

California's Ten Food Experiences (not to be missed)

“California cuisine” utilizes fresh, locally grown or harvested ingredients and reflects the diverse mix of cultures that exist here. The Pacific Ocean provides the state with an abundance of seafood year-round, while California farms produce a cornucopia of fresh fruit, vegetables, cheeses and meat products – making California’s supermarkets and farmer’s markets the envy of the country. Combine these raw ingredients with the diversity of California’s people, and the result is an exiting and culturally rich menu. Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Mexican, Vietnamese, Thai, and other communities have all contributed to the evolution of the California palate. Overwhelmed by all the choices? Start with this list, and you’re on your way to some memorable meals.....

1. Tri Tip Steak

Sometimes called “the Santa Maria tri tip,” this cut of beef is virtually unheard of outside of California. But to Central Coast residents, tri tip has been a barbeque mainstay since the 1950’s, when a local butcher seasoned the triangular cut of beef usually designated for stew meat and tossed it onto the store’s grill. The result proved so delicious that rave reviews spread about this “bottom sirloin” and it became a local favourite.

2. Dungeness Crab

Whether steamed, cracked and drizzled with garlic butter, or piled atop a crab Louis salad, fresh Dungeness crab is a must-try delicacy from late fall through early spring. Found in the water of the northern Pacific, Dungeness crabs are known for their bright orange shell and sweet pink flesh. They weigh anywhere from one to four pounds and yield substantial amounts of meat.

3. Fish Tacos

Mexicans have relished fish tacos in their Baja hometowns for decades, so it was inevitable that the concept would eventually move north to “Alta” California. Typically, white fish is either grilled or battered and deep fried, wrapped in a pair of warm corn tortillas, then topped with shredded cabbage, fresh salsa, and a squeeze of lime. Variations on the classic recipe are found across the state.

4. Cioppino

Cioppino come from the Italian ciuppino, or fish stew. During the Gold Rush, Italian and Portuguese immigrants pulled in a bounty of seafood off the northern Pacific coast and created a dish that would become the pride of San Francisco. Dungeness crab, littleneck clams, mussels, shrimp, and white fish simmered with tomatoes, bell peppers, garlic, herbs, and a touch of wine may be the original “California Cuisine”.

5. Dim Sum

Cantonese for “heart’s delight”, dim sum encompasses an endless array of bit-sized morsels traditionally served with tea during brunch or lunch. Waiters push carts laden with bamboo baskets containing barbecued pork buns, spring rolls, and delicately molded wrappers filled with combinations of ginger, scallions, vegetables, meat, and seafood. Diners simply point to what looks good and eat a la carte. At the end of the meal in some

restaurants, the waiter determines the price by adding up the number of empty plates on the table.

6. Olive Oil

The Franciscan missionaries responsible for planting the first grape vines in California 200 years ago also planted olive trees, giving rise to new industries. Then, in the late 1800's, less-expensive vegetable oils overtook the precious olive. In the last decade, however, California olive oil has experienced a renaissance. Boutique producers draw glistening gold and cool green oils from prized manzanillo, sevillano, mission, Picholine, and frantoio olives, which are grown throughout the state.

7. Sourdough Bread

Sourdough bread has been a symbol of San Francisco ever since Isadore Boudin opened his North Beach bakery in 1849. The bread's tangy taste comes from a special yeast starter, though some claim that San Francisco's air gives the yeast a characteristic flavor that cannot be exported. But sourdough bakers across the state would disagree.

8. Date Shake

The arrival of the first date palm from the Middle East in the 1890's spurred large-scale date farming in California. Today, medjool, deglet oor, halawy, khadrawy, and zahidi dates thrive in California's arid inland desert. Each February, the city of Indio hosts a Date Festival to celebrate the booming date industry. One of the festival's attractions is the date shake, a combination of ice cream or frozen yogurt, milk, and chopped dated, whipped into a foamy delight. You can find date shakes year-round in desert towns like Palm Springs.

9. Phở

Phở, is considered the national dish of Vietnam, is a noodle soup often eaten for breakfast in its native land but enjoyed for lunch and dinner at Vietnamese restaurants throughout California. The broth – flavoured with anise, cilantro, coriander, mint, and fish sauce – serves as a backdrop for a mixture of meats and vegetables. Bean sprouts, Thai basil, lemon, and hot peppered are offered as condiments to top the steaming phở.

10. Artichoke

Artichokes were first planted in Northern California in the 19th century by Italian immigrants, and today more than 10,000 acres of them grow in four Central Coast counties. You can find the thistle on the menus and in markets year-round, and in the spring they're hard to resist at roadside stands from Half Moon Bay to Castroville ("artichoke capital of the world"). Their presentation varies from cook to cook; try them fried, stuffed, and steamed, whole or just the hearts, in soups and salads.