

# Travel

## AND RECREATION



In a palmy dusk, Art's Delicatessen beckons the hungry.

# Ventura Boulevard

Rare guitars and delis to die for—you can find just about anything on Southern California's ultimate Main Street

By Matthew Jaffe • Photographs by David Zaitz

Imagine, if you will, a Main Street without end. A big bang of a street, all-encompassing and infinite in scale. A boulevard where mom and pop meets pop culture.

Ventura Boulevard, the onetime El Camino Real pioneered in part by the Portola party in 1769 and now California's preeminent suburban drag, is a contradictory, confounding street that nevertheless holds some of Los Angeles' greatest discoveries.

The boulevard has cool, but it's a beneath-the-radar cool. For those of us who love its delis and bakeries, its music stores and antiques shops, that's just as well.

In its own way, it's a neighborly street. If you grew up in Studio City or Sherman Oaks, Encino or Woodland Hills, you grew up on the boulevard: pie at **Du-par's**, weekends at the **Sherman Oaks Galleria**, and long summer drives,

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forsaking the freeway for those boulevard nights.

### A small-town street with celebrity touches

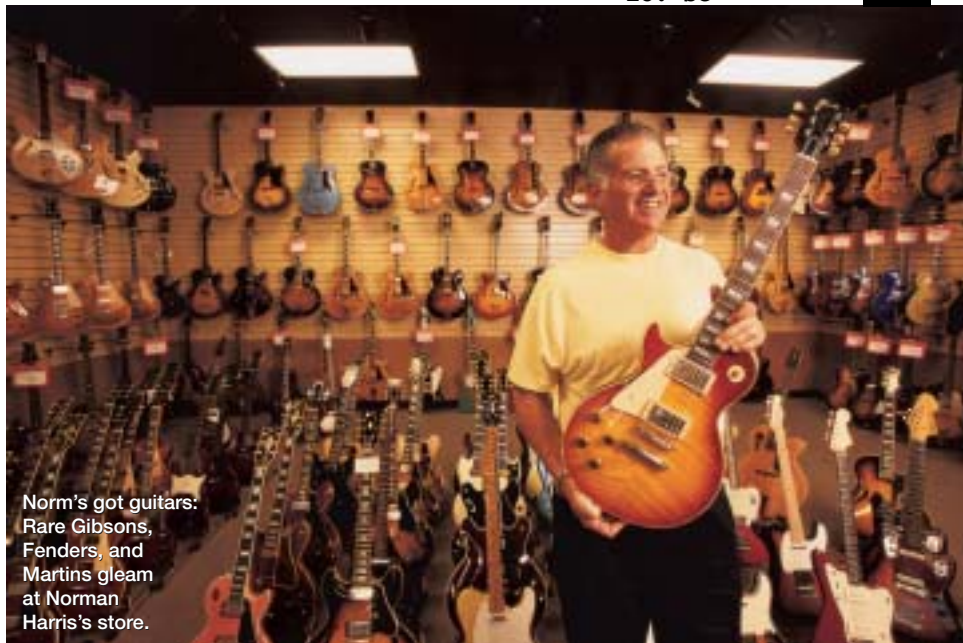
I didn't grow up on the boulevard. Instead I discovered it in my 20s, not long after moving to Los Angeles. One morning friends suggested meeting at **Art's Delicatessen**, and so I made my way north through Laurel Canyon to the San Fernando Valley.

In the wonderland of Los Angeles, this was a through-the-looking-glass moment: Ventura Boulevard offered the first evidence that there was an urban life beyond the Westside.

Novelist Stephen Randall had a similar experience. A native of Santa Monica and author of *The Other Side of Mulholland*, a book that explores the yin and yang of the valley versus the Westside, he found himself drawn to Ventura Boulevard, thanks to Du-par's and Art's.

"Those places really characterized Ventura Boulevard's small-town atmosphere," says Randall. But, he adds, Westside types believed the boulevard had no character. "If you told people that you preferred it over Sunset, they would think you lacked sophistication."

The irony is that Ventura Boulevard has a strong, if not flashy, entertainment-industry presence; Encino and other neighborhoods south of Ventura have a fair number of celebrity residents. That helps explain why the boulevard boasts some of Los Angeles'



Norm's got guitars: Rare Gibsons, Fenders, and Martins gleam at Norman Harris's store.

finest restaurants and home decor stores—and why you can easily see an entertainment deal made over breakfast at Art's.

One of the most surprising celebrity stops is tucked away in a Tarzana mini-mall, where Norman Harris operates **Norman's Rare Guitars**. Thirty years in the business, Harris sells guitars from \$89 to \$100,000, everything from Fender reissues to a 1955 Gibson ES-295 once owned by Eric Clapton.

Harris says Ventura Boulevard is an ideal spot for his business. "There are a lot of professional musicians in the valley and still plenty of recording studios," he says. "There are also all sorts of doctors and lawyers who now can afford the guitars that they dreamed of owning as kids." Not that all of his customers are lawyers: He's sold guitars during pop-in visits from Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan.

### The capital of car-chitecture

The challenge of Ventura Boulevard is finding gems like Norman's Rare Guitars. Though linear as an anaconda, the boulevard can be as unruly as the Internet: an un-Google'd gaggle of yoga studios and lighting stores, 3 Jerry's Famous Delis, and 11 Starbucks.

When surfing the boulevard, your car is at best an imperfect search engine. The problem is, there's just so much stuff, whether strung out along long blocks of low storefronts or stacked in mini-malls whose streetside marquees listing 20 or more businesses are virtu-

ally impossible to read at 35 mph.

This is not a new problem. Aldous Huxley wrote about it in a 1939 piece that described a trip through the valley to Tarzana.

"At the bottom of the hill the car turned to the left along a wide road that ran, a ribbon of concrete and suburban buildings through the plain. The chauffeur put on speed; sign succeeded sign with bewildering rapidity. MALTS CABINS DINE AND DANCE AT THE CHATEAU HONOLULU SPIRITUAL HELPING AND COLONIC IRRIGATION BLOCK-LONG HOT DOGS BUY YOUR DREAM HOME NOW."

And so Ventura Boulevard has long been one of the great repositories of car-chitecture, that attempt by businesses to do anything to grab drivers' attention. Efforts range from **Casa de Cadillac**, a streamlined 1948-vintage dealership, to more cartoonish variations, like **Studio City Hand Car Wash** (where a giant hand holds an old Corvette aloft).

Auto-centric though it may be, distinct villagelike stretches have emerged along the boulevard, helping to break it into more manageable pieces. While unlikely to make an expatriate boulevardier forget Paris, Ventura Boulevard is, like any great street, a true expression of its city.

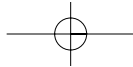
"It's not a Norman Rockwell kind of Main Street, but a Main Street for a new century," says Randall. "It's grand and diffuse in the way that Los Angeles is. Ventura Boulevard is kind of the soul of the valley. It's where everything is."

(Continued on page 32)

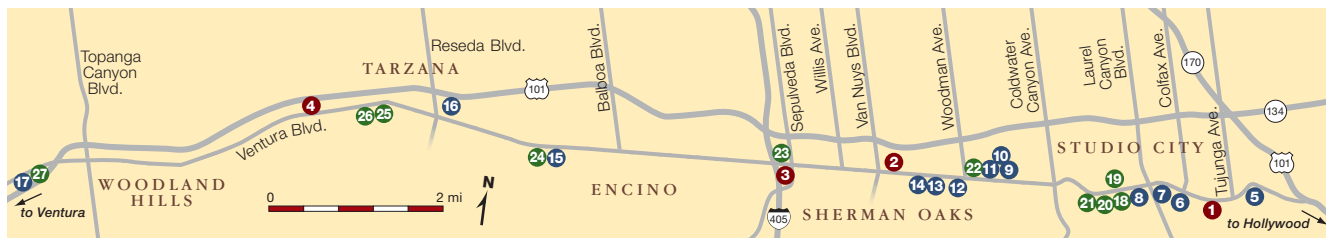
BOTTOM: TODD BIGELOW



A Studio City landmark gives a big hand to clean cars.



TRAVEL



## The Ventura Boulevard guide

Here's a list of boulevard highlights. The key to enjoying them and the boulevard? See them by sections. Be sure to bring quarters for street parking.

### Most walkable stretches

**Studio City.** Several blocks west of Laurel Canyon Blvd.

**Sherman Oaks.** Roughly between Van Nuys Blvd. and Willis Ave.

### Best roadside architecture

- 1 **Studio City Hand Car Wash.** Love it or hate it, it's a local landmark. 11514 Ventura Blvd.; (818) 980-8999.
- 2 **Casa de Cadillac.** Streamlined classic. 14401 Ventura; (818) 981-2000.
- 3 **Rubin's Red Hots.** Chicago-style hot dogs beneath a salvaged section of El train tracks. 15322

Ventura; (818) 905-6515.

- 4 **Fleetwood Square.** A shopping center that is the boulevard's answer to Texas's Cadillac Ranch. 19611 Ventura.

### Top dining

- 5 **Sushi Nozawa.** Best on Studio City's sushi row. Closed Sat-Sun. 11288 Ventura; (818) 508-7017.
- 6 **La Loggia.** Popular among entertainment-industry types for northern Italian and French food. 11814 Ventura; (818) 985-9222.
- 7 **Du-par's.** Icon beloved for pie and the like. 12036 Ventura; (818) 766-4437.
- 8 **Art's Delicatessen.** Schmoozapalooza at everyone's home away from home. 12224 Ventura; (818) 762-1221.
- 9 **Casa Vega.** Mexican mainstay. 13301 Ventura; (818) 788-4868.
- 10 **Max.** Cal-Asian creations by Andre Guerrero. 13355 Ventura; (818) 784-2915.

### 11 Mr. Cecil's California Ribs.

Barbecue goes upscale with a French wine list. 13625 Ventura; (818) 905-8400.

- 12 **Señor Fred.** Creative Mexican cuisine amidst stage set-worthy decor. 13730 Ventura; (818) 789-3200.

- 13 **Café Bizou.** Affordable, delicious bistro fare; make reservations early. 14016 Ventura; (818) 788-3536.

- 14 **Jinky's.** Jam-packed breakfast joint celebrated for its pumpkin pancakes. 14120 Ventura; (818) 981-2250.

- 15 **Nicolosi Pastries.** Prime cannoli and terrific breads. 17540 Ventura; (818) 789-0922.

- 16 **Bea's Bakery.** When they say everything bagel, they mean everything. Great cookies too. 18450 Clark St.; (818) 344-0100.

- 17 **Dan's Super Subs.** Triumphs of construction and proportion in the west valley. Closed Sun. 22446 Ventura; (818) 225-8880.

### Shopping sampler

- 18 **Maxwell Dog.** California canines rejoice: Here are pure pampering products for now pooches. 12332 Ventura; (818) 505-8411.

- 19 **Ferret.** Beautiful, high-end country furniture. 12345-M Ventura; (818) 769-2427.

- 20 **Coldwater Curve Shops.** Eclectic grouping of shops includes La Knitterie Parisienne (818/766-1515), a yarn store popular with celebrity knitters. Closed Sun-Mon. 12600 block of Ventura, east of Coldwater Canyon Ave., south side of boulevard.

- 21 **Indian Art Center of California.** Within Coldwater Curve (above), it has a fine selection of Native American pottery and jewelry. Closed Sun-Mon. 12666 Ventura; (818) 763-3430.

- 22 **Vespa of Sherman Oaks.** Stylish showroom for the hippest thing on two wheels. 13629 Ventura; (818) 906-0350.

- 23 **Sherman Oaks Galleria.** Frank Zappa mentioned it in the song "Valley Girl"; *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* was filmed here. Now radically remodeled, it's worth a stop for browsing and a movie. At Sepulveda and Ventura Boulevards; (818) 382-4100.

- 24 **Domingo's Italian Deli.** Classic Italian market with a big selection. Closed Mon. 17548 Ventura; (818) 981-4466.

- 25 **Norman's Rare Guitars.** Why play air guitar when you can own a rare guitar? Closed Sun-Mon. 18969 Ventura; (818) 344-8300.

- 26 **CD Trader.** Nothing fancy, just a deep, well-organized collection. 18928 Ventura; (818) 705-3544.

- 27 **Woodland Hills Wine Co.** Big selection of California and other wines, plus an always-helpful staff. 22622 Ventura; (800) 678-9463. ♦



A sunny morning turns Ventura Boulevard into a valley Champs-Elysées.

MAP: MINOT/HERSHMAN STUDIO

