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Take me to the County

In Orange County, Shandelle Battersby swaps fast food for fresh, sophisticated cuisine

Chain restaurants and fast-food outlets line its main streets, but you don't have to eat junk food on a visit to Orange County. The home of Disneyland and Southern California's beautiful beach cities and quaint towns has loads to choose from when it comes to great tucker.

With a growing emphasis on farm-to-table cuisine and making the most of the influences of its melting-pot population, there's no reason to settle for crappy fast food. Here are some of the OC's top eateries.

1. THE RANCH RESTAURANT AND SALOON, ANAHEIM

If you like your fine dining with a little line dancing, this is the place for you. With a menu based on seasonal regional cuisine prepared from scratch with high-quality sources, The Ranch relies heavily on its own nearby working ranch and local growers. Five-star service and an extensive cellar complement a sophisticated dark interior and a busy open kitchen. After stuffing yourself on Colorado mountain lamb chops or sustainably caught fish, scoot next door to the Saloon for some country dancing. theranch.com

2. THE LOFT, LAGUNA BEACH

Laguna Beach, halfway between LA and San Diego, has long been a mecca for artists because of its quality of light. About a half-hour drive from Anaheim, it is home to some of Orange County's plushiest hotels, including Montage Laguna Beach. The hotel's all-day restaurant, The Loft, on the fourth floor, overlooks the area's dramatic coastline and the resort's impressive pool. It features a 6ft wood-burning rotisserie and an interactive cheese gallery featuring 150 cheeses which are carefully paired with house-made condiments. Pop in for breakfast and dream of dining with views like this every day. montagehotels.com/lagunabeach

3. SANDY'S BEACH GRILL, HUNTINGTON BEACH

You can't really get much more Californian than Surf City USA, aka Huntington Beach, which is also about a half hour from Anaheim. Right on the 16km stretch of golden beach which runs parallel to the Pacific Coast Highway is Sandy's Beach Grill, which looks out at one of the 30 beach volleyball nets (first come first served, rent your ball from the beachfront stalls) and the Huntington Beach Pier. Sandy's is a casual restaurant and bar with great Bloody Marys and even better cornbread, fresh scallops served on yam medallions, and mushroom, thyme, fennel, truffle oil and brie flatbread. sandyshb.com

4. GABBI'S MEXICAN KITCHEN, ORANGE

A 10-minute drive from Disneyland, Gabbi Patrick's signature restaurant puts a modern twist on traditional Mexican cuisine. The interior of the early 1900s-era building in "Old Towne" Orange is all exposed brick, dark wood and low lighting with colourful decorative tiles throughout and bright flower boxes out in front, while the menu features terrific dishes such as pork belly tacos on grilled jalapeno-coriander tortillas, served with ham and coriander salsa, pineapple,



Checklist

ORANGE COUNTY

GETTING THERE

Hawaiian Airlines flies from Auckland to Los Angeles via Honolulu. Return fares start at \$1819, including taxes.

ONLINE

anaheimoc.org
DiscoverAmerica.com

Packed with options

One place to make a beeline for is the Anaheim Packing House, a very cool two-level collection of eateries and bars in what was once a Sunkist citrus packing house. The new owners have done a beautiful job of restoring the space, which opened as an artisan food hall in 2013. Dating from 1919, there are nods to the building's heritage throughout, including packing cases as furniture, orange trees in planter boxes, and colourful original signage and memorabilia.

Its floors are made of the original materials, plants grow off steel cables reaching to the exposed roof beams, and above dangles every kind of industrial light fitting you can imagine. The Packing House has a central atrium with a stage area for live music, and plenty of varied outdoor areas, including one with a welcoming fireplace. There are rocking chairs, swing seats and communal tables, and a four-person movie viewing room in the building's old vault which screens old films.

There are over 20 vendors but this is no ordinary food hall. Everything looks delicious, from the Popbar's gelato on sticks, to The Chippy's gourmet fish 'n' chips, to The Kroft's "Southern comfort food". You'll want to dedicate some serious time to its bars — Hammer is set up like a woodwork shop, complete with tractor seats and saddles as stools, while BXCR Underground Wine Society is decked out like the inside of a 1920s train carriage. There's a hidden speakeasy, too, The Blind Rabbit, which is accessible via secret doorways — either via a ramshackle collection of crates or a wall shelf of Japanese sake barrels. Decorated with old furniture and books, staff make fresh juices every day for their cocktails.

Outside the Packing House, the Packing District continues with Farmers Park, an innovative and



The Anaheim Packing House is one of the coolest spots in Orange County to eat, drink and hang out.

Pictures / Visit Anaheim; Supplied

interesting public space with a grassy knoll, boardwalk, community gardens and olive grove, a ping-pong table and bocce court. You can rent everything you need — and a picnic basket and gear to go with it — at the Packing House. The park plays host to regular farmers' markets and events such as outdoor movies.

pico de gallo, radish, avocado relish, with a side of spicy borracho beans, US\$16 (\$24). Unreal. The short ribs are said to be amazing, too. gabbipatrick.com

5. THE CATCH, ANAHEIM

The Catch is an upmarket sports bar with an excellent restaurant serving prime steaks and fresh seafood. Located just across the parking lot from Angel Stadium — home of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, the Honda Center and the Grove Theater, The Catch is where you go for

a quick bite before a show or baseball game. Though, in the case of the four men at the bar who ordered the OMG burger — a 3.2kg meat patty, topped with 10 slices of aged cheddar cheese, half a head of iceberg lettuce, tomato, red onion, mayonnaise and dill pickles, served on a 35cm-wide bun with nearly a kilo of fries (US\$65) — a more time-consuming, and artery-destroying bite. catchanaheim.com

The writer visited Anaheim courtesy of Hawaiian Airlines and the Visit Anaheim.



The OMG burger at The Catch in Anaheim.
Picture / Shandelle Battersby