

It's good to be an outsider here

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My mother, God bless her, has subscribed me to about a zillion magazines -- Newsweek, the Oxford American, Gourmet and Bon Appetit, among others. I love reading them all -- particularly the cooking ones, full of beautiful locations and exotic food. After hours of circling comma splices in student papers and unlocking the implications of em-dashes in Frank Bidart's poetry, nothing is quite as decadently escapist as dreaming myself into photos of happy people nibbling garlic shrimp in Oaxaca.

Now, however, I am starting to think my mother's being cruel -- she's begun sending me Garden Design magazine. My yard's a wreck -- I can't even get the grass to grow. Oh, the entertaining I would do if I could hire a landscape artist, build a rose-trellised teak deck and grill salmon in my rustic outdoor carriage-house turned guest kitchen.

But I can't. So instead I periodically invite a few friends to join me for a drink in great outdoor locations: the San Jose for a quiet glass of wine; Dry Creek for a bottle of beer; Club DeVille for hanging out with the posse. And if I'm on Fourth Street, Ludwig's patio. OK, so Ludwig's is a beautiful people bar and, generally speaking, the BP hangouts aren't my favorites. But I have to admit, I really like the patio. It's cozy, it's well-apportioned and if you get there early, it's comfy, too. The sofas and chairs, which get occupied quickly, are made of solid wood and plush cushions -- real furniture for the outside. There are also high tables and stools, a dash or two of standing room and an outdoor bar so you won't have to go back inside to acquire a drink. I'm not sure exactly what appeals to me so much about the patio, but something about taking over a small sitting area with a few friends feels Goldilocks-right. (Then again, this time of year, when nights are neither too hot nor too cold, a lot of outdoor spots feel just right.)

To get to the patio, you have to pass through L.A. The interior of the building is California white, with a wide-open space and high ceilings reminiscent of Malibu-esque homes in '80s teen movies. Brightly colored art adorns the walls, museum-style, and raised seating runs along the sides, allowing social voyeurs to keep tabs on all that's going on in the main area. People dress with shine and cling, and I've heard more foreign accents there than at any other place in recent memory. Vodka martinis nestle coyly in any number of patrons' hands, largely because Ludwig's serves a veritable plethora of vodkas. Who knew Australia actually made vodka? (It's called Albert River, for the record.) Irish, Estonian, Swedish, Austrian, Dutch, Danish, French, Canadian, Russian, Finnish, Polish and American vodkas are also available, should Australian not appeal. Enormous posters of musicians line the long, white entryway, and jazz bands play with some frequency, which explains the grand piano in the center of the room. But given that I know almost as much about jazz as I do about, say, carriage-house renovations, I mostly enjoy Ludwig's for the patio.

I've heard some grumbling about having to wait in long lines to gain entry (mostly dating from when it opened late last year) but the line has been noticeably absent the last four or

five times I've gone in. Perhaps that's because I get there early enough to secure a couch, which, while not as cool as a coquina-stone raised platform outdoor shower surrounded by lush foliage, is not a bad place to park yourself for an hour or two.

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Ludwig's: 217 W. Fourth St., 494-1150. Open Tuesday to Sunday, 7 p.m.-2a.m.