

# AT LAST CAFÉ OFFERS DELICIOUS FARE AT A REASONABLE FARE

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## Master Class

When it comes to delicious fare at a reasonable fare, any restaurateur could take a lesson or two from John McLaughlin's At Last Café

• Russ Roca



The Batali of bargains at work

I'm not a restaurateur, but if I were, I'd want to pick John McLaughlin's brain. A man who has worn many hats (of the tall, white variety, that is), McLaughlin is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, a caterer to the Academy Awards, an executive chef at many prestigious Southland restaurants and a culinary instructor at UC Irvine. But it is in his latest position as owner/chef of At Last Café—the buzziest Long Beach restaurant right now—that he has become a local legend. McLaughlin levies roadside-diner prices for gourmet-quality food. Like a magic trick, At Last Café seems to operate on negative profit margins.

His most expensive offering: \$12.25 for a steak dinner complete with made-from-scratch smashed potatoes and freshly sautéed veggies. Everything else averages about \$10. And the value pricing isn't a knee-jerk response to our recession, nor is it part of some Restaurant Week deal. These are his regular fares, firmly set when he opened the place last year.

Understandably, the response has been overwhelming. First-time customers turn into instant devotees. The 18 or so seats are usually filled nightly. Those who didn't think to snag a reservation either wait it out on the street or order to-go. Whatever you do, budget about 30 minutes to find parking, which is frustratingly scarce and the inevitable topic of conversation for the first few minutes of your meal. The rest of the time, you'll talk about the food and how McLaughlin manages to charge a fraction of what other establishments of this caliber would.

The group sitting next to us was having the same discussion. At one point, after shoving massive spoonfuls of McLaughlin's apple crumble into his mouth, one diner said to the other, "So, are we going to put this on our menu?" His companion shushed him and looked around nervously to see if anyone heard the slip.

Lucky for them, I was too entranced by the wonder that is McLaughlin's Brick Chicken to care. Here, I thought, is the apotheosis of what At Last Café is all about: Take a simple dish, charge a fair value, do it better than anyone else. For his poultry masterpiece, McLaughlin meticulously debones a half-chicken, cooks it under the weight of a brick, and serves it with smashed potatoes, veggies and pan gravy made from the drippings. The result? A chicken dinner that is one of the best I've ever had: crispy, mahogany skin reminiscent of the best Armenian rotisserie hen and meat so juicy it bursts. The cost for this soon-to-be-famous bird: \$9.25. His meatloaf retails for the same price and comes in two, flavor-packed, thick-as-a-textbook slices—every bit as delicious as we said it was when we proclaimed it Best Meatloaf in our 2008 Best Of issue.

The flatiron steak I mentioned earlier is of steakhouse quality—covered in mushrooms and onions almost wilted down to syrup, tender even though it is sliced along the grain. McLaughlin's \$10.95 center-cut pork chop is formidably enormous, seared to a crusty brownness, split in the middle so it looks like Pac-Man with his mouth crammed full of sweet apple-herb stuffing. The creamy bowl of mac and three cheeses, sprinkled with crunchy, seasoned breadcrumbs, can feed two people for \$7.95. His French pot roast features three fist-sized boulders sitting atop fettuccine and a smattering of vegetables. Every tender, meaty strand you tear away is as good as mom's.

At Last Café also does burgers, sandwiches and salads. But wisely, McLaughlin only offers one appetizer a night. Since he's the only one cooking, he can't let himself get bogged down on more than that. But that doesn't mean he phones in the one he does. On our visit, it was a cardoon gratine, pleasantly bitter, celery-like stalks of artichoke broiled in a ramekin with a soupy cheese sauce.

On my way to the restroom, I saw him making the dish. The studio-apartment-sized restaurant is half-kitchen, so to use the lavatory meant having to go through the sacred space. I shimmied past McLaughlin as he was cooking my dish along with others on his tiny stove. He said hello and bowed as I tiptoed around him.

McLaughlin's success is not built on secrets—it was all right there for anyone to see: well-made food made affordable, at last.

*At Last Café at 204 Orange Ave., Long Beach, (562) 437-4837; [www.jmchefcatering.com](http://www.jmchefcatering.com). Open Tues.-Sat., 11:30 a.m.-8 p.m. Main dishes, \$6.75-\$12.25. Wine; no corkage fee.*