

A futuristic cityscape with tall skyscrapers and a modern building in the foreground. The scene is set against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. In the foreground, there's a large, metallic, sculptural structure with curved, reflective surfaces. A walkway or bridge with a railing runs across the lower part of the image. The overall atmosphere is one of advanced urban development.

LA

VISIONARY

FIVE CATALYSTS FOR AN ENLIGHTENED FUTURE

Los Angeles Times Magazine

JANUARY 03, 2010

LATIMESMAGAZINE.COM



Ciao, Orso

The venerable West Hollywood eatery bids adieu, but Sean MacPherson plans to keep the faith *by* CAROL WOLPER

I'm not a nostalgic person. New Year's Eve never finds me looking back with fondness or regret. I'm a get-on-with-it kind of girl, which makes Los Angeles the perfect place for me. L.A. likes to get on with it, too, even if sometimes that means tearing down another piece of paradise to put up a parking lot.

Oh sure, every year during Oscar season, there's a nod to Hollywood's glorious past, and our sports teams always celebrate their legacies, but as 2010 gets under way, I don't see myself, or this city, looking in the rearview mirror. Which is why I was surprised to find myself getting a bit teary at Orso on November 21, as the place served its last meal.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the eatery, the best way I can describe it—and possibly justify my uncharacteristic foray down a sentimental path—is to give a little history. Twenty years ago, Orso took over the space that housed Joe Allen. The interior was changed from a New York-style show-biz hangout where burgers and fries were in demand to a trattoria featuring a thin-crust pizza so popular a customer rebellion brewed when it was briefly taken off the menu.

But it wasn't just the pizza that turned Orso into a destination—it was its fabulous patio. Sheltered from the street by a wooden fence and greenery—including

two towering trees—it was easy to feel as if you had escaped urban stress, even if you were there for a business meeting. Not even the occasional siren—Cedars-Sinai was across the street—could shatter the tranquil European ambience.

Orso was special in yet another way: It was an exception among L.A. foodie establishments, a place celebrities frequented without being a place about celebrities. And the difference is huge. In the case of the former, a restaurant recognizes its A-list customers but focuses on service and atmosphere. In the latter, celebs are escorted to their "special" table and made to feel like the stars of the show, while everyone else is relegated to feeling like an extra. Succinctly put, it's the line between cool and hype.

I'm not saying Orso didn't have incidents of paparazzi madness. Recently I spoke to Peter Landroche, who started as a waiter two decades ago and became part of the *maitre d'* staff. He recalled

LA



THE
OSCAR
ISSUE

FEBRUARY 07, 2010

escorting Kate Winslet out the back to avoid a pack of rabid photographers. I reminded him of the time Lindsay Lohan's presence turned into a scene reminiscent of Hitchcock's *The Birds*. First one camera lens appeared over the patio fence, then two, then three, four... eight. And Lindsay was doing nothing more noteworthy than eating a salad.

Those were the exceptions. More often, stars came and went with little fanfare, and that's the way they liked it. Over the years, I've looked across the patio and spotted Jennifer Lopez, Orlando Bloom, Colin Farrell, Thomas Jane, Mel Brooks (having his weekly lunch with the guys), Anjelica Huston, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, Al Pacino and, perhaps my favorite, Peter O'Toole, on the Friday before his lifetime-achievement Oscar. There he was, Lawrence of Arabia, in all his esteemed glory.

Orso never desired to build a business and reputation on the backs of its famous diners. At lunch, the place was a favorite with the Cedars staff. At night, especially on weekends, it was usually more of a neighborhood crowd—sometimes three generations of a family sharing that famous pizza, bowls of pasta and a pitcher of red wine.

As I raised my martini glass to toast Orso on that final night, I thought about the memorable moments I'd experienced there, including a girls' lunch for my birthday that lasted more than three hours. It was so relaxed it took the sting out of getting older. Of course, it didn't hurt that the lighting on the patio was always so flattering.

However, it occurred to me that maybe in these tough financial times, it isn't possible to be both low key and cool. I feared that in the 3rd Street locale's next incarnation, it

could be another one of those restaurants where management lures stars and then advertises whom they've lured in hopes of reading about it in the tabloids. Maybe flaunting high-wattage clientele is now a necessity in order to turn a profit. If so, I'd rather stay home and order from Why Cook?

At that moment, I spotted a familiar face making a patio entrance—Sean MacPherson. He was responsible for some of my favorite low-key L.A. spots—El Carmen, Olive (back in the '90s) and Swingers—before heading off to NYC to dazzle with the Park, Waverly Inn and the Bowery Hotel. MacPherson wasn't at Orso just to participate in closing-night festivities. Word was he would be taking over the space and reopening in the spring. Could it be that the torch was being passed, not extinguished? Yes!

He explained that he isn't looking to make drastic changes to the space. He simply wants to "give it the love it's been missing." And MacPherson's the guy to do it, having a résumé full of what I like to call fun, friendly, frenzy-free zones.

I've always thought L.A. is at its best when it blends a touch of glamour with a laid-back attitude. It's a mix that suits a city that's still as much of a renegade frontier town as it is a star-studded entertainment capital.

As I drove off that night, I thought, *So many things in this city are so cross-wired with other things that the past comes around again and becomes your future, just in a slightly different package.* If that sounds a little screwy, a bit optimistic or a tad in denial about what's gone for good, well, you can always blame it on those martinis.

CAROL WOLPER is a novelist and screenwriter. She has spent the past year working on projects for HBO and ABC.