimism for better times ahead.

1 NASH & PROPER



It's safe to say that Nash & Proper founders Cecil Rhodes and Jake Bombard haven't sat still since they first rocked Sacramento's food scene with their food truck featuring Nashville-style hot chicken sandwiches back in 2018. Since then, they've opened a ghost kitchen in Northgate and two brick-and-mortar locations, one in downtown Sacramento—made possible when they won the Calling All Dreamers contest sponsored by the Downtown Sacramento Foundation—and the other in Elk Grove, a longtime aspiration of Rhodes'. "Every time the truck came to Elk Grove for an event, we always got love, so opening there was always on the top of my list," says the chef. In addition to the beloved sandwich, Nash & Proper's menu includes quarter and half birds, impressive sides, chicken and waffles (weekends only) and an over-the-top ice cream chicken sandwich made with ice cream from their K Street neighbor, Devil May Care, available only at the downtown location. 1023 K St.; (916) 426-6712; 9080 Laguna Main St., Elk Grove; (916) 897-8437; nashandproper.com



2

MIDTOWN SPIRITS

Bringing a distillery back to Sacramento's central city was a long time coming—there hadn't been one in the city limits since Prohibition until Jason Poole and Dave Abrahamsen opened Midtown Spirits last November. But the business partners went one step further by including a lively eatery on the premises of their new venture. The casual bar and restaura-



Brunch at Midtown Spirits: ube mochi pancakes and a bloody mary

rant boasts a covered street-side deck and an interior that gets its industrial aesthetic from the shiny labyrinth of distilling equipment on display. The food menu is designed to complement the ample cocktail list, which leans heavily on the rice-based vodka and gin that Midtown Spirits is known for. On offer are fancy deviled eggs, a charcuterie board and an assortment of hot dogs, sandwiches and fries dressed up with fixings both familiar and unusual. The hearty brunch fare is built to carry you through till dinner. Look for even more inventive dishes from the kitchen as Midtown Spirits settles in. 1717 19th St.; (916) 243-6991; midtown-spirits.com





Duck liver mousse with blackberries
at Restaurant Josephine



3 RESTAURANT JOSEPHINE

Husband-and-wife owners Courtney McDonald and Eric Alexander, who met as students at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, opened this darling Auburn restaurant after 13 years at the well-regarded Carpe Vino. Their French bistro-inspired menu also pays homage to Eastern European ingredients and techniques, a nod to Alexander's ethnic heritage. (The restaurant is named for his great-grandmother, who immigrated to the United States from Lithuania.) Think oysters and shellfish, caviar service with Eastern European chilled vodkas, and moules frites. An "iron chicken" dish is prepared on an oak-fired grill under heavy iron presses "to get the skin nice and crisp," says Alexander. Desserts lean toward simple ingredients used to delicious effect: chocolate mousse; multilayered Russian honey cake; tarte au citron made with Meyer lemons. The full bar serves vintage cocktails and imported wines from Georgia (the country, not the Southern state) and elsewhere. "Our vision was for a restaurant that had a sense of place," says McDonald. "We're trying to build something that is timeless, not trendy." 1226 Lincoln Way, Auburn; (530) 820-3523; josephineauburn.com

4 JUNOON FLAVORS OF INDIA

In spite of the pandemic, Roy Singh and his wife, Bobbie, were optimistic when they opened Junoon in July 2020. "I wasn't scared," Singh explains. "All I had was hope that it would do well." Since then, neighbors have turned into regulars at this East Sac restaurant, which features mostly North Indian dishes and a handful of specialties from other regions of India. "These are the dishes that I grew up eating," says Singh, who opened Junoon after operating a coffee shop in Davis. Many of the dishes are based upon family recipes, and all of them are cooked in small batches so that everything is made fresh. One of the most popular menu items is Jaipuria lamb masala, a rich, hearty tomato curry dotted with minced lamb. Junoon also offers a broad selection of vegetarian dishes starring Indian staples like lentils, potatoes, cauliflower and paneer. 3672 J St.; (916) 942-9796; junoonflavorsfindia.com

5 MAJKA PIZZERIA & BAKERY

The couple behind this inspired midtown pizzeria, Alex Sherry and Chutharat Sae Tong, prove that you don't need a long, elaborate menu to attract legions of fans. You just need to execute a few things very well, and Majka does that. The simple opening menu—one weekly pizza, a side salad, a few breads, a cheese box and a handful of enticing beverages—shows off local organic produce and the gift that is naturally leavened pizza dough. "Our pizzas are always vegetarian, and we do toppings in different combinations that people might not have seen before," explains Sherry. Think asparagus with arugula-walnut pesto. Or roasted fingerling potatoes with aged cheddar and crème fraîche. The chocolate chunk miso cookies, baked with whole grains and house-made miso, reveal that there is still room for sublime reinvention with this classic American treat. Expect to see Majka's offerings grow in the coming months, including the addition of house-made organic ice cream. 1704 15th St.; (916) 572-9316; majkabakes.com

Sweet Spots

For the days when a little pick-me-up or perhaps a well-deserved indulgence is in order, these new places are primed to provide sweet satisfaction.



The adorable **GINGER ELIZABETH PATISSERIE** is a slice of pure heaven on J Street. In fact, chocolatier Ginger Elizabeth Hahn's expansion into pastries might be one of the best things to happen to Sacramento of late. Like everything Hahn does, the goodies here are executed to buttery perfection, from the double lemon cream puffs to the chocolate raspberry croissants. 2413 J St.; (916) 706-1738; gingerelizabeth.com



Danny and Olga Turner, the gluten-free pioneers behind Pushkin's Bakery and Sibling restaurant, are at it again with **BABES ICE CREAM & DONUTS**. It takes great care and creativity to make confections that are both vegan and gluten free, but this duo is up to the task, using a coconut base for their ice creams and a proprietary mix of flours for their doughnuts. 2417 J St.; (916) 476-4519; babesicecreamdonuts.com



Glancing at their impressive menu, you'd never guess that Aaron Coffey and Thana Ny were newbies to making doughnuts when they opened **DONUTS & COFFEY** in East Sacramento in spring 2020. Thanks to a more-is-more philosophy when it comes to toppings and fillings, the shop has won a loyal customer following. You've been warned: The tiramisu doughnut sells out early. 5611 Folsom Blvd.; (916) 999-0232; donutscoffey.com



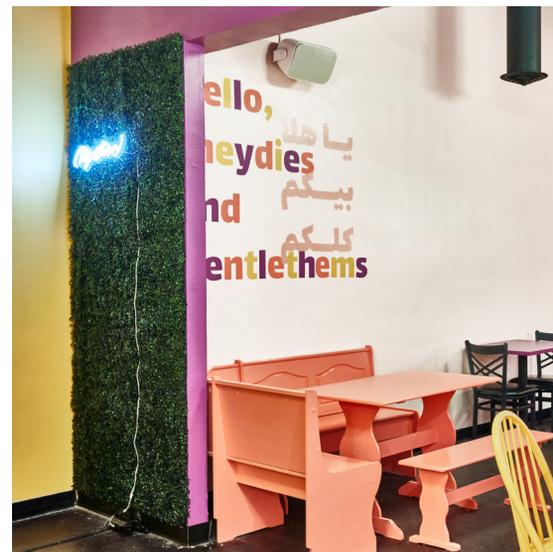
Sacramento was the clear winner when ice cream maverick Jess Milbourn opened an outpost of his **DEVIL MAY CARE ICE CREAM & FROZEN TREATS** in the heart of downtown. Milbourn's unorthodox flavors, such as an olive oil ice cream with goat cheese honey cheese-cake and a roasted apricot ribbon, are an indication that this chef is at the top of his frozen game. 710 K St.; (916) 594-9476; dmcicecream.com



Fans of **CONSCIOUS CREAMERY**'s gelato cheered when owners Andrea and Kevin Seppinni finally opened their flagship gelateria in Oak Park in April. Inspired by a vegan ice cream shop the couple visited in Austria, Andrea set out to perfect the art of making small-batch, dairy-free gelato. In addition to traditional scoops, the shop sells gelato sandwiches, tacos and bars. 3400 Broadway; (916) 407-1175; consciouscreamery.com



A schwaco and a hand pie at A Part Café



Desserts: Gabriel Teague



6

A PART CAFÉ

What happens when a Michigan-born career food professional meets a Saudi-born graphic designer in Brooklyn and the two relocate to Northern California to fulfill their dream of owning a restaurant? That's the story behind A Part Café, a relaxed but stylish Middle Eastern fusion eatery in downtown Roseville serving up culture-bending dishes born from the imaginations of owners Areej Khan and Michael Spencer. At the heart of A Part's menu are the schwacos: shwarma-spiced meats or vegetables wrapped in a pitatilla ("It's a take on a tortilla, but is slightly fluffy and not corn-dominant in flavor," explains Khan) and topped with goodies like pickled veggies, cumin yogurt sauce, cilantro and mint. Smoked whole chickens and savory hand pies with unique fillings like shakshuka and feta are also on offer. A Part's tahini chocolate chip cookies are a hit. "One of the things we are trying to do with our restaurant is to create a space that everybody would want to hang out in but that also celebrates the culture and the cuisine of the Middle East," Khan says. 217 Vernon St., Roseville; (916) 474-4154; apartofroseville.com



7 EASY DINER & BAR

Lizz Gibb and Chad Novick have parked the truck that was Bambi Vegan Tacos for the time being and have instead focused their attention on a neighborhood diner with an eclectic menu that offers a little something for everyone. “We cover all the big flavors from Central and North America,” says Novick. “We’re doing food from New Mexico, Mexico and the Caribbean as well as nostalgic American diner food.” That translates to dishes like a Cubano sandwich on a house-made potato roll; lamb barbacoa tacos; and a plant-based “garden chorizo” taco. “We wanted to focus on making things healthy and fresh and from scratch but also a bit indulgent,” Novick says. If you ever sampled the excellent food from Bambi’s, then you know this duo is capable of pulling it off. True to the vegetable-forward ethos of the owners and co-chef Gabriel Nokes, who met while working at now-shuttered Mother, the bar at Easy Diner features veggie-centric cocktails utilizing ingredients like juiced carrots, golden beets, ginger and mezcal. Who said you can’t drink your veggies? 1725 I St.; (916) 469-9574; facebook.com/Easy.Diner.Bar



8

MATTONE RISTORANTE

The first thing to know about Mattone is that it is not Biba or even Biba 2.0. Yes, several of the key personnel at this East Sacramento spot (which took over the space formerly occupied by another legendary Italian-style eatery, Español) are Biba alums, including owner June Chang. But Mattone is out to do its own thing, says general manager John Black. A true neighborhood joint, “this is the place for every occasion: watching the game, friends getting together, a romantic dinner,” says Black. House-made pastas share the menu with decadent appetizers, including crab salad with fennel mousse and caviar, and a short list of straightforward entrées featuring beef, chicken and fish. The wine list, which Black says will “stay small,” is heavy on California bottles, while the menu of classic cocktails will rotate on occasion. Mattone may be new, but it’s already comfortable in its own skin. “We’re a place that lacks trendiness; there are no fads here,” says Black. 5723 Folsom Blvd.; (916) 758-5557; mattonesac.com



Mattone's chicken under a brick



Fried chicken hummus at Joon Market



Joon Market

JOON MARKET

“Eclectic modern American” is how Saba Rahimian describes the food at the casual East Sacramento eatery she and Seth Helmlly opened in December 2020. The couple brings unique culinary backgrounds to the project: She is Iranian-American and “grew up with a lot of interesting flavors, lots of cardamom and fennel, not typically anything too sweet.” Helmlly hails from Texas and knows his way around a barbecue pit, but he also draws inspiration from his travels in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Inventive sandwiches on house-made bread were a fixture at Joon when it first opened, in part because they made for pandemic-friendly takeout fare. But looking ahead, expect to see the addition of “composed dishes that are plated beautifully, to show off the thoughtfulness of our staple items,” says Rahimian. Weekends are when Helmlly’s smoking skills shine, with an ever-changing lineup of rotisserie items. “Now that we’re allowed to have people dining in, we can show people what we’re capable of,” says Rahimian. 5401 H St.; (916) 389-0025; joon-market.com

MAYDOON

It’s a family affair at midtown’s Maydoon, a Persian restaurant opened in June 2020 by Idean Farid and his father, restaurant veteran Mohammad Farid, with help from an ensemble of siblings and in-laws. Maydoon serves traditional Persian fare with a modern sensibility. The dinner offerings (the restaurant is also open for lunch) include a dozen different types of kabobs as well as classic entrées like fesenjoon, a succulent chicken stew braised in walnut and pomegranate sauce and served atop saffron rice. The cocktails at Maydoon make the most of Persian and Mediterranean ingredients that you won’t typically find in drinks elsewhere on the grid, such as barberry and saffron. The Cucumber Cooler is a gin-fueled twist on a traditional Iranian drink called sekanjabin. “We took a big leap opening a Persian restaurant in midtown,” says Idean. “We’re grateful to have had a great reception from the community.” 1501 16th St.; (916) 382-4309; maydoonrestaurant.com 🍴