

# At Last Cafe chef dishes up gourmet, modern comfort food in Long Beach

By Merrill Shindler

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## At Last Cafe

Truly, I wish every neighborhood had a restaurant like the At Last Cafe. The name, a bit of a punch line, comes from a comment made by Chef John McLaughlin's mother, that John and his wife Ria were opening a restaurant of their own "at last."

Indeed, for a couple of decades, the craggy, intense chef had been one of the most famous cooks in town, who just didn't have a restaurant of his own. He was a private chef for the Fluor Corp. He was the chef at the upscale JW's in the Anaheim Marriott. His bio says he prepared hors d'oeuvres for the Academy Awards green room. And at last, he opened At Last. And Long Beach is a better place for it.

This is a modest restaurant. It's unassuming, unpretentious, just the type of place you could drop by several times a week — and I suspect many do. The prices are also rock bottom. Oversized sandwiches, served with a side of pasta salad or fresh fruit, run \$7.50 to \$9. Salads clock in at about \$6 more or less. Entrees go from \$7.75 to \$13.25, while there's a sizable blackboard of daily specials. Chef McLaughlin likes to cook what's in season and, apparently, what appeals to him at any given moment. By the end of the evening, the blackboard menu is almost totally erased, as dishes run out. This is not the sort of restaurant where the freezer is full of entrees that get tossed into the microwave (if there's a microwave at all).

If you go online and Google Food Network's "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" and "At Last Cafe," you'll find a [fascinating segment](#) from some years ago, in which the perpetually over-caffeinated Guy Fieri goes behind the scenes at the cafe, into a kitchen the size of a walk-in closet, where the chef does something rarely encountered these days: He makes everything from scratch. Every sauce, every sauté, every grill — it's amazing. This is where you can get the most labor-intensive food imaginable, and Chef McLaughlin is happy to do the labor required. The man must get up at four in the morning. Truly, his cafe is a labor of love.

And, you can taste it. This is the very essence of modern comfort food. Well, perhaps not so much modern as classic. His meatloaf has the light solidity and intensity of flavor that I'd expect from a meatloaf served by Julia Child or James Beard — an American classic, classically rendered. The French pot roast (I think it's French because it's braised in red wine) is a fine example of long-cooked meat, cooked until it's melting into its basic elements. The brick

chicken is just what it sounds like: chicken flattened and grilled under a brick, served with “smashed” potatoes.

But let’s go back a bit. I could live quite well on the appetizer of portobello mushrooms and polenta, two of my favorite ingredients, which I’d like even more if the polenta were soft instead of grilled; just a personal preference that probably goes back to when I was 2 years old and lived on soft foods.

Come lunchtime at the cafe, I head for the sandwiches and the salads, of which there are many.

The hamburger is another classic, not gimmicky as so many are these days. It’s just the sort of hamburger we all grew up eating — except better. The meat oozes juices. The burger tastes of beef, and honestly, it’s been awhile since I’ve been able to say that about a hamburger.

The BLT, with bacon that’s so crisp you can hear it crackle when you bite into it, reminds me of why I fell in love with BLTs in the first place.

There’s a French dip sandwich that holds up well against the original at Philippe’s in Downtown Los Angeles — and that’s saying a lot.

Speaking of classics, there’s a salad made with the house interpretation of Green Goddess dressing, a preparation that’s almost, but not quite, extinct. The most expensive salad is the Thai beef salad, which isn’t so much Thai as it is Thai-ish. The lime cilantro dressing is more subtle than you’d find in a Thai restaurant, where the dressings tend to be laid on with a hose.

For dessert, there’s bread pudding, warm apple crumble and cheesecake — as the menu says — “until we run out.” True to the cafe’s style, the cheesecake is made daily, not monthly and stored in the deep freeze. How good to find a restaurant that understands all that ... at last.

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