

# Small Bites, Small Sips



**We matched the creamy crab dip with X Bar's signature vodka drink, the Citrus Monkey. It's a mix of Absolut Ruby Red vodka, red grapefruit juice, Stirring's tangerine purée and lemon-lime soda. Note the colorful glassware!**

Whether it's the renovation of an entire area (downtown Los Angeles), the rejuvenation of a classic hotel or the opening of a fab new restaurant, California is not resting its reputation on sunshine, sushi bars and celebrities. THE TASTING PANEL pops into three West Coast haunts for some creative food and beverage pairing.

Chef Nick Shipp, of **Pete's CaFé** in downtown Los Angeles, shapes a roasted beet and goat cheese salad into mesmerizing form and color. We taste it with K'orus Merlot, a ripe, red-fruited wine from the South of France; its jellied plum palate works wonders with the cheese and the earthy beets.

**X Bar** at the renovated Hyatt Regency Century Plaza is a sleeked-out, contemporary lounge on L.A.'s West Side. Its indoor/outdoor ambience is reflected in granite floors, wicker furniture and a view across Century City. The fresh face of the room matches Chef Manny Lassahn's eclectic menu. "The menu was created for sharing," Lassahn tells THE TASTING PANEL. As a group, we dig in: a trio of burgers (Angus, garden and turkey); Bao bun with short rib, slow-cooked for 36 hours; one

pound of fiery chicken morsels (or as we put it, Buffalo wings sans Buffalo). Our favorite? A plate of chilled crab dip with generous slices of jumbo lump and fresh cut veggies.

San Francisco has always been a top-notch food town, and it's easy for locals to become complacent about the latest hot restaurant. But even the most jaded of the city's foodies were dazzled and amazed with the opening of Spruce. Located in a former car barn in tony Presidio Heights, the restaurant is at once a sexy and compelling design statement, a see-and-be-scene rendezvous spot (former mayor Willie Brown was waiting patiently for a table the night we visited)

and an up-and-coming bastion of American cuisine. Signature cocktails include a Whiskey Smash made with the house bourbon, specially bottled for Spruce by Old Rip Van Winkle distillery, and the sultry Lady Marmalade (brandy, Qi white tea liqueur, orange marmalade, lemon and orange), created by first-class barman Brandon Clements. Chef-partner Mark Sullivan's menu draws on fresh local ingredients, some of which are grown on the restaurant's farm in Woodside. Good news for off-hour nosherers: the bar remains open between lunch and dinner, serving liberal libations and some of San Francisco's most delectable bar food. ■■



**Bartender Brandon Clements prepares a Whiskey Smash using Spruce's house-bottled bourbon from Old Rip Van Winkle, matched with the signature burger.**