

# Pub crawl across the county

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brews and other imports. The service is unflustered and always nice and friendly (as the solid contingent of solo diners can attest). A limited pub menu is served in the bar rooms; there's a full menu in the dining room. Beer is exceedingly fresh; the food is excellent. Sausage rolls are made with the right kind of sausage encased in fresh, crisp puff pastry; a vegetable samosa is crisply fried, with a fresh, appropriately spiced filling. Fish and chips are delicious with a good crunchy crust. Shepherd's pie has well-seasoned ground beef topped with nicely browned mashed potatoes and comes with your choice of American or mushy peas. \$5 pints. *116 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica, (310) 451-1402.*

## Venerable in the Valley

**Ireland's 32.** It's all velvety darkness inside at first, but once your eyes adjust you'll find that the room's well appointed, the locals are friendly and the beer's fresh. If the bar's filled, sit on a stool at the mid-room divider or grab a table by the dance floor. Seamus Kennedy, the current owner (there have been several in the pub's 50-odd year history), and his family members circulate and greet patrons; on a Sunday NFL afternoon (the Irish football on Setanta's being ignored), everyone seems to be a regular and most are in company of his or her spouse. Hungry? Check out the board list, then amble over to the kitchen door and tell the cook what you'd like — fresh, tasty standards such as fish and chips and burgers are in front of you a few minutes later. Very fresh Guinness, Bass, Harp and Smithwick on tap. \$5 pints. *13721 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, (818) 785-4031; www.ireland32pub.com.*

## Sox and Celtics

**Sonny McLean's Irish Pub and Restaurant.** Named for the owner's grandfather, this is a Boston Irish pub with an emphasis on Sox and Patriots games, and Beantown menu twists such as New England clam chowder, clam boats (fried clams on a roll) and lobster rolls. Young and personable guy staffers cover their heads with baseball hats declaring team allegiances and their backs with surf equipment T-shirts. The décor is heavy on New England sports stuff such as sleds and snow shoes, which hang on the walls of a spacious room, divided into cozy areas with booths, tables and bar seating. The coffee-shop style menu features decent fish and chips, credible salads and sandwiches, and even a few pastas. (Also Saturday night lobster feasts.)



GENARO MOLINA *Los Angeles Times*  
**TASTY:** A banger sandwich at O'Brien's in Santa Monica.

Twenty-one beers are on tap, including domestics. \$4.75 pints. *2615 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, (310) 449-1811; www.sonnymcleans.com.*

## Waterfront dive

**Britannia Pub.** A scrappy contender with loyal regulars and wildly uneven food offerings. Guys in shirts proclaiming English soccer team allegiances hang out on the smokers' patio; inside the two-story space are hanging pictures of tall ships, ocean liners and other seafaring vessels. Britannia is known for its fish and chips, which are hot, light and fresh even at odd hours, and served with a fabulous curry dip. But other dishes disappoint: Sausage rolls are soggy and a samosa is just silly, falling apart around a filling of thin mashed potatoes and peas. Anglo-Indian dishes such as a bland chicken vindaloo are just weird. Breakfast all day and a small selection of tap beers, including Guinness, Harp and Bass. Wonderful jukebox. \$5.50 pints. *318 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica (310) 458-5350; www.britanniapub.com.*

## A civilized alternative

**The Auld Dubliner.** Located directly across from the Long Beach Convention Center in an impossibly corporate-looking site near a bunch of chain stores, the Auld Dubliner grows on you once you make your way past the gaggle of guys in shirts and ties smoking on the doorstep. It's an upscale pub, with branches in Squaw Valley, Lake Las Vegas and Tucson, but it's not too slick; it feels lived in and comfortable. There's a fine lineup of draft beers, including Guinness, Harp, Newcastle, Smithwick's, Boddingtons and Bass, and the food's terrific. A specialty of the house is the Irish dish boxty — elsewhere that's an awkward potato pancake folded over messy fillings, but here it's a graceful crepe-like dish with simple, tasty fillings. Chips (fries) are dusted with curry powder; there's a full menu of salads and sandwiches and the like. The desserts, including Irish whiskey brûlée, are wonderfully well executed. \$6 pints. *71 S. Pine St., Long Beach, (562) 437-8300; www.aulddubliner.com.*

## Reality check in Pubville

**D**ON'T get hung up trying to determine whether an Irish or British pub in L.A. is "authentic." Down that road lies a quagmire. Or, perhaps, a trivia quiz.

For example, fish and chips may seem like authentic English pub fare, but traditionally, fish and chips were sold in dedicated shops that were open late at night; this delectable fast food was consumed on the way home from the pub. Or you might think that a pub with a guy from Dublin behind the bar is more like the pubs in Ireland — until you learn that these days many bartenders in the auld country are Eastern Europeans.

All the Guinness you drink in L.A. is brewed in Dublin; variation in its deliciousness from pub to pub has to do with the amount sold and how well the tap system is maintained (it can sour in the lines). Several of the other imported beers available in pubs are much admired by aficionados,

but nowhere here can we get English "real ales," unpasteurized local brews available on hand pump in pubs in Britain.

Meanwhile, remember that corned beef and cabbage is an Irish American dish and that although a menu listing bangers and mash and Cornish pasties sounds British, in a London pub today you're more likely to be offered hummus and kebab.

And though it's laughably true that you can order an "authentic" Irish pub-to-go online ([www.irishpubcompany.com](http://www.irishpubcompany.com)), building a pub is just the beginning. The great thing about an Irish or British pub is that the longer it's around, the better it gets. The real test of a pub's authenticity is its connection to the community around it.

Menu innovations and nods to local taste can strengthen that connection more than adherence to false nostalgia.

— SUSAN LA TEMPA

## Big city style

**Finn McCool's.** The crowd's boisterous and loud around 11 p.m. on the weekends, and on Sunday afternoon it's loaded with tourists, but at other times this handsome pub from L.A.'s best-known Irish chef, Gerri Gilliland, is a surprisingly sweet spot. Nice, even for a quiet date. Stick with appetizers, drinks and desserts, though the extensive menu is tempting. Dinner entrees are oversized and poorly presented on plates too big to manage in the intimate nooks and at the bar. The mini-Yorkshire puddings are fun — cold slices of roast beef on tiny popovers with a dollop of horseradish crème fraîche. The horseshoe bar is the centerpiece of a high-ceilinged room with tall windows that at night let in a sense of the city street just outside. They move a lot of Guinness here, and the deft bartenders are fun to watch. \$6 pints. *2702 Main St., Santa Monica, (310) 452-1734; www.finnmccoolirishpub.com.*

## Extreme makeover

**Pickwick's Pub.** Rebuilt and reopened in March after being destroyed by fire and closed for a year, the fresh new room of this 32-year-old pub is still comfortable and homey. The food's been updated too — lightened up with fresh fish and salad offerings. It's a pretty, friendly place, full of dart players who know their game, live music and a mix of regulars and occasionals, mostly young. It's more a get-to-know-you spot than many pubs. The extensive menu is inviting and the open-lay-

out room is equally comfortable for dining or just getting together for drinks. The Cal-Val standards and British specialties are like good diner fare: barbecue chicken breast or skirt steak with steak with mushrooms come with sides such as mashed and peas; juicy, salty onion rings are a specialty. There are 14 draft beers, including Irish stouts and lager, English ales and cider. \$4 pints. *21010 Ventura Blvd., Woodland Hills, (818) 340-9673.*

## It's in the drinks

**Tom Bergin's.** A tavern? A pub? A saloon? Tom Bergin's is as it's ever been — full of people drinking and talking so enthusiastically the place fairly roars at some hours. No silly background music here — you wouldn't hear it. Would that the food matched the drinks, which are top-notch. A bar card proposes concoctions such as Black and Tan (Bass ale and Guinness stout), Snakebite (hard cider and Harp Lager), Smoothie (cider and stout) and Half and Half (lager and stout). Though they're clearly drinks someone thought up during a dull moment behind the bar, some are delicious and they're unknown to staffers at "Irish pub concept" spots. Opened in 1936, in this location since 1949, Bergin's is what some aficionados call an Irish American pub, with roots deep in an earlier diaspora. The menu's fallen on hard times lately, though. Stick to a simple steak with steak fries. *840 S. Fairfax Ave., Los Angeles, (323) 936-7151; www.tombergins.com.*