



GABRIEL FENOY / Hotel Casa 425

The newly opened Lounge 425 in Hotel Casa 425 has brought another nightlife option to Claremont.

Old citrus town gets new zest from downtown growth

Added dining, shopping, museum bring distinction to L.A. suburb of Claremont

By Vanessa Hua

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

CLAREMONT, Los Angeles County

In the early 20th century, colorful advertisements of lush orange groves against a backdrop of snowy peaks lured visitors to Southern California. And even in the smoggier 21st century, a town like Claremont — 30 miles east of Los Angeles, at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains — offers a wintertime vista of bright blue skies, luxuriant citrus trees and Mount Baldy gleaming on the horizon.

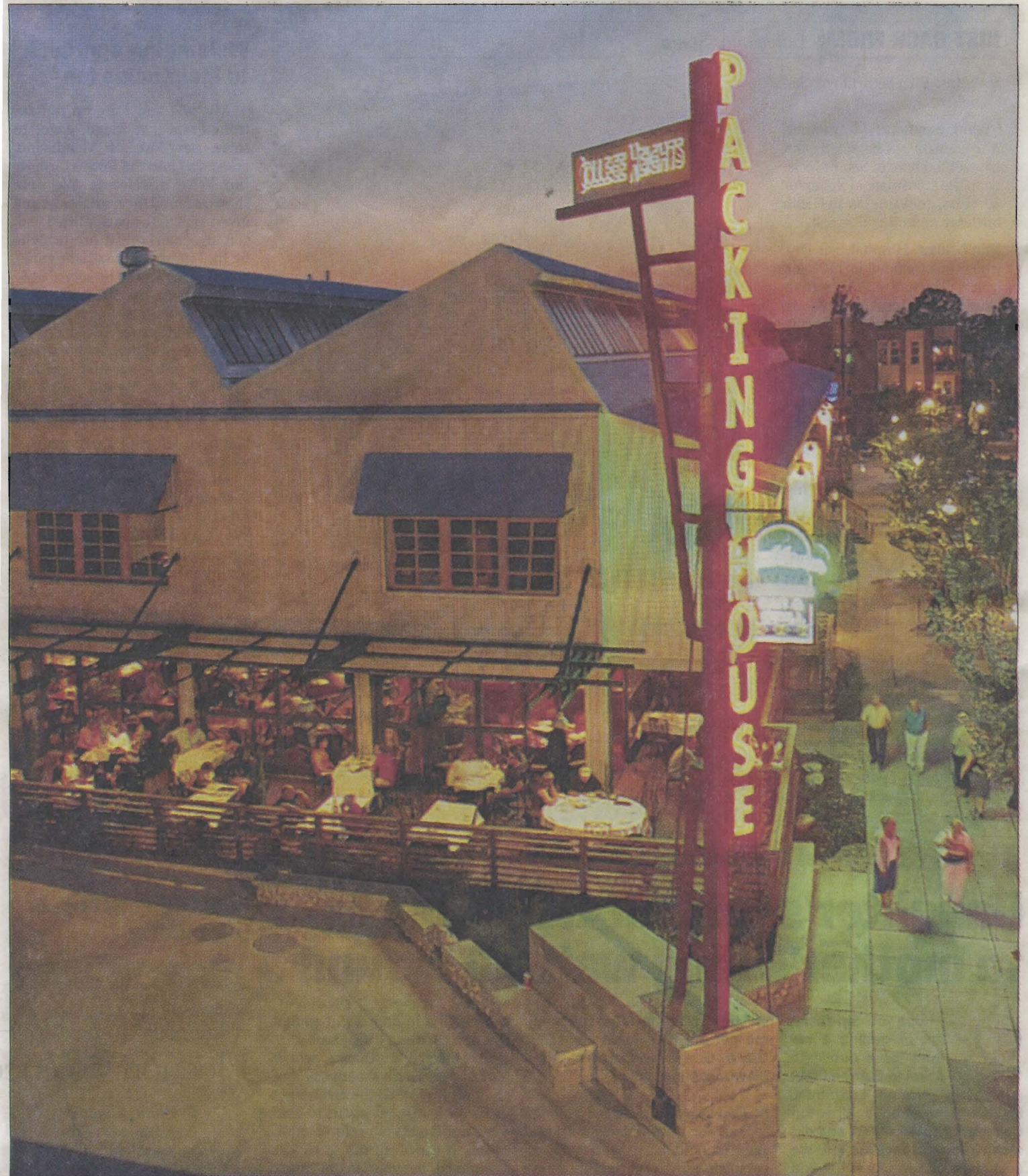
Like parts of Palo Alto and Berkeley, Claremont has the feel of an East Coast college town, with palm trees, Arts & Crafts bungalows and Spanish Colonial Revival homes. Although houses have replaced the groves that once dominated Claremont, many yards still boast citrus trees, and the industry's legacy lives on in the new Packing House project, a conversion of a 1922 citrus packing facility into upscale shops and restaurants.

But a modern ad campaign for

the town — best known today for its college campuses — would feature more than fruit and a mountain skyline. New to the scene are intriguing shops, trendy restaurants, a boutique hotel and an art museum, all of which have helped create the perfect weekend getaway to drive away winter doldrums. Compared to the Bay Area, parking is a snap — and free — and you can walk to almost all of the attractions.

For my husband, Marc, and I, the weekend begins in the charming downtown village, where many of the streets are named for colleges. Friday night, we might dine at Viva Madrid (225 Yale Ave.) Jammed with kitschy bullfighting memorabilia, paintings, a coat of armor and mismatched chairs and tables, this cozy but bustling restaurant serves the standard tapas, along with more unusual offerings such as bacon-wrapped dates and steamed strawberries and cheese drizzled with 15-year-old vinegar.

After dinner, we might head to one of the handful of late-night spots in Claremont: the Press Restaurant (129 Harvard Ave.), which



The Packing House, above, in Claremont, is a former citrus packing facility near the downtown village recently converted into shops and restaurants. Below: The San Gabriel Mountains provide a scenic backdrop to the Claremont colleges' red-tiled roofs.

on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. It has a good selection of beers and a full bar; if we're still hungry, we can order the fries — a mixture of yucca, yams and potatoes.

The newly opened 28-room boutique hotel called Hotel Casa 425 also offers after-dinner drinks in its indoor and outdoor lounges. In the heart of downtown shopping district, the hotel features an expansive courtyard with fountains, a canopy of trees and fire pits. Its sleek, modern interior contrasts with the white-washed, red-tiled roof architecture of a California mission.

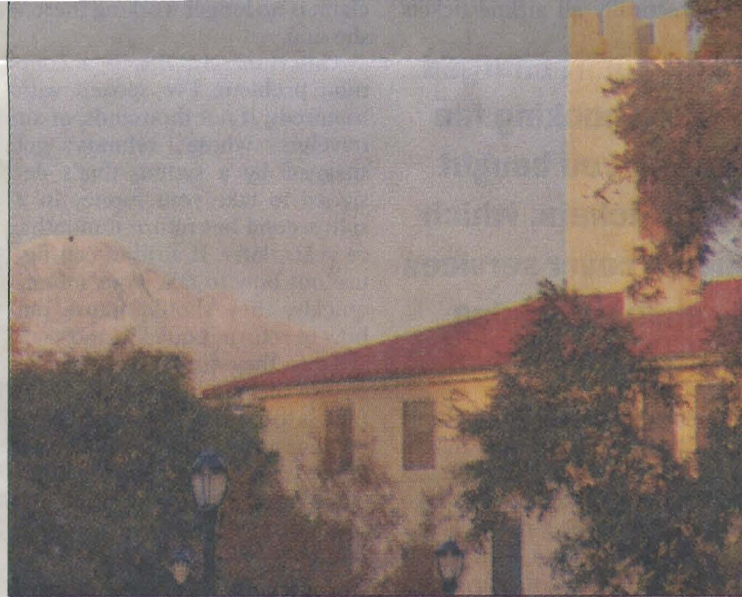
Saturday morning, we start at Some Crust Bakery (119 Yale Ave.) Since 1916, this homey bakery has been whipping up huge buttery cookies (we like the dark chocolate chip and the ginger chocolate) and delectable cakes and pastries. Thus fortified, we can go shopping in Claremont village and its new expansion. At the Folk Music Center (220 Yale Ave.), browsers can play with the banjos, the Tibetan music bowls, wooden frog instruments and more. The Little Dress Shop (214 W. Second St.) features eclectic and fun designer frocks, while Raku Gifts (224 Yale Ave.) sports a hip assortment of clothes, paper goods, bath products and books.

For lunch, we like to dine al fresco at Harvard Square Cafe (206 W. Bonita Ave.), which has a huge outdoor dining area and a large selection of sandwiches and salads. Afterward, we try a food craze that has yet to hit the Bay Area: Korean-style frozen yogurt, at Kiwiberry (373 W. Bonita Ave.). It's tart, with toppings such as mochi and mango.

The Claremont Museum of Art, which opened last year in the Packing House with 7,400 square feet of exhibition space, a store and a sculpture garden, is an afternoon destination. From there we can stroll to the Claremont colleges — a consortium of five undergraduate colleges and two grad schools — marked by broad walkways and overhanging trees.

The museum at Pomona College is currently featuring an exhibit by alumnus James Turrell, who plays with the viewer's perception of light. An outdoor installation on campus — entitled "Skyspace" — is magical at sunrise and sunset, when shifting colored lights on a canopy contrast to a slice of the heavens. Check the college event listings for author readings, films and concerts on campus, many of them free.

For dinner, reservations are necessary for Three Forks (580 W.



MARC PUICH / Special to The Chronicle 2007

We can stroll to the Claremont colleges, a consortium of schools marked by broad walkways and overhanging trees.



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas, USGS

TODD TRUMBULL / The Chronicle

First St.), which is drawing crowds from as far as Santa Monica — the equivalent of San Franciscans trekking to San Jose — after a glowing review in the Los Angeles Times. Also in the Packing House, the restaurant has a fancy hunting lodge decor and a menu focusing on hearty, savory dishes of wild game and steaks.

An after-dinner walk along the wooden boardwalk to the other end of the Packing House leads to the Hip Kitty (502 W. First St.) As trendy as any Mission bar, it offers live jazz Wednesday through Sunday. Velvet paintings and glowing amber lamps create a retro lounge atmosphere. Dessert fondue is mixed tableside, with a choice of chocolate (dark, white or milk), a mixer (such as raspberry puree or peanut butter), heavy cream and brandy.

If you don't feel like cocktails, you can peruse the Packing House's display of vintage photos from the days when Claremont

counted four packing houses and an ice house along the railroad tracks.

Sunday morning brings brunch at Walter's (310 Yale Ave.), a classy Claremont classic that serves American standards and Afghan specialties. Take a seat at the vine-covered patio, beside the fountain and people-watch along one of the town's main drags.

Our weekend wraps up with a visit to the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, 86 acres devoted to the state's native plants. The paths meander through towering cactus and palm trees, manzanitas and wildflowers. It's a bit of a hike — about 1½ miles from downtown — but has panoramic views worthy of an ad campaign of its own.

Vanessa Hua, who last wrote for Travel about Israel, recently moved to Claremont from San Francisco. To comment online, visit sfgate.com/travel and follow the links.

If you go

All addresses are in Claremont (Los Angeles County).

GETTING THERE

Claremont is about 9 miles northwest of the Ontario International Airport via I-10. It's also on the San Bernardino train line, which connects to Los Angeles' Union Station.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Casa 425, 425 West First St. (866) 450-0425, (909) 625-2272, www.casa425.com. A 28-room boutique hotel. \$165 to \$400 weeknights and \$195 to \$400 weekends; special packages available. Bicycles are available for guests to borrow.

WHERE TO EAT

Viva Madrid, 225 Yale Ave. (909) 624-5500, www.vivamadrid.com. Tapas, \$1.95 to \$7.95; entrees, \$12.95 to \$17.95.

Three Forks, 580 West First St. (888) 933-6757, www.threeforkschops.com. Entrees, \$20 to \$80.

WHAT TO DO

Claremont Museum of Art, Packing House, 536 West First St. (909) 621-3200, claremontmuseum.org. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. \$3, free for ages 17 and under.

Pomona College Museum of Art, 330 N. College Ave. (909) 621-8283, www.pomona.edu/museum. Open noon to 5 Tuesday-Friday, 1 p.m. weekends; closed for winter break through Jan. 21. Free.

Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, 1500 N. College Ave. 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Free admission; \$4 donation suggested.

Claremont Colleges: For listings of public events, visit collegescalendar.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Claremont Chamber of Commerce, www.claremontchamber.org, (909) 624-1681

Claremont Heritage, www.claremontheritage.org, (909) 621-0348. Offers guided and self-guided tours.