



Restaurants

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25 Best Restaurants 2009

Our experts scoured the state to find elite dining establishments old and new. How did they fare? Read our Top 25 Restaurants list to find out. Feel free to comment on their findings.

Posted July 13, 2009

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Squeezed by rising food costs and customers cutting back, restaurants are trying harder than ever to please. The best of the best provide exceptional food, service, and ambiance at every price level—affordable luxury for lean times.

EDITOR'S NOTE: After our August issue had already been printed, Ox in Jersey City—one of our Top 25 restaurants—suddenly shut down, a victim of these tough economic times. We have removed it from the following honor roll and substituted the Pluckemin Inn in Bedminster. When we began working on the Dining Issue early this summer, the Pluckemin was a contender, but its highly promising new chef, Juan Jose Cuevas, was just getting acclimated. Since settling in, he has produced such a plethora of excellent food that we enthusiastically add the Pluckemin to our list.

AVENUE • Long Branch

Executive chef Dominique Filoni had a tough act to follow after chef Antonio Mora put the lustrous beachfront bistro on the culinary map. But since taking the helm in February, the 39-year-old native of Saint-Tropez has burnished the restaurant's French pedigree with a Provençal accent. Salt-crusted whole fish comes with a vegetable tian (a Southern French specialty of onion confit and layers of zucchini, eggplant, and tomato). "It definitely reflects where I come from and the entire Mediterranean basin," says Filoni, who first gained wide acclaim in 2004, when Food & Wine hailed him as one of "America's Best New Chefs." At Avenue, he has come into his own. 23 Ocean Ave, 732-759-2900, leclubavenue.com

BLACKBIRD • Collingswood

As his forearm tattoos and pharaoh-like beard suggest, chef/owner Alex Capasso isn't wishy-washy. Neither is his food, which he calls Franco-Italian—a mixture of French (after a stint at Brasserie Perrier in Philly) and Italian (his heritage), with some Asian influence. His flavors are sumptuous, as in a short rib-and-eggplant lasagna with fresh tomato compote, or a crispy chicken confit with succotash risotto. Yet the heartiness is delivered with finesse. 619 Collings Ave, 856-854-3444, blackbirdnj.com. BYO

BLU • Montclair

A self-taught cook who constantly experiments, does things his own way, has strong opinions, and charges bargain prices—could be a recipe for disaster. But in the hands of chef/owner Zed Arifai, the result is near genius. ([Click here to read story](#)) 554 Bloomfield Ave, 973-509-2202, restaurantblu.com. BYO

ELEMENTS • Princeton

"I'm super shy," says executive chef and partner Scott Anderson (below), explaining why he doesn't venture into the dining room. But there is nothing bashful about the ambitions of elements (despite its affectation of a lower case initial). Its combination of audacious food, informed service, and striking architecture make it one of the most significant openings of the last twelve months.

Looking at its stacked-stone walls and cantilevered roof, you would never guess the place used to be an auto-repair garage. "I like to cook for people who are open-minded," says Anderson, 35, one of three Ryland Inn alumni involved in the restaurant. A recent menu featured such riffs as ostrich carpaccio, skate paired with crosnes (crunchy tubers also known as Japanese artichokes), and sustainably farmed Japanese bluefin tuna with broccoli rabe, raisins, Marcona almonds, and cipollini onions.

Rather than stack the elements of a dish on the plate, the kitchen often presents them horizontally, sometimes with trompe l'oeil effects. What saves the presentation (most of the time) from preciousness is the clarity and interest of the flavor and texture combinations. Don't get the wrong idea. The dining room is no lecture hall. "Going out to dinner should be fun," Anderson says. "It should be lively and theatrical." And at the end of the night, satisfying. That is the most essential element, which elements delivers. 163 Bayard Lane, 609-924-0078, elementsprinceton.com

CHEZ CATHERINE • Westfield

Strange how you almost never hear a French accent in a dining room anymore—except here, where owner Didier Jouvenet, 60, is everywhere at once, encouraging patrons not to skip dessert (included in the prix-fixe menu), talking up French cheese, explaining the culinary traditions of Lyons, where he grew up. Meanwhile, from the kitchen of American chef C.J. Reycraft Jr. comes food eminently worthy of the buildup. 431 North Ave W, 908-654-4011, chezcatherine.com

COPELAND • Morristown

In Europe, hotels often harbor great restaurants. Here, not so much. Copeland is the exception, thanks to executive chef Thomas Ciszak. Born and trained in Germany, he came into his own at the Manor in West Orange before opening Copeland in the Westin Governor Morris Hotel in 2005. As befits a hotel restaurant, Copeland does it all: breakfast, lunch, dinner, Sunday brunch, tasting menu. A \$23 three-course lunch is a great way to experience such rewarding Ciszak dishes as a ravishingly good chicken paillard with English peas, morels, white asparagus, and sorrel pesto. 2 Whippany Rd, 973-451-2619, copelandrestaurant.com

CUCHARAMAMA • Hoboken

A two-time James Beard Award nominee as Best Chef, Northeast, Maricel Presilla is a scholar and explorer. Every dish, cocktail, painting, and artifact in the cozy restaurant represents a culinary or cultural experience she has brought back from her travels in South America. Small plates are the menu's glory. You can order off the extensive menu, which includes entrées, or, better yet, just have the kitchen cook for you. ([Click here to read a detailed review.](#)) 233 Clinton St, 201-420-1700, cucharamama.com

CULINARIANE • Montclair

Regulars may be secretly pleased that Ariane Duarte did not win Bravo TV's Top Chef. Why would they want to lose her and her cornmeal-crust oysters, plump crabcake, juicy coriander-rubbed pork chops with cheddar grits, and other winning New American dishes? Then there are husband Michael's pleasing desserts, including seasonal fruit cobbler. The Duartes' tiny corner storefront in a residential neighborhood, away from Montclair's Restaurant Row, is worth seeking out. 33 Walnut St, 973-744-0533, culinariane.com. BYO

DARYL • New Brunswick

Pairing a host of small plates with more than 60 wines by the glass in 2-, 4-, or 6-ounce pours makes for ultimate flexibility. (To subtract confusion, simply order the wine suggested for each dish.) Nibbling from executive chef David Drake's eclectic menu is fine fun. Let's see: celery root and pear soup, then mini burgers with blue cheese and caramelized onions, caviar, and crème fraîche arepas... 302 George St, 732-253-7780, darylwinebar.com

DAVID BURKE FROMAGERIE • Rumson

Yes, the Fromagerie offers cheese courses, but we like to think of it as the David Burke Menagerie, and not just for the signature "hot and angry lobster" appetizer, so good it's hard to eat slowly, or the crunchy, coated "cheesecake pops," a joke that's fun to eat. As prepared by chef de cuisine Jared Calderone, the food is lively, amusing, and delicious. PS: Be sure to see the amazing collection of antique toys and knickknacks on the second floor. 26 Ridge Rd, 732-842-8088, fromagerierestaurant.com

DAVID DRAKE • Rahway

HOME	RESTAURANTS	LIFESTYLE	JERSEY SHORE
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At 50, the Summit native has become one of the more influential chefs in the state. But with two restaurants to run, he isn't resting on laurels or his baby lettuces. His flagship can still be counted on for fine service and gustatory triumphs such as seared sea scallops with caramelized endive, morels, and a sherry reduction. 1149 Irving St, 732-388-6677, daviddrakes.com

DUE MARI • New Brunswick

This year, the partners behind 2-year-old Due Terre ("Two Lands") opened Due Mari ("Two Seas"). Some of its best dishes come right from the Bernardsville mother ship, including the peerless pasta tasting. It's a tough call, but Due Mari gets the nod for the quality and range of its seafood (try the gnocchi with tomatoes, crab, and sea urchin), its larger and more comfortable space (we love the oval bar), and its new brick, wood-burning pizza oven. 78 Albany St, 732-296-1600, duemarinj.com

FASCINO • Montclair

An Italian accent is always discernible in chef Ryan DePersio's menu, whether in a brilliant scallop crudo with chive-almond vinaigrette and crispy prosciutto or in a brace of sophisticated pastas. Only under duress do we share our side of crispy polenta fries. Mom Cynthia's desserts and brother Anthony's hospitality seal the deal. 331 Bloomfield Ave, 973-233-0350, fascinorestaurant.com

THE FROG AND THE PEACH • New Brunswick

A year after its silver anniversary, the F&P continues to shine under the polishing guidance of owners Betsy Alger and Jim Black. The big bar makes a wonderful perch, the garden room is bright and leafy, and the other spaces are handsome and interesting (except for three small tables under the staircase). Wherever you sit, you are in the good hands of chef Bruce Lefebvre, whose New American cooking never stints on flavor. At a recent lunch, pan-seared chicken breast was full of flavor, perfectly complemented by asparagus and nuggets of tasso ham in a rich amontillado sherry double chicken jus. And we've never found better sweet potato fries (here, served with terrific housemade ketchup). 29 Dennis St, 732-846-3216, frogandpeach.com

FUJI • Haddonfield

Resisting the trend towards flashy decor and novelty handrolls, Fuji serves superb traditional sushi and cooked dishes in a tranquil setting rich with fabric and natural wood. To experience all that chef Matt Ito is capable of, order one of his superlative tasting menus—omakase (5 courses, \$50) or kaiseki (8 courses, \$80-\$110). 116 East King's Highway, Rt 41, 856-354-8200, fujirestaurant.com. BYO

GIRASOLE • Atlantic City

New Jersey has more Italian restaurants than angel hair pasta has strands, so why is Girasole our favorite? The uniform excellence of its cooking, the ravishing marinated fish crudos, raw fish carpaccios and warm or chilled meat carpaccios, the big selection of brick-oven pizzas, the authentic pastas and risottos, and the invigorating, lovingly prepared secondi, or entrées. 3108 Pacific Ave, 609-345-5554, girasoleac.com

IZAKAYA • Atlantic City

Izakayas are the pubs of Japan. Some are devoted to sushi, others to the kebabs called robotayaki, others to noodles, others to all of the above. Some are stylish, some funky. All serve beer and sake, the latter a realm as broad as wine. Now, what are the odds that something so indigenous could be transposed to the scale and theatricality required of a casino restaurant? Not good. So it's a small miracle that Izakaya in the Borgata Hotel and Casino turns out to be the most exciting opening since we last compiled this list.

The sushi, sake, rice dishes, skewers, oysters, and Kinki chicken wings (aka Finger Food of the Year) are all perfect for sharing. The space is fascinatingly divided into sexy coves at different elevations where pin lights seem to make the darkness glow, and the people watching is terrific. Credit executive chef Michael Schulson, who caught the izakaya bug during a sojourn in Japan. 1 Borgata Way, 609-317-1000, theborgata.com

LORENA'S • Maplewood

Take one stove with six burners, and nine tables that seat 32. Add two lovers with a passion for modern French cuisine, and you get the 4-year-old love child of chef Humberto Campos Jr., and manager Lorena Perez Campos. His elegant, seasonal food has made most of his customers regulars. Summer offerings include a crêpe encasing jumbo lump crabmeat and field mushrooms; black angus hanger steak au poivre with braised onions and potato purée; and skate wing enlivened with fennel, black olives, capers, and lobster-shellfish broth.

"Balance of flavor is my priority," says Campos, a CIA grad who was raised in Rahway and helped open Nicholas in 2000. "I try to stir all the flavors on the palate—sweet, salty, sour, acid." His wife's gracious, attentive touch seals the deal. "Lorena's would not be the same without her," he insists. She, a native of

Santiago, Chile, was working as an ICU nurse when they met. Eventually they found their charming Maplewood nest. "Maybe if I'd been by myself I would've done something different," Campos says. "But it had to reflect both of us." She adds, "We always say we love our little restaurant. And that's why it works." 168 Maplewood Ave, 973-763-4460, restaurantlorena.com

MEHNDI • Morristown

"Hospitality isn't something you can be taught by the book," says Shaun Mehtani. (Don't tell them at hotel management school.) You can't really blame him for cockiness; he's only 25, but already vice president of operations for his family's company, which operates six Indian and Pan-Asian restaurants in the state, including Mehndi, the sophisticated flagship. And he did, in fact, grow up in the business (His mother, Sneha, and father, Satish, opened their first restaurant six days after he was born.)

Mehtani, who is working on a Dartmouth MBA, was the driving force behind the 2007 opening of Mehndi and its two adjoining sister restaurants. At Mehndi, Chef Munish Sharma's menu is rich in authentic Mughlai and Punjab cooking. Parda biryani, for example, is a cossetting Mughlai casserole of tender goat and basmati rice with saffron, cinnamon, clove, mint, green chili, and coriander paste, capped with a savory crust and steamed in the oven. A waiter opens the crust tableside, releasing the heady fragrances. 88 Headquarters Plaza, 973-871-2323, mehtanirestaurantgroup.com

NICHOLAS • Red Bank

The ideal of exquisite service in an elegant space with exceptional food (props to chef de cuisine Dave Santos) never fades at Nicholas. Memorable dishes such as Parisienne gnocchi and braised suckling pig abound on the reasonably priced menus (three courses \$59; six courses \$79). Nicholas and Melissa Harary have two young children but are still as devoted to the restaurant (which turns 9 in December) as they were when it alone was their baby. 160 Route 35 South, 732-345-9977, restaurantnicholas.com

NISI • Englewood

John Piliouras could have held on to what he had—a secure and prestigious position as longtime chef de cuisine of Molyvos, one of Manhattan's most acclaimed Greek restaurants. But when brothers Peter and Othon Mourkakos offered him the opportunity to open Nisi, their ambitious new Aegean restaurant, the 50-year-old leaped. "I was ready for a shorter commute from my home in Haworth," Piliouras explains. "But what really sold me was the chance to cook what I love and create my own menu."

The chef draws from his expertise in Greek cuisine and from his classical training at the Culinary Institute of America to imbue his food with subtle details that make it especially rewarding. A case in point are his marvelous sea scallops ketaifi. The scallops are wrapped in paper-thin, air-dried beef pastourma, wrapped again in Shredded Wheat-like ketaifi dough, pan fried, and served with two sauces: lemon butter emulsified with a little chicken stock and flavored with parsley, and a tangy-sweet reduction of balsamic Kalamata vinegar, Greek thyme honey, cinnamon, and bay leaf. 90 Grand Ave, 201-567-4700, nisirestaurant.com

PLUCKEMIN INN • Bedminster

In the Hard Act To Follow Department (see Avenue), the vacancy created at the Pluckemin Inn by the departure of long-time chef David C. Felton ranks high. (Felton has signed on with the much-anticipated Natirar Resort & Spa, the 491-acre Somerset County property being developed by Sir Richard Branson, head of Virgin Group.) But enough about these others. The arrival of executive chef Juan Jose Cuevas is a coup for the plucky owners of the Pluckemin Inn, Carl and Gloria LaGrassa. A native of Puerto Rico and an honors graduate of the CIA, Cuevas has a stunning resume: sous chef at Lespinasse, executive chef of Blue Hill in Manhattan, opening chef of 81 in Manhattan, to name a few. But enough of resumes. This guy's food is pure rapture. His salads are much more than the sum of their parts, his pastas ditto. His slow-cooked duck puts most others to shame. His halibut with pancetta, whole-grain mustard and Sauternes jus is meltingly delicious. At lunch, he elevates fish and chips, hamburgers, and sandwiches to rarefied levels. And, having arrived this spring, he is just getting started.

RESTAURANT LATOUR • Crystal Springs Resort, Hardyston

"There are definitely people who come for the wine list," admits executive chef Michael Weissaupt. "That's the big challenge for me in the kitchen. You've got to hold up to those wines." The list is world-class in breadth and depth. P.S.: the food more than holds up. Weissaupt's three- and seven-course prix-fixe menus are as dazzling as Latour's view of sunsets on the Kittatinny ridgeline.

1 Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548, crystalgolfresort.com

VARKA • Ramsey

Traditional Greek food, rustic and rewarding, ascends to elegance at this modern estiatorio with its vaulted ceiling and brawny wood beams. Brilliantly fresh whole fish are grilled and filleted with finesse. Tired of the same old fried calamari? Try executive chef George Georgiades' grilled whole calamari stuffed with feta, tomatoes, garlic, and herbs. 30 N. Spruce St, 201-995-9333, varkarestaurant.com

VERJUS • Maplewood

We've said it before, but it bears repeating: Charles Tutino's French cooking, while modern, reveals the verities of such timeless dishes as roast chicken with tarragon, boeuf bourguignon, apple tarte tatin, and many others in a way that makes their satisfying simplicity seem profound. And his wife and co-owner, Jane Witkin, is one of the state's warmest hostesses. 1790 Springfield Ave, 973-378-8990, verjusrestaurant.com

Edited by Eric Levin. Top 25 panel: Jill P. Capuzzo, Adam Erace, Karen Tina Harrison, Sam Kadko, Eric Levin, Stan Parish, and Rosalie Saferstein. Critics' Picks panel: Jill P. Capuzzo, Deborah Carter, Adam Erace, Emily Faherty, Mallory Gelert, Karen Tina Harrison, Sam Kadko, Eric Levin, Stan Parish, Ken Schlager, and Rosalie Saferstein. Reporting by Mary Ann Fusco.

Elemental pleasures: At elements in Princeton, one of the most significant openings of the last year, diver scallops are served with Bordeaux spinach, porcini mushrooms, pearl onions, local garlic scapes, and fennel top pesto.

Click here to read the 2009 Readers' and Critics' Choice Restaurant Poll.

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COMMENTS

Serenade conspicuously missing?

I'm stunned that Serenade in Chatham is missing from your list of NJ restaurants. I cannot fathom how some of these "fine dining" restaurants made your list at all, much less snubbing one of the best in the state.

This may be a readers' choice, but not mine.

Respectfully,

Warren Bobrow
<http://www.wildriverreview.com/wrratlarge/?tag=warren-bobrow>
Posted by: Warren Bobrow, None | Jul 29, 2009 19:45:36 PM |

Whispers and Serenade Missing

Having eaten at most of the restaurants on you top 25 list, I cannot imagine how Whispers of Spring Lake and Serenade of Chatham can be left off of any top restaurant list.

Posted by: Scott Bader, None | Aug 01, 2009 01:04:07 AM |

No Stage Left? No Restaurant Serenade?

Both Stage Left & Serenade are as good as, if not, better than the F&P. It's a shame to leave them off.

Posted by: Ken Robinson, None | Aug 06, 2009 00:07:48 AM |

What About Cape May?

Wow, not a single restaurant in Cape May on the critics list. The NY Times must have really screwed up when they called it "the culinary capital of New Jersey."

Posted by: Sharon, None | Aug 10, 2009 20:51:58 PM |

3West

3West in Basking Ridge used to be GREAT!!!!!! They had an amazing young chef who left to become a culinary teacher??!!? Now the place is like a corporate cafeteria. A real shame.

Posted by: Mark Peters, None | Aug 11, 2009 18:00:06 PM |

We can all "add" to the list our favorites...

...that are likely well deserved, however, all that aside, let's look at who doesn't deserve to be on this list... I'll cast the first stone at Avenue. or "Le Avenue"

Really? Avenue? Perhaps the majority of "readers" are Bennys or Paris Hilton wannabes, but the food there is horrible. The service usually matches it. Sure it has a 5\$ martini special, however 300+\$ bottles of Stoli vodka are also on the menu for that "velvet rope" crowd.

Some say the Lobster roll is okay, some even say it's good. I'd say it's a shame! Beautiful location and potential, but I'd have rather seen Windmill or Max's on the list!

Posted by: RPMcMurphy, None | Aug 13, 2009 16:54:02 PM |

25 Best Restaurants

None from Mercer County except Princeton? Come on, be real--this is THE restaurant capitol of NJ.

Posted by: HPSimer, None | Aug 13, 2009 17:33:37 PM |

Chez Catherine

Although it is a 45 minute drive from our home, we find the time to get there every two weeks, as we rate this in the top three in the state. As a couple who eat out about five times/week, we think we recognize amazing food and presentation when we see it.

Posted by: Nat & Julie Zucker, None | Aug 16, 2009 13:03:46 PM |

DIVINA RISTORANTE

One of the best restaurants missing from this list is definitely "Divina Ristorante", in Caldwell, NJ. For italian food, it is definitely the best. You must try it.

Posted by: Alex Aieello, None | Aug 26, 2009 03:49:06 AM |

Online and print versions of the top 25 are different

I have the print version of this article from NJ Monthly, and then found the online version of the list - and they are slightly different! Pluckemin Inn is in the online list, but not the print version. Instead, the print version lists Ox, in Jersey City.

Posted by: C P, None | Aug 26, 2009 17:53:27 PM |

Re: Online and print versions of the top 25 are different

Of course, after I posted this I now see the editor's note as to why...

Posted by: C P, None | Aug 26, 2009 18:08:17 PM |

Pluckemin Inn

The Pluckemin Inn is soooooo overrated! The staff was ok but hardly attentive. The food was fine but nothing special or memorable. It isn't worth the price and the experience was more frustrating than enjoyable. We won't be returning.

Posted by: Emily, None | Nov 03, 2009 14:54:13 PM |

Feedback re: Avenue

I am shocked to see Avenue listed as a top NJ restaurant. I've been there for dinner and the experience was so terrible that I later sent a detailed letter to the owner, which was completely ignored. Parking is difficult, and the valet service is a whopping \$10/car. There are attendants in the bathroom with a visible tip jar. After dinner, if you want to wander upstairs for music, you will be asked to wait outside on line. Based on the food and drink prices, these should all be complementary additions to the meal. I found the experience to be awful, and we will not return.

Posted by: Elizabeth , None | Dec 08, 2009 17:47:39 PM |

Top 25 Restaurants

I think that it is fair to say that the top 25 list will inspire a whole host of opinions from impassioned foodies. So here is mine. I think any list that does not include Char Steakhouse in Raritan does the public a disservice. NJ Monthly would do better to add some legitimacy to their picks by not requiring that the restaurants considered by ad space.

Posted by: Joseph Hoffman, None | Dec 09, 2009 23:19:21 PM |

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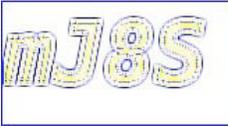
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