

Honoring L.A.'s Translator

BY ANDREA CHANG
PHOTOS BY ANNE FISHBEIN

PRESS CLUB PRESENTS THE IMPACT AWARD
TO LATE RESTAURANT CRITIC JONATHAN GOLD

ONE OF THE most widely admired voices in Los Angeles, Jonathan Gold wrote about restaurants for more than three decades. During that time, he became indelibly linked with the city in which he was born and raised.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning *Los Angeles Times* restaurant critic richly chronicled L.A.'s vast culinary landscape, focusing not on the austere, the high-end or the Michelin stars, but on hole-in-the-wall joints, street food and mom-and-pop shops. Although Gold appreciated and wrote beautifully about fine dining, he revered the taco truck more than the tasting menu.

"He, more than any chef, changed the dining scene in Los Angeles," said longtime friend, chef and Mozza co-owner Nancy Silverton. "He really was the ambassador for our city."

Gold died on July 21, 2018, of pancreatic cancer. He was 57. Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club remembers and honors him with the Impact Award for Journalism That Makes a Difference.



The eldest of three boys, all born at UCLA in the 1960s, Gold spent his childhood attending Dodgers games and eating at Junior's and Canter's delis. His father was a probation officer, his mother a longtime high school librarian at L.A.'s Dorsey High School. The Reform Jewish family uprooted several times but stayed local, moving from a neighborhood near Inglewood to West L.A. and then to Beverly Hills, where Gold graduated from high school.

As an undergrad at UCLA, Gold, who grew up listening to classical music and was a talented cellist, studied art and music. He worked a number of jobs in his 20s—information operator, music booker, proofreader at a Downtown law journal—and had a short but memorable stint as a performance artist, in which he appeared on stage naked and blindfolded and tried to kill a live chicken with a machete (the chicken lived).

Writing was Gold's calling, though, and his deep curiosity combined with his distinctive, artful prose made his work a must-read. Although he would become famous for

Chef Darren Sayphraraj, from We Have Noodles (FoodBowl Next Gen winner)

What did Jonathan Gold mean to you personally and to Los Angeles in general?

A: We forget all the neighborhood spots that you have to wait in line for now, post-J Gold review. He was a champion for the little mom-

and-pop small business. He was a beacon for chefs, cooks, restaurateurs and the countless other employees that show up day in and day out to feed people in this huge city.

There are few true food journalists left that are doing their work and showing you something with a point of view. We lost a true journalist in J Gold and there will never be a replacement for him, he was so embedded in L.A.'s culture.

Do you have a particular fond memory of Jonathan?

A: Jonathan Gold did dine at We Have Noodles once. I remember being scared shitless seeing him walk through the door. My biggest regret was never introducing myself to him at the time and at various food events. You also never know with food critics. He has eaten my food, which I am honored to have fed him.



Gold wrote frequently about the variety of Chinese and other Asian restaurants from San Gabriel Valley to Orange County. He was able to eat anonymously but eventually gave up when he was recognized.

Left to right: The Golds at Pann's; the family gathers on the steps in 2008; celebrating a birthday.



his food criticism, he was an equally gifted art and music writer and became *L.A. Weekly's* music editor. Gold covered hip-hop, grunge and the rise of gangsta rap in the 1980s, spending days in the studio with Eazy-E and the rest of the group N.W.A and earning the nickname Nervous Cuz from Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg.

Counter Intelligence, his signature restaurant column, first appeared in the *L.A. Weekly* in 1986. It quickly became an indispensable dining guide for Angelenos, giving them a way of discovering their own city.

Gold's first *Times* byline appeared in 1988, a review of the Sherman Oaks bistro Mistral. He became the paper's official restaurant critic in 2012, after working as New York restaurant critic at *Gourmet* magazine and as *L.A. Weekly's* restaurant critic. He wrote more than 1,550 print stories for the *Times* during his career.

With his suspenders, slightly rumpled button-down shirt, mustache and mop of feathery strawberry blond hair, Gold was an easy-to-spot silhouette around town, peering through the order window of his favorite food trucks and sending chefs into near-panic when he would show up at restaurants unannounced.

Affectionately known as J. Gold, he explored L.A. in



his beat-up green Dodge Ram 1500, racking up 20,000 miles a year as he traversed the sprawling city in search of his next great meal. He sought out places that felt emblematic of the city, and the resulting reviews bore a distinctly Los Angeles feel.

Gold hoped his food adventures through the city's many immigrant enclaves would help break down barriers among Angelenos wary of venturing outside their comfort zone. In the process, he made L.A.'s enormity and diversity feel accessible and became one of the city's most insightful cultural commentators.

"I am trying to democratize food and trying to get people to live in the entire city of Los Angeles," he said in a 2015 interview with *Vice*. "I'm trying to get people to be less afraid of their neighbors."

Gold pioneered a different approach to restaurant criticism. His reviews were predominantly positive; he renounced his anonymity in 2015; and he dismissed the notion of starred reviews and cheered the stuffy Michelin Guide's departure from Los Angeles in 2010.

"He was a trailblazer and he really did change the way that we all write about food," said Ruth Reichl, who edited Gold at the *Times* and at *Gourmet*.

Heralded for sensory prose that often read more like poetry than rote review, Gold penned evocative descriptions of food interwoven with a healthy sprinkling of pop culture references. His unusual and frequent use

Chef Suzanne Goin, from Lucques (#15 on Jonathan Gold's 101 Best Restaurants in L.A.), A.O.C. (3 stars *L.A. Times*) and more

What did Jonathan Gold mean to you personally and to Los Angeles in general?

A: Jonathan Gold was the king of Los Angeles. He was our king and also our cheerleader. He believed in L.A. and saw its greatness long before the word got out

and we became known as the food city of the moment. He loved real L.A.—the small out-of-the-way spots that other writers never sought out or bothered to explore. He really did change the dynamic and momentum of food writing first in L.A. but then all over the country.

Do you have a particular fond memory of Jonathan?

A: I was lucky to know Jonathan personally and to have actually traveled with him to Rio years ago. He was such a completely authentic and original person who believed

in what he believed long before it happened to be cool. I remember eating around Rio with him and how deeply he would immerse himself into every facet of every place we went. Hanging with Jonathan could really make you feel like you were somehow just scratching the surface, but he always wanted to swoop you up into his world and spread his love of exploring and food and life. He was intense and intimidating in a way, but then so warm, funny, bright and ever so generous with his spirit.

Los Angeles Times

FIVE RULES FOR DINING IN LOS ANGELES

ONE: IF THE RESTAURANT YOU HAVE BEEN DIRECTED TO LIES BETWEEN THE SEVEN-ELEVEN AND THE DRY CLEANERS IN A DUSTY STRIP MALL, THEN YOU'RE PROBABLY AT THE RIGHT PLACE.

TWO: THE RESTAURANTS WITH THE LONGEST LINES ARE EITHER BETTER THAN THEIR COMPETITORS OR FIFTY CENTS CHEAPER. TRY AND KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.

THREE: THERE IS NO SHAME IN AVOCADO TOAST.

FOUR: THE BEST CHOICE IS ALWAYS THE RESTAURANT FIFTEEN MINUTES FURTHER THAN YOU ARE WILLING TO GO.

FIVE: THE TACO HONORS THE TRUCK

Our thanks to Jonathan Gold, who taught us so much about food, culture and Los Angeles.



of the second-person point of view made readers feel like they were sitting across the table from him. A passage in his review of Koreatown galbi jjim specialist Sun Nong Dan epitomized the approach:

"If you have ordered it with cheese—you have to order it with cheese—a waiter scoops a big handful of white gratings over the top and bazookas it with a torch, creating

several small fireballs along the way for effect until the mass breaks down into oozing, char-flecked rivulets that stretch from your chopsticks like pizza goo," he wrote.

In 2007, when he was writing for the *L.A. Weekly*, Gold became the first restaurant critic to win the Pulitzer Prize for criticism. The judges praised his "zestful, wide-ranging restaurant reviews, expressing the delight of an erudite eater." He remains the only food critic to have won the prestigious award and was again a finalist in 2011.

The self-described "belly of Los Angeles" also won numerous James Beard Foundation journalism awards during his career, including the M.F.K. Fisher prize for



JONATHAN GOLD AND LAURIE OCHOA AT USC ANNEBERG SCREENING AND PANEL DISCUSSION OF "CITY OF GOLD."

In honor of Jonathan Gold and Laurie Ochoa and their influence on food journalism and education, the USC Annenberg School of Journalism congratulates the winner of the Impact Award.

USC Annenberg
School for Communication
and Journalism



From left: Gold enjoying drinks with chef Mary Sue Milliken and her husband, architect Josh Schweiter; preparing a meal at home.

distinguished writing in 2011 and, in May, the Craig Claiborne Distinguished Restaurant Review Award.

A voracious reader as much as a voracious eater (as far as anyone could tell, his only aversions were to eggs and peanut butter, although he loved peanuts), Gold was famed for his extensive knowledge of whatever subject he was tackling. In addition to being able to vividly describe how a dish tasted, he was just as likely to rattle off its provenance, obscure ingredients and evolution. His boundless curiosity and meticulous research afforded him a credibility unmatched by other critics.

His reviews were compiled into a book, *Counter Intelligence: Where to Eat in the Real Los Angeles*, in 2000. Gold was also the subject of a 2015 documentary *City of Gold*, which followed him as he explored and ate his way through the city.

Friends have called him L.A.'s translator, its guide and the conduit for the stories of the city. He is survived by his wife, *Los Angeles Times* Arts and Entertainment Editor Laurie Ochoa, and their two children, 24-year-old Isabel and 15-year-old Leon.

Gold spoke often about how fortunate he was to do what he did for a living.

"I love going out to eat in the way a theater critic

loves theater. I love going to farmers markets. I love sticking my hands in pots," he said in an interview this year. "And it turns out food is a pretty good prism through which to view humanity."

Laurie Ochoa is the *Los Angeles Times* arts and entertainment editor and oversees the Sunday Calendar and Sunday Arts & Books sections. In the years she was editor in chief of the *LA Weekly*, the paper won more national journalism awards than any other alternative newspaper in the U.S., including its first Pulitzer Prize. She co-founded the journalism and fiction periodical "Slake: Los Angeles," was the executive editor of *Gourmet* magazine and, in her first tour of duty at the *L.A. Times*, was the paper's food editor. She is the co-author of *Nancy Silverton's Breads From the La Brea Bakery* and lives in Pasadena with her two children.



Chef Bryant Ng, from Cassia

What did Jonathan Gold mean to you personally and to Los Angeles in general?

A: I can't imagine a bigger champion of immigrants in Los Angeles than Jonathan Gold. Through his writing he helped us understand immigrant culture with food as the context, but with the human experience at its center. He not only helped us understand other unique neighborhoods in Los Angeles, he helped us understand our own neighborhoods better. He was the

string that held us all together. His influence is immeasurable.

There are countless stories of how he changed people's lives and livelihood by eating at their restaurants and sharing that experience through his writing. I'm one of those people. I can truly say that my family and I would not be where we are in life without his influence.

Do you have a particular fond memory of Jonathan?

A: Jonathan Gold was notorious for coming in late to restaurants just as they were closing, as a nice "Surprise! Here I am," moment. I

wasn't aware of this until it happened at my first restaurant, The Spice Table. The only problem was that we had ran out of some of the dishes I would have liked him to try. It left me with that feeling you get when you take a test and you know you didn't do as well as you could have. From that moment on, I would always save at least one of each dish at the restaurant in anticipation of him coming in. To this day, we do it at Cassia. When Jonathan passed, I realized that we were still saving one of each dish every night for him. That will never change.