

*After years of playing  
San Francisco's tough little sister, Oakland  
lands a starring role in its own  
remake story. Meet the cast of characters  
behind this classic comeback.*

*By Josh Sens | Photographs by Thomas J. Story*

# EASTSID



**THE TASTEMAKER**

*Alanna Rayford*  
Founder, Urban Stitch

# THE STORY

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**ENNY WILLIAMS** eases his Prius onto Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, heading downtown on a trip through time.

“That was a club called the Showcase Lounge,” he tells me, pointing to an office building whose art deco façade hints at the history behind it. “I won a few talent shows there in the late ’60s. I guess you could say it’s where I got my start.”

It’s midday, misting. Driving through the drizzle, Williams counts down the side streets. 23rd. 22nd. 21st. As the numbers dwindle, his memories swell. At around 20th Street in the Uptown neighborhood, restaurants, bars, and shops spread in the shadows where grand department stores once stood. Condos bloom here and there.

The former Sears building stands cloaked in scaffolding, the new corporate home for Uber, which purchased the property last fall. Around the corner is The Fox Theater. An ornate movie palace during Williams’s boyhood, The Fox went dark for decades before reawakening as one of the best live-music venues on the West Coast. Its marquee announces the week’s headliner: Van Morrison, in town for three shows.

We turn onto Broadway, and Williams idles at the entrance of the now-closed Sweet’s Ballroom. “I snuck in to see James Brown here when I was a kid,” he says. “Etta James, Count Basie, B.B. King. Pretty much anybody who was somebody, they played here.”

With gray-flecked hair, a velvet voice, and the easy grace of a seasoned stage performer, Williams is something of a somebody himself. The gold-record artist and former lead singer of Oakland-born Tower of Power came to fame in the 1970s, when his hometown, long renowned for its gospel-, blues-, and jazz-soaked music scene, was gaining notoriety. The postwar boom was over, and crime and drugs swept in. Oakland’s murder rate shot up to twice that of San Francisco and New York. Businesses shuttered. Residents set off for the suburbs. The ENTERING OAKLAND sign came to smack as much of warning as it did of welcome.

Something important had been lost, Williams says, yet he kept his roots here, raising a family in East Oakland and playing gigs at the bluesy holdovers that survived in the ascendant age of rap.

“Back in the day, you’d see people of all ages, colors, backgrounds milling around, and there was always something to do or see,” says Williams. “That’s why when I hear people saying that Oakland is gentrifying and becoming this or that, to me it doesn’t ring right. The way I look at it, what’s really happening is that Oakland is returning to what it used to be.”

#### PORTRAITS OF A CITY

A magnet for marquee musicians, the reborn Fox stands tall in Uptown; Lake Merritt, an oasis in the concrete jungle; legendary soul singer Lenny Williams surveys the scene outside the now-defunct Esther’s Orbit Room, a club where he once played.

**REBIRTH. REINVENTION.** No matter how you cast it, this much is clear: Oakland has arrived, and in a big way. At a time when we’re breathlessly renewing our love affair with cities, few have enjoyed as much affection as Oakland. Celebrated for its heterogeneity (more than 125 languages are spoken here) and hailed for the breadth





**THE PIONEER**

*Lenny Williams*  
Gold-record artist

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PASS



**THE POWERHOUSE**  
*Libby Schaaf*  
Mayor of Oakland

and depth of its cultural life, San Francisco's upstart neighbor has transformed into a haven for artists, a hub for innovators, and a hotbed for independent retail shops and restaurants.

So many publications have labeled Oakland "the new Brooklyn" that you'd swear there was a campaign pushing for a name change. Such comparisons are meant as compliments, and they get at certain truths. But as many locals see it, they gloss over the character of a city that stands securely on its own.

I've lived here for 25 years, and I've watched Oakland grow up in the same way I've watched my children grow up: little by little, then all at once. It started in 1999 with then-mayor Jerry Brown and his pledge to bring 10,000 new residents downtown. Next came the live-work lofts dotting the outskirts of Jack London

Square followed by fresh jolts of funding, both public and private, to help defibrillate landmark buildings like The Fox. Then things went into hyperdrive: Between 2010 and 2014, Oakland added 3,000 residential units, and in 2015 alone, 4,273 new businesses laid stakes in the

#### OAKLAND'S FIRST LADY

Libby Schaaf stands with owner Wei Nin Wu outside Shanghai Restaurant in Oakland's Chinatown. She's bullish on the city's rebirth, but Schaaf wants to make sure Oakland doesn't lose its magic.

city—mom-and-pop grocers, galleries, tapas joints—more than the year before.

At times, the transfigurations can seem disorienting. You awake one morning to find tattoo sleeves are suddenly in, craft beer is as common as cappuccino, and boutiques are surviving on nothing but skinny jeans and air plants.

It'd be easy to write this off as the latest hipster hallucinations, but that too doesn't ring right. What's happening in Oakland runs much deeper and speaks to the creativity and resilience of the people who built, and are rebuilding, the city. It can't be explained with tired memes. If I wanted to understand this new Oakland, I'd have to seek out the artists, politicians, and businesswomen who are shaping these changes.

And that's what led me, on a gray afternoon, to City Hall and the office of newly elected mayor Libby Schaaf.

"WHAT MAKES OAKLAND different is our 'secret sauce,'" the mayor answers cheerfully when I ask her to describe her city. Schaaf, an Oakland native, is a most approachable power broker, a polished politician who channels the chipper spirit of the friendliest mom at a neighborhood potluck.

Still, her phrase—"secret sauce"—sounds canned to me, until I give her time to tease out the idea.

The ingredients, she says, include progressive values, creative energy, and a gritty authenticity borne of Oakland's deep blue-collar roots. In her eyes, these qualities season a city whose port, railroads, and shipyards have, over the decades, helped forge a natural melting pot. And that bubbling cauldron, Schaaf says, doesn't just contain a mix of people. It's also filled with new ideas, making Oakland a lively place for innovation, both high-tech and homespun.

The Popsicle was born in Oakland, the mayor reminds me. So, for that matter, was Pandora radio.

Schaaf often rides around town in a "snail car," a Volkswagen Beetle customized by a local artist to resemble a garden mollusk, with flame-spouting antennae sprouting from its roof. It's an apt official vehicle in a convention-shirking city where, Schaaf says, "I can be driving home and not be surprised to see someone juggling fire while walking a slack line in a park."

An unabashed civic booster, Schaaf makes a public point of putting her money where her mouth is, stocking up on produce at local farmers' markets and styling herself in local fashions. Last fall, while searching for an outfit for her 50th birthday, the mayor turned to Alanna Rayford, founder of Urban Stitch, a second-story boutique on Broadway with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking several bustling Uptown blocks.

Rayford is standing before one of those windows, rearranging a display of dresses, when I stop by one Friday afternoon.

"I can't help myself," she says. "I'm constantly moving things."

Her light-filled shop shows off clothes and jewelry from more than 20 mostly Oakland-based designers, including a line by Erica Varize, whose fuchsia dress with an African-print panel Rayford selected as the mayor's birthday party gown.

Rayford was raised in the suburbs south of San Francisco. She studied fashion in Los Angeles, then worked as a wardrobe stylist in Hollywood and later as a buyer for Bebe before leaving the corporate world. In her mid-20s, she launched fashion pop-ups in San Francisco to showcase local design talent but was soon priced out.

"San Francisco was the cool place at the time, but it felt disconnected," Rayford says. "I remember looking at a space that was going to cost me \$10,000 a month. And thinking, 'This doesn't feel right.'"

Rayford started spending time in Oakland, a city she'd built ties to in her late teens when she'd take Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) into town to get her hair done. ("Nothing against the South Bay," she says, "but there weren't a lot of places there that knew what to do with a black woman's hair.") On those trips to Oakland, she was struck by the preponderance of people like her. "I don't mean just racially," she says. "I mean people who were interested in getting to know one another, in helping one another, in making their city a better place."

She eventually moved to Lake Merritt, staging fashion pop-ups and keeping an eye out for a permanent location. When she stumbled on the vacant space that would become Urban Stitch, it took an instant before it hit her: The former tenant was her old salon.

"Oakland's like that," says Rayford. "You have these stories and relationships that all seem to connect back on one another."

It's late afternoon when we step out onto Broadway. The daylight is fading, and the sidewalks are filled with people. Every few steps, Rayford stops to chat.

Across Telegraph, a jazz trio plays at a new beer hall. We weigh our options for the evening. There are drinks at Tamarindo Antojeria Mexicana downtown, where owner Alfonso Dominguez mixes cocktails from small-batch tequila and mezcal. A little booze and bar food might go down nicely, followed perhaps by a sundae at Little Giant, a nearby ice cream shop whose co-owner Kevin Best is often behind the counter, sleeves rolled up, scooper in hand.

You see this a lot in Oakland. The owner-operated ethos is central to the self-image of a city that relishes its status as an underdog, regardless of how dubious that status may now seem. Although commercial rental prices in Oakland are a far cry from the fevered heights of San Francisco's market, the city is still a long way from cheap. Last fall, the city became the fourth most expensive rental market in the nation according to Zumper's National Rent Report.

Buying is no bargain either. The median home price in Oakland is now \$568,750, a 13.8 percent jump from last year. In the Temescal neighborhood, where I bought my home nearly 20 years ago for roughly the same price that my neighbors now pay for their Teslas, a two-bedroom bungalow recently fetched \$979,000. The new owners clinched their bid by offering all cash.

In the midst of this real estate boom, the ever-optimistic mayor hopes to, as she puts it, "reinvent the gentrification story." When Uber announced that it had purchased the old Sears building and intended to build its global headquarters here, Schaaf responded by writing an open letter to the car-ride giant, urging it to help protect "the magic" that attracted it to Oakland in the first place. Among her suggestions: Uber should forget about building a cafeteria and encourage its employees to frequent local restaurants instead.

**SABRINA MUTUKISNA** is sitting at a round table outside a busy commercial kitchen downtown, her nose in a laptop. Her meal-delivery start-up, The Town Kitchen, combines good food with the kind of civic-mindedness people think of when they talk about keeping Oakland Oakland.

A former community activist who ran her own cupcake company on the side, Mutukisna launched The Town Kitchen last year with Jefferson Sevilla, Google's onetime executive sous chef. Later, her sister, Tara, an ex-Google engineer, joined the team as chief operating officer. The three came up with the idea of tying technology and culinary trends into a project with a social-justice bent.

Lots of Oakland food businesses source locally, but The Town Kitchen does so down to its staff, which is made up of local youth, many of whom grew up in foster homes. A group of them, ages 16 to 25, cook under Sevilla's guidance, turning out an ever-changing menu of delivery-ready items, from seared falafel cakes to Thai chicken lettuce wraps with pickled bamboo shoots.

The Town Kitchen takes orders online,



dispatching more than 3,000 lunches a month to the many office workers intent on eating well without leaving their desks.

Yet for all the focus on cuisine, culinary training is a small part of the company's broader mission, which aims to develop business and management skills while paying its workers a sustainable wage.

"I'd be a hypocrite if I said I don't enjoy sitting in a hip cafe sipping single-origin espresso," Sabrina Mutukisna tells me. "But there comes a point where if people who are from here can't afford to stay here, the city starts to lose its identity."

This sense of social consciousness infuses much of Oakland's growing culinary chic. You see it in the actions of native son James Syhabout, the Michelin-star chef behind Commis and Hawker Fare, who gives proceeds from his restaurants to area public schools. You see it in projects like LocoL, a high-minded fast-food

#### STUDY IN CONTRASTS

A gondola crosses Lake Merritt; the Mutukisnas, Sevilla, and Sarah Taylor (second from left) of The Town Kitchen aim to create good jobs, empower local youth with culinary and business skills, and feed desk jockeys sustainably.



**THE START-UPS**

*Sabrina Mutukisna,  
Jefferson Sevilla, Tara Mutukisna*  
Cofounders, The Town Kitchen

concept from Oakland-based chef Daniel Patterson and Los Angeles chef Roy Choi, who've partnered to bring better-quality grub (and higher-paying jobs) to underserved neighborhoods around the country.

They plan to open an East Oakland location, as well as an outpost in Uptown, adding to a city whose culinary scene is in dramatic flux—along with nearly everything else.

**LENNY WILLIAMS** steers the car past the Paramount Theatre, another movie palace turned A-list performance venue. “I did a show there last September,” he says, gesturing out the window.

It warms his heart that Oakland’s music scene is thriving again, even if its heartbeat isn’t where it used to be. When Williams was growing up, all the action was along Seventh Street in West Oakland, which was once lined with jazz and blues clubs.

We drive there now. At the West Oakland BART station, he hops out to stroll along the Walk of Fame, a gold-star tribute to the musical luminaries who either hailed from Oakland or dazzled local audiences. Gazing down as he walks, Williams reads off the names: Billie Holiday, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles. He stops, smiles. He’s standing on a star bearing his own name.

We get back in the car and drive on, down narrow residential streets where Williams spent his boyhood, a hodgepodge of refurbished Victorians and chain-linked vacant lots. Turning onto 12th Street, he sees another familiar spot. There before us stands a boxy building, its windows boarded over, its nondescript profile giving little indication that it has any stories to tell.

“The Continental Club,” Williams says. “Ike and Tina Turner. The Temptations.”

He pauses.

“I heard some young guy bought it.”

And indeed some young guy has. It’s scheduled to reopen this summer.

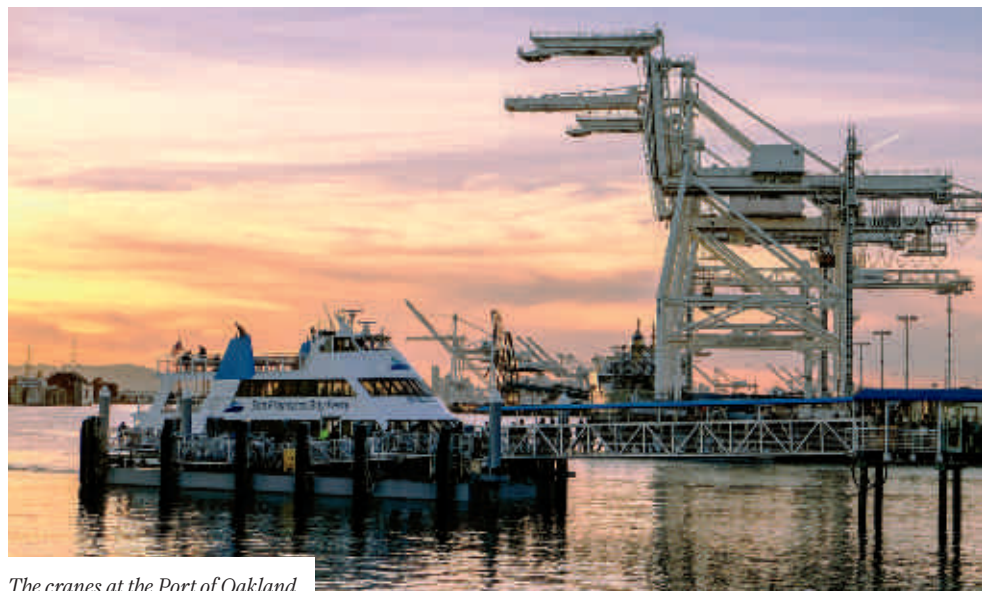


# THE OAKTOWN LOWDOWN

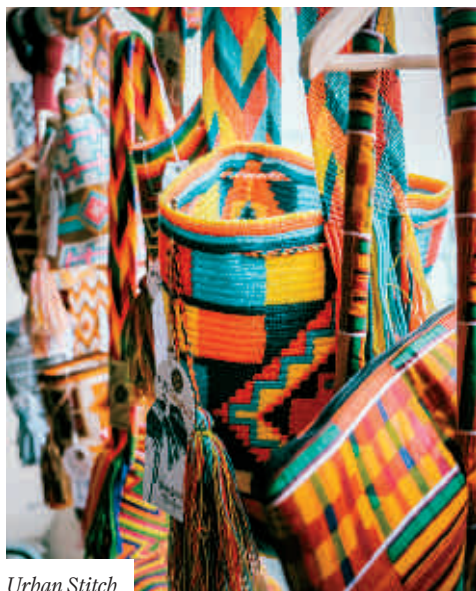
Want the 411 on the 510? Here's where to eat, drink, shop, and play, from Uptown to Downtown, Rockridge to Temescal.



Pineapple-jalapeño margarita at Tamarindo Antojeria



The cranes at the Port of Oakland



Urban Stitch



Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon



Owner Alyab Baker at Show & Tell

## FOOD Homestead

Inside a Julia Morgan–designed building, this farm-to-fork eatery stays true to its name, down to the freshly churned butter. For breakfast, it offers everything from salads and *strata* to doughnuts and fruit. \$; 4029 Piedmont Ave.; [homesteadoakland.com](http://homesteadoakland.com).

## Juhu Beach Club

Star chef Preeti Mistry, of *Top Chef* fame, puts a modern spin on Indian street food. Diners can't get enough of the *pavs*—slider-size sandwiches—alongside snacks such as Desi Jacks, a spicy twist on the old Cracker Jack recipe. \$\$\$; 5179 Telegraph Ave.; [juhubeachclub.com](http://juhubeachclub.com).

## Mamacitas Cafe

It's not hard to feel the love at this Kickstarter–fueled cafe, where the drinks are squeezed from locally roasted beans and warm doughnut kebabs are served on Fridays. The cafe is staffed by young women enrolled in a job-training program. \$; 1714 Franklin St.; [mamacitascafe.com](http://mamacitascafe.com).

## Miss Ollie's

Barbados native Sarah Kirnon brings the flavors of the Caribbean to Old Oakland at this casual eatery, with dishes such as salt-fish ackee, curry goat, and more. She also makes the best fried chicken in the 510—which is saying a lot. \$\$; 901 Washington St.; [realmissolliesoakland.com](http://realmissolliesoakland.com).



OwlNWood owner Rachel Konte



Homestead's dining room



Nutella-stuffed doughnut kebabs from Mamacitas

### Picán

A deep bourbon roster and a comfort food-focused menu are two highlights here. Dishes are a riff on classics from the Southern canon, such as fried green tomatoes and jambalaya. Come Sunday brunch, they put bacon in everything. \$\$\$\$; 2295 Broadway; [picanrestaurant.com](http://picanrestaurant.com).

### Shanghai Restaurant

Dumpling devotees head to this hole-in-the-wall—located in the heart of Oakland's small, vibrant Chinatown—for *xiao long bao* (Shanghai-style soup dumplings). Shredded eel, green onion pancakes, and other Chinese favorites round out the menu. 930 Webster St.; (510) 465-6878.

### DRINK

#### Calavera

Here, even the humblest cocktails display a dash of molecular magic (yes, that's sea foam on your Salt Air margarita). Other treats include an Old-Fashioned made with *mole* bitters, and the hibiscus-infused gin and tonic. 2337 Broadway; [calaveraoakland.com](http://calaveraoakland.com).

#### Flora

The setting in this eatery is classic art deco. To match the milieu are elegant drinks, from the evocatively named Sophia Loren to the Salt & Pepper, made with gin, lemon, grapefruit, and volcanic black salt. 1900 Telegraph; [flora.oakland.com](http://flora.oakland.com).

#### Tamarindo Antojeria Mexicana

This classy mother- and son-owned joint turns out Mexican-inflected variations on the mojito and the Greyhound, along with margaritas tricked out with tamarind purée or chile salt. 468 Eighth St.; [tamarindoantojeria.com](http://tamarindoantojeria.com).

### SHOPPING

#### Atomic Garden

Sundry handmade goods, from garden tools to tea towels, fill this ecoboutique, with a focus on organic materials. Shoppers can even buy AG Scent No. 1, a perfume that mimics the store's smell. 5453 College Ave.; [atomicgardenoakland.com](http://atomicgardenoakland.com).

#### OwlNWood

Browsing this boutique feels like going on a treasure hunt. The wares include local, international, and vintage designs from the '70s, '80s, and '90s, from stylish clutches to kitschy tees. 45 Grand Ave.; [owlnwood.com](http://owlnwood.com).

#### Show & Tell

Find wallets and handbags, beard oil and psychedelic soap here, alongside clothing bearing feisty civic slogans, such as "Oakland Against the World." 1427 Broadway; [showandtelloakland.com](http://showandtelloakland.com).

#### Suru

Inspired by a trip to Japan, Nigerian-born Oaklander Baba Afolabi opened Suru. The shop spotlights fashions that celebrate the city's diversity and multiculturalism, such as a T-shirt that marries the iconic Oakland oak logo and the African acacia tree. 1624 Telegraph; [suruclothing.com](http://suruclothing.com).

### ART AND MUSIC

#### The Fox Theater

After decades of disuse, this gilded beauty made an epic comeback when it was purchased by the City of Oakland and refurbished in all its deco glory, from floor to (golden) ceiling. It now hosts big-name musicians, such as Sam Smith and Prince. From \$30; 1807 Telegraph; [thefoxoakland.com](http://thefoxoakland.com).

#### The New Parish

A relative newcomer, this venue showcases reggae, roots, rumba, rock, tango, and soul. For a small place, they bring in some mighty acts—Mos Def, Dave Chappelle, and George Clinton have all played here. From \$15; 1743 San Pablo Ave.; [thenewparish.com](http://thenewparish.com).

#### Oakland Museum of California

What do you get when you combine Gold Rush-era daguerreotypes, Richard Diebenkorn landscapes, and Dorothea Lange's archive? A tiny portion of the museum's 70,000-piece California art collection, which contains pieces from the 1800s to today. \$16; 1000 Oak St.; [museumca.org](http://museumca.org).

#### Paramount Theatre

Around the corner from The Fox, the Paramount shines, from colorful mosaic façade to meticulously restored interior. On any given night, you might hear rock 'n' roll, R&B, gospel, or soul inside. In April, they'll showcase The O'Jays. From \$5; 2025 Broadway; [paramounttheatre.com](http://paramounttheatre.com).

#### Saturday Stroll

First Fridays in Oakland are a massive street party of art, food, and music. For an experience more subdued and art-centric, Saturday Stroll is the ticket. More than a dozen galleries host artist talks, film screenings, and more. [oaklandartmurmur.org](http://oaklandartmurmur.org).

#### Yoshi's

This sushi-and-jazz joint has brought tunes to the East Bay for decades. The audience forms a semicircle around the stage, which means there isn't a bad seat in the house. From \$20; 510 Embarcadero West; [yoshis.com](http://yoshis.com). —Josh Sens and Megan McCrea

**S DIGITAL BONUS**  
Find 16 more spots we hella love at [sunset.com/oakland](http://sunset.com/oakland).