

The Best New Restaurants in America, 2024

Jeff Gordinier, Joshua David Stein, Omar Mamoon



The other day my son Jasper asked me what sounded like a simple question: "Dad," he said, "what is American food?"

Jasper is six years old, and we live in Southern California, which meant that in the course of the preceding week he and his twin brother had encountered Sonoran-style tacos, Lebanese kebabs, Vietnamese spring rolls, and several iterations of pizza. It is customary for first-time visitors in Los Angeles to remark on the multicultural multitude of the city's restaurant landscape, but only when you live here do you realize (as did the late California food critic Jonathan Gold) that the scope of its globe-hopping is immeasurable, that you can roll along miles and miles of boulevards such as Pico and Venice marveling at shopping centers that read like culinary maps of the world.

Los Angeles is both a culinary wonderland—as you'll notice here when you scroll down—and a national mirror. There never really has been any fixed, singular definition of American food, because the country and its cuisines—influenced by wave after wave of new arrivals—have remained in a state of perpetual transformation. The ultimate answer to Jasper's question is that American food, like American music, is something that's always in motion.

As are we. Our contributors to this, Esquire's 2024 list of the Best New Restaurants in America, happen to live in four of the country's great food cities: Amethyst Ganaway in Charleston, Joshua David Stein in New York, Omar Mamoon in San Francisco, yours truly in L.A. We reported from our home bases and took to the highways and the friendly skies.

At Vinai, a restaurant in Minneapolis, [chef Yia Vang](#) told us a story about how thousands of Hmong people were relocated to Minnesota from refugee camps in Asia after the end of the Vietnam War. At Bintü Atelier, an African restaurant in [Charleston](#), chef Bintou N'Daw gave us living proof that the delicious traditional dishes of her native Senegal and the delicious traditional dishes of South Carolina's Lowcountry are culinary siblings—and, in so doing, she coaxed us to ask why. In San Francisco, a hot spot called Four Kings urged us to keep Chinatown in our hearts, while Amy's Pastelillos in Philadelphia pulsed with Puerto Rican pride. All of these places nudged us to think in a new way about the weaving, wandering course of "American food." All of them are part of a story that, as we careen toward the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, keeps on unfolding. —Jeff Gordinier



RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR



Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Four Kings

San Francisco, CA



Pete Lee

Chinatowns are shrinking. It's happening everywhere in America—from Philadelphia to San Francisco, where I reside. San Francisco is home to the first and largest Chinatown in the country, but recently Sam Wo, a beloved restaurant that's 115 years old, announced that it could close its doors. Sign of the times: Sam Wo's owner is retiring at sixty-nine, and he doesn't want his children to inherit the legacy—restaurants are hard work. In other cities, the hungry beast of development has begun to gnaw at these important cornerstones of culture, cuisine, and community. Gentrification has no mercy and knows no bounds.

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Enter Four Kings, a soulful and vital Cantonese restaurant from chefs Franky Ho and Michael Long. Four Kings occupies what used to be a ramen shop in an alley in the heart of San Francisco's

Chinatown. In fact, it's right behind Sam Wo. You can't help but notice the symbolism: Ho and Long represent a new guard that could help bring Chinatown roaring back. You can feel the electric energy emanating from their shoebox space. Cantopop ballads blast from the speakers. Vintage posters of Hong Kong cinema stars decorate the walls. Woks go orange with waves of flame. Behind the wooden counter, you see the chefs cooking the dishes they grew up eating—and reinvesting in their community along the way. (Much of their produce comes from nearby Chinatown stands and storefronts.) Clay-pot rice beckons with thick slices of bacon and house-made lap cheong, a few grassy chrysanthemum greens, and a single luscious egg yolk that you mix into the chicken-fat-fortified rice. Black-pepper beef is made from an entire strip steak cooked pink on the inside, smothered in a glossy sauce on the outside, topped with a few whips of wok-fried broccolini, and delivered on a sizzle platter over a bed of sweet onions. There are only fifteen squabs per night, and that's because the cooking process takes ten days: The small birds are marinated, dry-aged, smoked, and deep-fried to order, resulting in skin that is ethereally thin.

This is why there's a line to get into Four Kings, and this is why that line gives me hope. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but I can't help but wonder whether Sam Wo will wind up getting rescued by its new neighbor. —Omar Mamoon

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Azizam

Los Angeles, CA





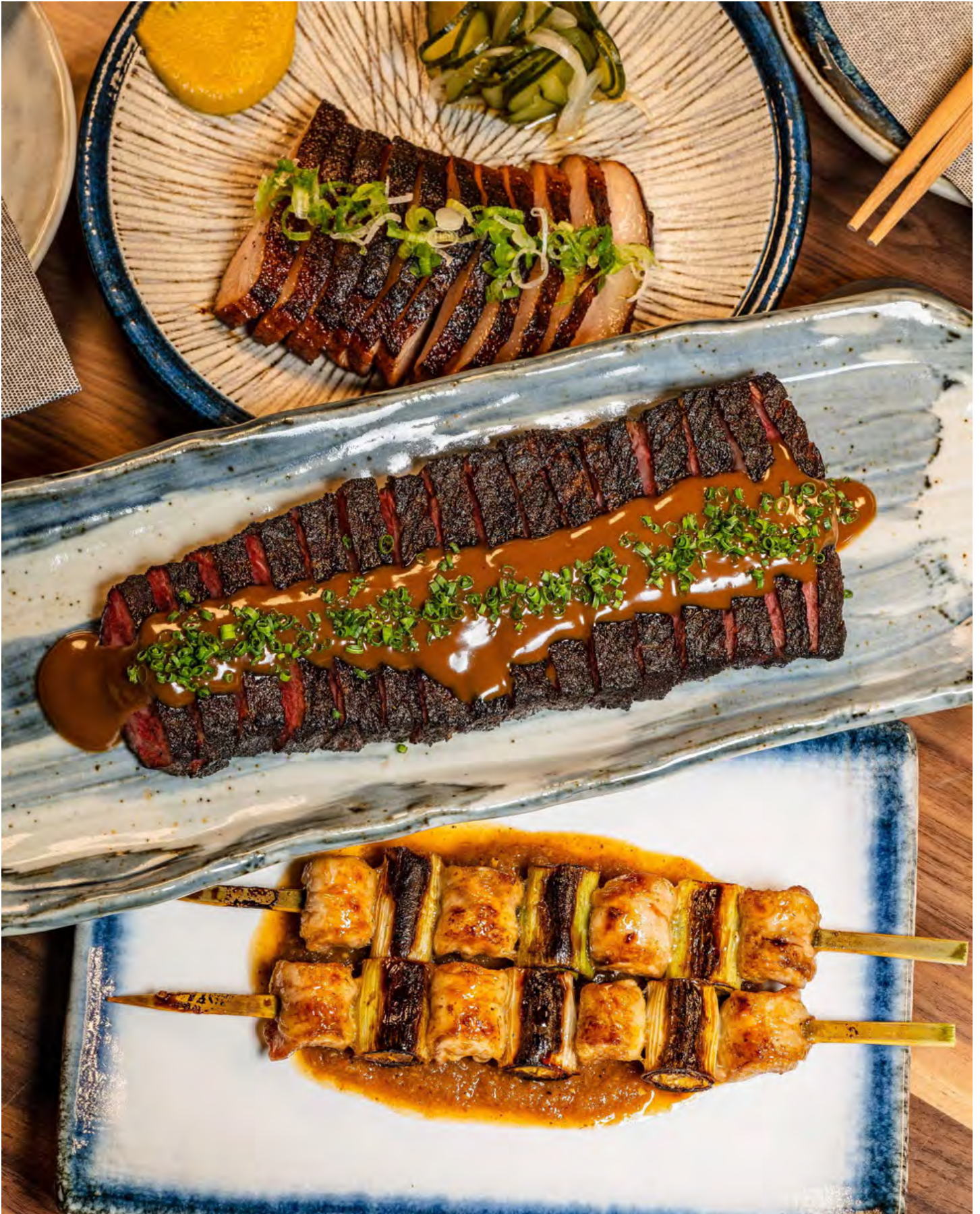
azizam

Cody Ma and Misha Sesar put it this way on Azizam’s website: “we believe in blurring the line between the front of house and back of house & hope this fluidity brings about a more honest form of hospitality.” This spirit pours out onto the Sunset Boulevard sidewalk like shafts of sunshine. At first glance, Azizam looks like an open-air Silver Lake literary salon. Even if you didn’t know that it serves delicious Persian food, you might be inclined to join the line out the door just because the people waiting in the line seem to possess some crucial information. They do. Azizam’s meatball is famous, and you’d be foolish to skip it. It’s kofteh Tabrizi, with its constellation of herbs and its pool of red broth and—hidden in the middle—the compressed sweetness of walnuts, barberries, apricots, and prunes. But the less showy dishes might wind up planting a daybed in your memory banks: the bowl of smashed green olives with pomegranate molasses, mint oil, and morsels of walnut, or the feni—a custard that looks mild only before you slide a spoon into it. Once you taste it, it roars with the flavors of cardamom and pistachio and rose. —JG

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Budonoki

Los Angeles, CA



Ira Edelman

Everything about Budonoki seems to say, “Seriously, do not take us seriously.” The menu is full of frolicking cartoon bears, and there’s a cocktail that costs \$150 if you steal the cute penguin mug it comes in. The room is dark and the bar is vast. Obviously you’re here to drink. But then the food starts coming, and it is no joke. Chef Dan Rabilwongse may sidestep a traditional approach to izakaya staples, but it’s hard to take issue with that when you can’t stop scooping spicy tuna into sheets of toasted nori and when the au poivre sauce that accompanies his Wagyu zabuton—like a steak in the shape of a swimming flipper—shimmers with so much flavor. They’re dead serious about cooking at Budonoki; they just don’t want that to get in the way of a good time. —JG

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Camélia

Los Angeles, CA





Camelia

Ease into one of the leather banquettes and glance at your table setting. To the left, across a folded napkin on top of a plate from Utsuwa-no-Yakata in L.A.'s Little Tokyo: a pair of chopsticks designed by Yota Kakuda. To the right, resting on a handmade ceramic ridge: a fork and a sharp knife from Sabre Paris. There are no accidents in this tableau. "A thousand details add up to one impression" is the mantra of the writer John McPhee, and if you pay attention, you'll see how every gesture at Camelia is meant to contribute to a narrative. The story is a romantic one, a love affair between France and Japan. So a chicken is roasted with koji and surrounded by a seaweed-flecked cream, while tender beef cheeks in a red-wine sauce come with the crunch of crispy burdock root and the zing of fresh wasabi. In less capable hands this lane-changing might lead to a pileup on the Fusion Freeway, but with chef Charles Namba at the wheel it feels natural, inevitable, expressive. (The single most beautiful dish I saw during a year of eating had to be Namba's "market vegetables in a variety of ways," whose blasts of orange and pink and green called to mind the cutouts of Henri Matisse.) As the co-owners of two beloved Los Angeles spots at which it is customary to imbibe, Tsubaki and Ototo, Namba and partner Courtney Kaplan know quite a bit about the art of pairing. Should you choose wine or sake? Both. Even better, listen to Kaplan and opt for a chilled glass of Kamoshibito Kuheiji "Sauvage," a sake that takes its inspiration from, yes, the French concept of terroir. It's all about the details. —JG

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Mae Malai Thai House of Noodles

Los Angeles, CA



Mae Malai

Microdosing is cool and all, but have you tried Thai boat noodle soup? Because for eight bucks and change it's hard to beat the mind-altering bowl of flavor that chef Malai Data serves in the middle of a shopping center on Hollywood Boulevard. The dark broth is thick with coconut milk and pork blood, spicy enough to make your brain start snapping like a bag of Jiffy Pop, and so crowded with different flavors that your thoughts will chase them around down cartoon alleyways: "Oh, that's sour ... but wait, what about that sweetness? ... And now I'm getting a sunburst of herbs!" Slow down, Captain Trips. Take it all in. There's a universe in that soup, and we haven't even gotten to the tom yum noodles. —JG

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Mori Nozomi

Los Angeles, CA





Mori Nozomi

You don't realize how rare it is until you sit down at the sushi counter: Your omakase experience this evening rests in the hands of three women. Patriarchal hierarchies have dominated the realm of elite sushi for so long that Mori Nozomi feels quietly revolutionary, and quiet itself is integral to the revolution: This is no place for bromakase whales who grab their phones and shout at their private-equity minions during service. This is a place to leave behind the clamor of Pico Boulevard, step into a white cube of calm, inhale deeply, and let chef Nozomi Mori and her team usher you through the symphonic movements of a meal. She tops a bed of warm rice with the meat of a Japanese hairy crab, then crowns that with the oceanic cream of the crab's innards. You might pick up the swell of violins and the rumble of timpani—even if you don't hear a sound. —JG

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

7 Adams

San Francisco, CA





Tara Rudolph

Life is all about choices. Serena Chow Fisher and David Fisher embrace this concept, so instead of forcing you to endure a four-hour tasting menu that gives you no control over what's coming next, the married duo put you in the driver's seat with something accessible, affordable, and downright fun. In this Bay Area spin on the French prix fixe model, you get five courses. You can choose each one. Do you want to start with a Hokkaido scallop with hazelnut oil and green strawberries, or a sweet and summery chilled corn velouté? For the pasta course, are you into English pea cappelletti or saffron cavatelli? Crispy-skinned black cod with a sauce Grenobloise or grilled pork collar? There are no wrong answers. But just to be careful that you don't miss anything, come with a loved one, select different routes, and share. —OM

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Charlie's Napa Valley

St. Helena, CA





emma k creative

Let's start with the Seafood Party, which features a bevy of sea creatures on ice. Luscious tongues of uni garnished with kiwi. Spicy marinated mussels. Crab legs with crab dip. How does he do it? Everything that chef Elliot Bell touches just tastes ... better. The oysters are colder and plumper. The fried chicken juicier. The steak ... steakier? Okay—it helps that Bell spent the past decade at a little nearby restaurant called the French Laundry. But here at Charlie's, he's setting aside the dainty tweezers and going for the jugular. —OM

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Alma Fonda Fina

Denver, CO





Shawn Campbell

Johnny Curiel stands behind the counter at Alma Fonda Fina like he's ready to pounce. There's more than technique guiding his movements as the chef assembles the pieces of a tuna tostada with smashed avocado, salsa macha, and dollops of mayonnaise that has been infused with the nutty tang of chichatana ants. Curiel's got the brassy smile and the coiled energy of a man on a mission: He's all taste this and try this and I want you to know about this. He was born in Guadalajara and became so determined to bring Mexican excellence to Denver that he and his wife, Kasie, sold their house to raise money for the restaurant. (The gamble paid off: About a year later, the restaurant landed its first Michelin star.) In that spirit, the team at AFF seems incapable of phoning anything in, whether it's the guacamole (with its anisey purr of hoja santa) or its avocado margarita (with the verdant fat of avocado puree giving the acid-treble cocktail some succulent bass notes). Tortillas, both corn and sourdough flour, have the heft and chew that only human hands can deliver, and the birria de borrego—a prodigious lamb shank towering over a lake of spice—makes osso buco look a wallflower. —JG

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Dogon

Washington, D.C.





Scott Suchman

A purple glow emanates throughout Kwame Onwuachi's Dōgon, an Afro-Caribbean restaurant on the bottom floor of the Salamander DC Hotel. The color feels triumphant, and it should: Dōgon represents Onwuachi's return to our nation's capital after having conquered New York with Tatiana in

Lincoln Center. With the help of chef de cuisine Martel Stone, Onwuachi has created a menu that tells a story about the cuisines of the African diaspora—and the city itself. Exhibit A: a roast chicken, marinated in a warm berbere spice and served with jollof rice, that nods toward both Nigeria and the district's vibrant Ethiopian community. Then there's Exhibit B: hoe crab, a dish in which picked plump pieces of the blue crustacean are stuffed back into a shell (hello, D.C.), topped with a spicy shito crunch (oh hey, Ghana), and served with roasted plantain hoecakes (sup, South!) as well as a creamy aji verde (we see you, Peru). —OM

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Itamae AO

Miami, FL





Michael Pisarri

Over time, restaurant experiences blend together. Menu items, design flourishes, fonts—you worry that everyone’s borrowing from everyone else. Itamae AO is the cure for sameness. Nando Chang’s cooking at his eight-seat counter is electric, and his flagrant use of acid is like a slap in the face—in the exciting way. He serves coils of slippery, sweet squid in a pool of leche de tigre made with fermented yuzu. He offers slices of grilled eel alongside a pink strawberry gel that’s fortified with aji panca, a Peruvian pepper. It’s sweet and sour and savory all at once, and it’s unlike anything else you’ve eaten this year. Or ever. —OM

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Little Sparrow

Atlanta, GA





Andrew Thomas Lee

Upon my deathbed, I shall remember one meal that was so rich it hastened my demise and so wonderful it was worth it. That meal was an unrepentant ode to decadence in a shopping center in Atlanta. Here Ford Fry cooks at Little Sparrow. Here he deploys butter, hundreds of pounds of it, across a fever dream of French bistro bangers. When Jacques Pépin wrote that “it’s hard to beat bread and butter,” he could have been talking about Little Sparrow’s (free!) bread service: a seventy-two-hour fermented bâtard accompanied by a generous peel of warm butter sprinkled with Maldon salt sitting on a plate of olive oil. The cheese pull from the French-onion soup—a mixture of Mahón and Gruyère—would make Philippe Petit grab his balancing pole. A saucisson—made with steak-frites trimmings from Bar Blanc upstairs—gives freely of its juices atop a divan of potato puree. Then there’s La Vie En Rose, a steak haché sitting in a pool of compound butter. It comes with a Lincoln Log cabin of thrice-fried frites tossed in beef fat. Why not double down? Order the raclette service so that you can pour melted cheese on top of the fries and let it commingle with butter and beef jus. Do not go

gentle into that good night. —Joshua David Stein

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Maxwells Trading

Chicago, IL





JEFF MARINI

If naan and green-onion pancakes had a baby, and that baby was dunked into a creamy dip inspired by French-onion soup, that'd be one delicious baby. Good news: Said spawn exists in real life, and you can find it at Maxwells Trading in Chicago's West Loop. Here chefs Erling Wu-Bower and Chris Jung have collaborated on a long and large menu on the theme of "let's cook what we want to eat." Their cooking is hard to define and impossible to label. Maybe you get a funky sea-bass tartare fortified with lemongrass, chile, and nasturtium from their rooftop garden, or maybe you realize that those tortellini happen to be soup dumplings. Wu-Bower and Jung get to play, and we get to partake. —OM

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Acamaya

New Orleans, LA





Denny Culbert

Acamaya is devoted to mariscos—Mexican seafood—and chef Ana Castro takes sourcing seriously. For example, she drives almost an hour each way to pick up plump blue lake crabs from Higgins Seafood in Lafitte. She boils the claws and tosses them in a charred and smoky salsa verde. For a different dish, she dresses crabmeat in a chiltepin mayo before scooping it into house-made sopas. But Castro isn't averse to seeking out pristine product from outside the Gulf of Mexico, too—plump Kumamoto oysters from the Pacific Northwest, say, or hamachi from Japan for her oceanic spin on al pastor. Castro goes the distance—whatever the distance may be. —OM

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Oun Lido's

Portland, ME



oun lidos

Oun Lido's is a joint venture from Bounahcree "Bones" Kim, a thirty-four-year-old Cambodian American, and Vien Dobui, who runs Công Tử Bột, Portland's best Vietnamese restaurant. Using Maine's rightfully lauded ingredients, cooking in a space that's still in the process of being built out, and tapping into hazy, precious memories of childhood, Bones turns out plates that brilliantly synthesize Cambodian and Cantonese flavors. Baptized in pungent homemade prahok, a Cambodian fish sauce, his beef salad topped with toasted rice powder is a salty-sweet-crunchy-meaty mouth party. The skin on the fried hot lemon chicken is as glassy as the water of Casco Bay. The mee kathung, another Khmer staple, made with broad rice noodles, is tangled with braised beef and served with an unusually rich five-spice gravy. It tastes like home, no matter where home is or what language one uses to describe it. —JDS

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below



The 5 People Redefining American Restaurants





Advertisement - Continue Reading Below



Vecino

Detroit, MI





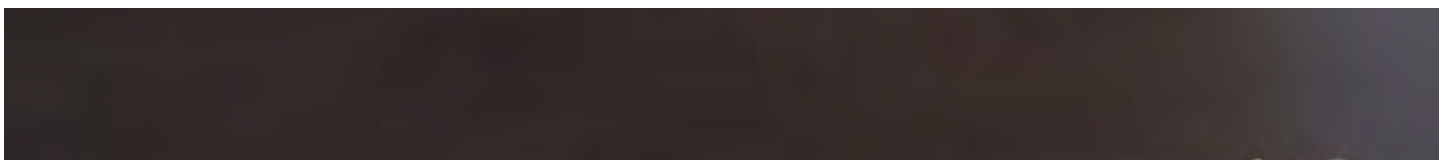
Jacob Lewkow

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

A blue-corn sope topped with crispy chunks of pork belly. A quesadilla laced with herbaceous epazote and meaty maitake mushrooms. A tuna tostada topped with frizzles of fried leeks. A butterflied fish painted with green and red salsas. Yes, this last dish is a clear nod to the legendary Contramar in Mexico City, and that's no accident. Born in Mexico's capital and raised in Detroit, where she worked at her family's taquerias, Adriana Jimenez wanted to bring a modern taste of Mexico City to her neighbors in Motor City. She enlisted the help of a talented pair, chefs Edgar Torres and Stephanie Duran, and together they're showing Detroiters the potential of what Mexican food can be. —OM

Vinai

Minneapolis, MN





Vinai

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Hmong is one of the most endangered languages in the world. The Hmong, an Indigenous people in China and Southeast Asia, many of whom fled to America after the Vietnam War, have sought to

preserve their storytelling by various means, most spectacularly through a tradition of ornate textiles full of covert symbology called paj ntaub. At Vinai, chef Yia Vang's new restaurant in Minneapolis, the language lives on the menu. Khoom Noj are snacks; Yog Peb Xwb are appetizers; Nqaij Hau are braised meats. It is the first menu that Vang's mother, who came to the United States in 1987, could read. Vang is adamant that Vinai is not "elevated" Hmong cuisine but rather Hmong cuisine presented in a culture that is finally putting some respect on its name. Regardless of its elevation, the pleasure of the food is visceral. Poking out of a tin pot, a beef rib yields its meat upon lifting, plopping into a long-simmered, ginger-studded broth. Picked crabmeat, tossed in brown butter and crab fat, commingles with crispy fried rice. Add the duck egg. Add the fried oyster. Go ham. There are four hot sauces—kua txob—including one made with pickled peppers from Vang's mother's farm. Each is deeply flavored; some are very funky. Atop an ice cube floating in the 1988 New Fashioned, one of the many stellar cocktails, is a geometric pattern. It is the Hmong symbol for home. —JDS



Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

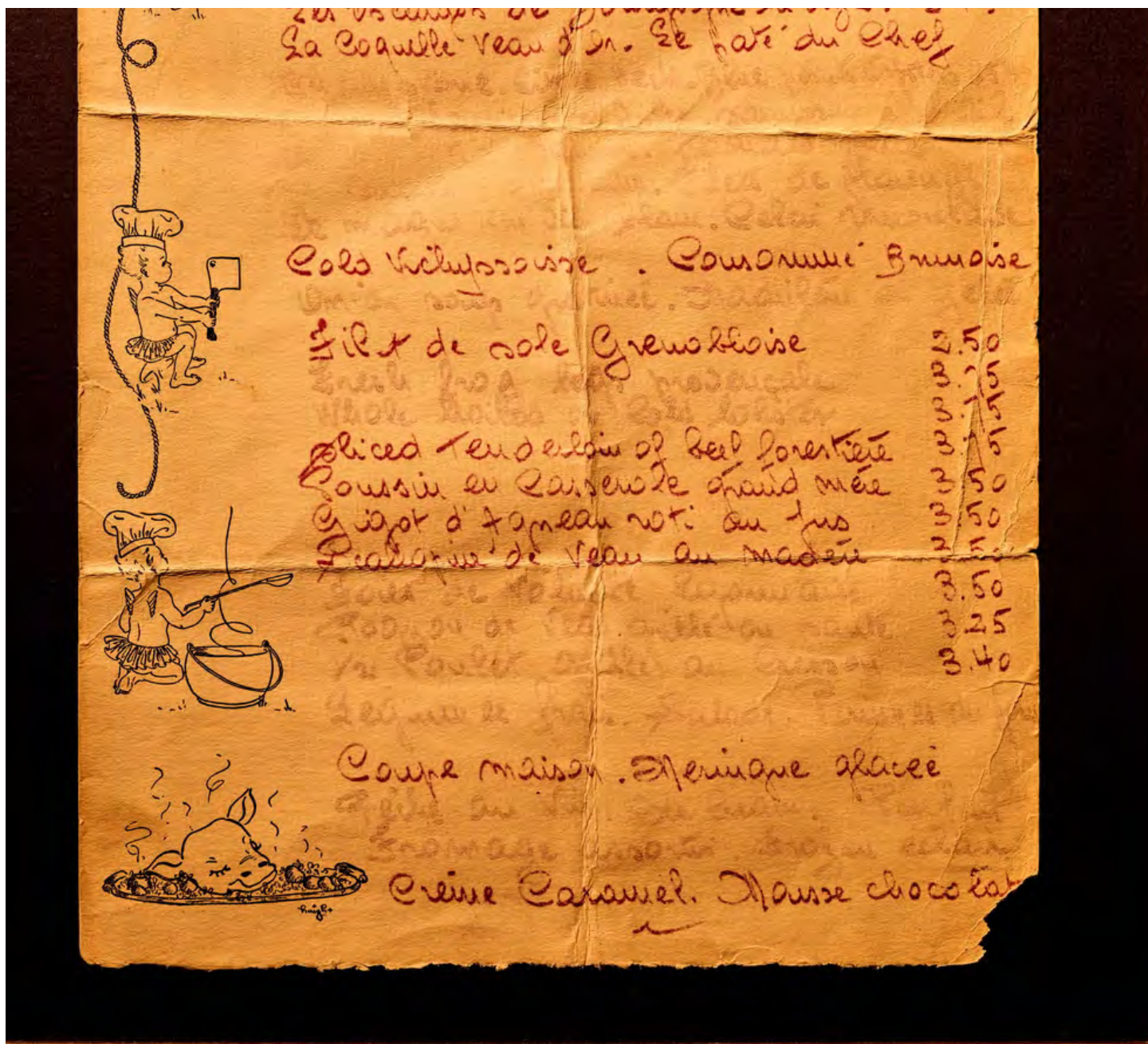
COMEBACK OF THE YEAR



Le Veau d'Or

New York, NY





Gentl + Hyers

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Lord knows resurrection is a neat trick, but it's hard to pull off. Had it not been for the capable hands of bistro whisperers Lee Hanson and Riad Nasr (whom you know from Frenchette and Le Rock), ably assisted by maître d' Derek Summerlin, the grandson of the original owner, the new-again Le Veau d'Or might have been a revived shanda. But thankfully, nearly ninety years after it first opened, the resurrected Le Veau d'Or does not feel like a zombie pastiche. Rather, it's an intimate, vibrant room, maybe the liveliest in New York. It's the CBGB's of Escoffier, Carême's Blue Note—the place where the legend lives on. Frog legs sizzle in so much garlic and butter that only a fool doesn't order fries for sopping. And damn if the duck magret aux cerises, pink under a crust of peppercorns, isn't the best

thing from Long Island since Billy Joel. —JDS

Sailor

Brooklyn, NY





sailor

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

In literary circles they refer to it as *le mot juste*, which is just a French way of saying “the word that expresses exactly what you want to convey.” You can flip through a thesaurus and find hundreds of choices. You can select a curveball word, a word that pulses with a weird and wild energy, and that can be fun, but that’s not necessarily the right word. In the kitchen, April Bloomfield specializes in the culinary version of *le mot juste*. Every gesture is deliberate. How long should toast be toasted? How sharp is the grassy bite of the olive oil, and where should it be splashed? Bloomfield knows why celery salt is the right seasoning for eggs mayonnaise, and she pays attention to the temperature and texture of the egg whites and yolks so that the result is neither wobbly nor seized up with fridge shock. The amount of dressing on a Caesar salad, the snowdrift texture of the cheese on top, the shape of each leaf of lettuce, the crispiness/wispiness balance of the croutons: These things matter. Modesty is a mask. Sailor is a temple of culinary exactitude that happens to be disguised as a neighborhood restaurant. —JG

Demo

New York, NY





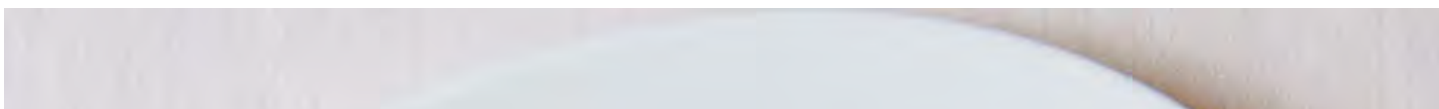
demo

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Demo is a wine bar like Claud and the Four Horsemen are wine bars. Meaning there is wine—here a stirring list (put together by partner Jacob Nass) of little-known producers—but boy oh boy is there food, too. Sit at the back bar of this West Village bolt-hole and watch chef Quang “Q” Nguyen emerge from the kitchen with plates of vertiginous focaccia topped with sesame seeds and za’atar and paired with a tangle of Cantabrian anchovies. Bet the house on a crab casino, glistening with café de Paris butter and accompanied by Ritz crackers. Appreciate the arroz a la plancha—a crisp envelope of rice and cheese under a bramble of king oyster mushrooms. —JDS

Four Twenty Five

New York, NY





425

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Must we have another high-ceilinged sanctuary on the second floor of a midtown office building

where hushed conversations fill the air? Must we dine atop freshly pressed white linen in the company of ostrich-sized floral arrangements? Must we wait patiently while a besuited waiter pours a velouté around a mousseline? In the case of Four Twenty Five, Jean-Georges Vongerichten's new restaurant in the Lord Norman Foster–designed tower on Park Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street, yes, yes, yes, we must. Even better now that JGV is joined by Jonathan Benno. Spectral and serious, Benno has, for years, been something of a ronin of elevated kitchens. Having the two in the same restaurant is like listening to a duet from Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré: two masters, two different scales, perfect harmony. Take a small vessel of silken tofu and coddled egg topped with caviar, black pepper, and olive oil. It's a symphony of softness and subtlety, like the light filtering through the frosted windows. Marvel at the two-part harmony of fluke in a plush tahini-citrus dressing stippled with chile oil. The Asiatic pantry is Jean-Georges's métier; the Italian simplicity is Benno's. They meet together in impeccable French technique. —JDS

Naks

New York, NY





NAKS

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Such is the wonder of human migration and the modern era that the barbecue made by a neighbor of a young Pinoy boy in the projects of Manila—and sold at night in one of the countless informal eating places that dot the world—has made its way onto a menu in New York City’s East Village. That kid, Eric Valdez, has grown into a promising young chef, confident at the helm of a Filipino restaurant called Naks. (“Naks” is the Tagalog equivalent of an appreciative “Daaamn!”) The menu is concise and thrilling, not just for its flavors but for the world it conjures. You’ll find that same pork barbecue, which is a pork jowl that has been marinated for a long time in Filipino lemon soda before being kissed by charcoal, candy-ribboned onto a skewer, and glazed with homemade banana ketchup. You’ll find a coconut-rich crab that’s enjoyed by taxi drivers at roadside stalls on Manila’s streets—Dungeness meat picked out of and placed back into its shell, where it’s topped with creamy crab fat. A brined, dried, and fried duck comes to the table as a chaotic sculpture of foot, wing, breast, skin, fat, and crispiness. Dismantle it and feast. —JDS

Penny

New York, NY





Teddy Wolf

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

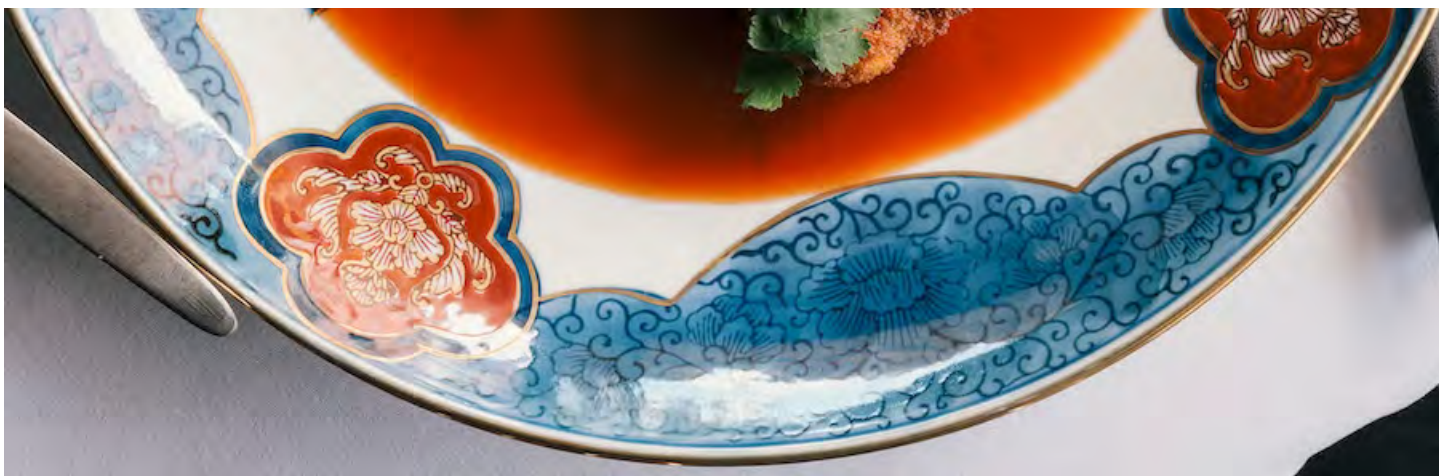
Penny is to the American raw bar what *The Godfather* was to American mob movies. It's a genre reinvention so virtuosic that—no exaggeration—it can change the way you think about something as

simple as shrimp cocktail. Why don't all shrimp cocktails deliver that juicy pop when you dunk and bite? Why don't all raw bars have loaves of sesame brioche that hiss steam when you tear them open and smear them with salty butter? Why does any side salad need more than springy lettuce leaves and a mustardy vinaigrette? Why does the ice box full of raw seafood feel colder to the touch here, as does the long marble bar itself, and what secret elixirs are making these scallops and mussels and razor clams sing with the harmony of a doo-wop quartet on an East Village stoop? Penny is so perfect that it freaked me out. I plan to return again and again, determined to find a flaw. —JG

Tolo

New York, NY





Matt Dutile

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

On the menu, seek out “little rice noodles with XO sauce.” Order that. It doesn’t look like much when it arrives: soft ribbons that’ve been rolled up like miniature sleeping bags at a campout. They’ve absorbed a rusty color from the sauce, and they’re adorned with nothing more than stir-fried chives. Take a taste and you realize this dish is that rare example of sublime simplicity. Ron Yan’s whole menu at Tolo, inspired by years spent in Hong Kong, radiates just-rightness, from the fried rice with crabmeat and gai lan to the raw tuna with sesame oil and sweet soy sauce to the nubby curls of bean-curd skin with leeks and peppers and cumin. The best things at Tolo come in little bowls. Their spices and salt make you thirsty, and that’s a fortunate development, because Tolo happens to be a wine bar, one with hundreds of bottles at hand. You can be in and out in a flash, but you’ll probably feel inclined to linger. Can we get another bowl of the rice noodles? —JG

Hellbender

Queens, NY





StarChefs | Alexander Zeren

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

The hellbender, the largest salamander in North America, sleeps during the day and leaves its shelter at night only to forage for food. Lord, may it slink someday into its namesake restaurant, Yara Herrera's freewheeling spot in Queens. What great food would await it. Irregular shards of Oaxacan cheese, dipped in cornflakes, are fried into golden clouds to form Mexican mozzarella sticks that are served with a green marinara. A dusting of scarlet homemade chamoy, a chile-rich, pickled-fruit spice condiment, sits atop cubes of watermelon, arranged like a brutalist salad. In a stellar fluke aguachile, spice lurks like a rain cloud that never breaks. (That's thanks to the habanadas.) As at Amy's Pastelillos in Philadelphia, familiar flavors are presented in novel forms—a reverse détournement that allows you to experience them anew. Whether these dishes are authentically Mexican is not only a

moot question but gatekeeper-y and sus. The food at Hellbender is authentically Yara Herrera, addictively good, and wildly inventive. —JDS

Wildweed

Cincinnati, OH





David Jackson

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

“What is a weed?” Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote. “A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.” Wildweed, David and Lydia Jackman’s new Cincinnati restaurant, represents a soaring ode to a region whose culinary virtues have been overlooked for too long. In a heartland that can feel as though it has been overtaken by corporate chains, the Jackmans have spent six years promoting an alternative vision of midwestern cuisine: David, formerly the chef at the Catbird Seat in Nashville, and Lydia, a Buckeye through and through, hosted more than 225 pop-up dinners before they finally found a home. Now, across two menus—à la carte in the dining room, a tasting menu at the counter—David alchemizes Ohio farms, fields, and forests into pastas of terrific personality and plates of great wonder. In a doppio raviolo, brown-buttered beans and local quark huddle under a zingy lemon sauce studded with foraged lobster mushrooms. But it’s the fresh basil that, like sun through stained glass, turns the plate divine. —JDS

Amy’s Pastelillos

Philadelphia, PA





Amy's

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Amaryllis Rivera Nassar sells pastelillos—pas-te-LEE-jos—out of a bright-pink corner shop with no seats. She's Amy, a Diasporican chef who's the youngest of five siblings and the only one not born on La Isla. (Philadelphia has the largest Puerto Rican population in the United States, after New York.) The pastelillos in question are half-moons of crinkly fried dough. They might come stuffed with succulent stewed pork in a homemade guava-barbecue sauce, or a flawless picadillo, or a shredded-chicken stew whose moistness threatens to seep through the achiotelaced dough. (Every now and then there's a cheesesteak pastelillo—this is, after all, Philly.) If you've ever walked past a cuchifritos shop, you've seen a pastelillo. They're frequently left to languish all day in the vitrine, where they gradually turn brown paper bags translucent with grease. Hot Pockets, pshaw. Nassar's pastelillos are not that. Fresh like a favorite thing, as welcome as a love letter, they burst with flavors and, let's face it, love. —JDS

Bastia

Philadelphia, PA



GAB BONGHI

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

The single best bite I've had this year was a fried squash blossom, stuffed with ricotta, spiced with Corsican herbes de maquis, on a tranche of toast topped with uni butter, which ran down my chin and onto my jeans. I had it at Bastia, a restaurant to which I was not predisposed. Another sleek and well-funded Mediterranean place in a new boutique hotel? Phooey. But the chef, Tyler Akin, is a man on fire. Akin has turned to the weird island of Corsica (and its cousin, Sardinia) to craft an actually surprising Mediterranean menu. Chunks of neon-green melon, compressed with verjus, are tossed with Perrystead Dairy's Intergalactic, a soft local cheese, and a silky coppa from Siena. It's a prosciutto and melon but not and somehow better. There are grilled lobsters and braised veal and grass-fed steak, too. Stuff thyself. Sink into the pleasure. Surrender to the squash blossom, baby. — JDS

River Bar

Westerly, RI





Rane Gram

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

The mighty Pawcatuck flows under the Broad Street Bridge and past the twinkling patio lights of River Bar, James Wayman and Aaron Laipply's new spot in an old space. Rare is the restaurant whose food matches the comfort and pleasure of a slow-rolling waterway. Settle in with a dozen oysters and littlenecks from nearby Ninigret Pond and consider following up with a lobster roll or a burger—a "Classic Burger" halfway to smashed and made with the meat of locally raised (but fundamentally Tuscan) Chianina cattle. Virtuosoic, it isn't—visit nearby Nana's Westerly for culinary fireworks—but like the alewives and eels darting in the river, brilliance shimmers underneath the surface. Wayman's Rhode Island chowder, a creamless and flourless wonder, is studded with quahogs and house-made salt pork from a local farm and imbued with shio koji. Wayman, who co-owns his own soy-sauce company, knows how to harness its umami. The hanger steak is bathed in koji, and the sauce atop the oysters has it, too. The cornbread, from a family recipe of one Whit Davis, operator of the oldest continuously operating farm in Connecticut, is made with an ancient flint corn, served warm. Soon the honey butter atop it has melted like the sun, but as long as I gaze on the Westerly sunset, I am in paradise. —JDS

Bintü Atelier

Charleston, SC



starschef

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

You might walk right past it: a white-and-yellow house across from a church. In its tiny kitchen, chef Bintou N'Daw, her husband, Tracey, and their crew are hammering out some of the best food in Charleston—and it happens to share a link to the food that created Charleston hundreds of years ago. During the slave trade, the city became an economic powerhouse by using the forced labor of enslaved West Africans to grow crops like Carolina Gold rice, indigo, and cotton. The Gullah Geechee culture of South Carolina's Lowcountry, and its cuisine, can be traced to the coast of the African continent, so you might say that Bintü Atelier is bringing back a connection that has always been there, even if people sometimes walk right past it. Bintü highlights a multitude of African cuisines. The menu changes frequently, but there are always staples like Senegalese yassa, egusi stew, and suya. There is jollof, the beloved rice dish made with a tomato base; my favorites are crab rice and thieboudienne, which I consider the mother of all other one-pot rice dishes. You're going to want the freshly pressed juice—I love the soursop—and the dairy-free desserts, including a baobab ice cream sprinkled with pellets of bee pollen and drizzled with wild honey. Long overdue in a city built by African people and their descendants, Bintü Atelier is an uplifting, delicious homage to Black folk across the diaspora. — Amethyst Ganaway

Kultura

Charleston, SC





Natale Kamayan

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Caring for others has always been Nikko Cagalanan's ethos, but working long days and nights as a nurse began to take a toll on him. Finding comfort in the recipes of his lola, or grandmother, he took a leap of faith and left his career in nursing to start a series of pop-up Filipino dinners in Charleston. After gaining national attention, he opened Kultura, where the menu qualifies as a proud asseveration. In tribute both to Filipino cuisine and to the southern city that Cagalanan fell in love with, the chef weaves local ingredients into traditional dishes. My favorite? Arroz caldo, a comforting dish that I would eat every day if I could. Cagalanan cooks down rice in a flavorful broth, then tops it with trout roe, XO sauce, fried garlic, chile crisp, and a soft-boiled egg. Oh, and what's that purple milkshake over there? It's a cocktail inspired by halo halo, the Filipino dessert. Kultura mixes ube, pineapple juice, and sake before garnishing it with whipped cream and a sweet array of toppings. — AG

St. Vito Focacceria

Nashville, TN





st vito

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Chef Michael Hanna serves focaccia, yes. More specifically he serves the fluffy Sicilian varietal known sfincione. In Italy these soft squares might be topped with nothing more than tomato sauce, onions, and anchovies. Hanna takes liberties. He might add a plethora of curly cupped pepperoni, a pouch of about-to-burst-burrata, or a luscious potato cream sauce. You could start your meal with these, but try not to end there, because Hanna's got more than bread on the brain: St. Vito's is a full-on restaurant disguised as a pizzeria, which means you'll want to branch out and get the bottarga pâté covered in bright-green celery oil—and, if you're hungry enough, the veal Milanese showered with shaved truffles. —OM

Mābo

Dallas, TX





Mabo

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

If you could eat only one animal for the rest of your life, which would it be? For me, the OG white meat is the superlative and essential protein: chicken. And when you consider the Japanese art of yakitori, in which skewered chicken parts grill over binchotan coals until they achieve maximum smokiness and juiciness—well, this is where the bird gets transcendent. Right now the best place in America to experience yakitori is Dallas. At Mābo, his eight-seat counter, chef Masayuki Otaka prepares a two-hour meal in which poultry is the star. He sources free-ranging heritage breeds from Pennsylvania, and he lets you order additional skewers—maybe you're in the mood for more tail, or for the fatty triangular nub known as the pope's nose—when the planned courses have reached their completion. —OM

Late August

Houston, TX





late august

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

As a culinary ambassador for the U.S. Department of State, Chris Williams has traveled the globe, finding common ground in the cuisines of Ukraine, Serbia, Nepal. At Late August, his newest restaurant, the chef is building his own bridge. The restaurant, in an old Sears building now niftily repurposed as the Ion (“Houston’s HQ for innovation”), imagines a terra novus made of African American and Mexican American culinary traditions. Not that it’s pure fantasy—the parallels are there. Gaspar Yanga, Mexico’s greatest revolutionary, was a Black man. The Costa Chica on the southern edge of Oaxaca is predominantly Afro-Mexican. Working with chef Sergio Hidalgo, Williams coaxes out the connections with bravura acts of invention. You might find a citrus pork confit that consists of chunks of crisp/tender pork atop a mustard-and-collard-greens masa, or a hummus made

of field peas and topped with roasted grasshoppers. —JDS

Atoma

Seattle, WA





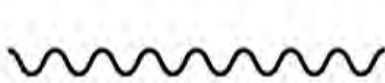
Kyler Martin

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

When I learned that Johnny Courtney had peeled off from Canlis, one of the best old restaurants in America, I couldn't help but be intrigued. When I saw that his own restaurant, Atoma, occupied the bottom floor of a Craftsman house in Seattle's Wallingford neighborhood, I was charmed. And when I read the menu, I was excited. Fermented radish cakes with geoduck and clam-belly aioli. Crumpets with koji butter. Dungeness crab with crab phat sabayon. Atoma's in the Pacific Northwest, so you know the menu will change with the seasons, but one mainstay is a crispy, savory, flower-shaped cookie that's pumped with a soft cheese and sweet jam made from Washington's finest Walla Walla onions. Pair that with a glass of good grower Champagne and tell me you're not excited, too. —OM



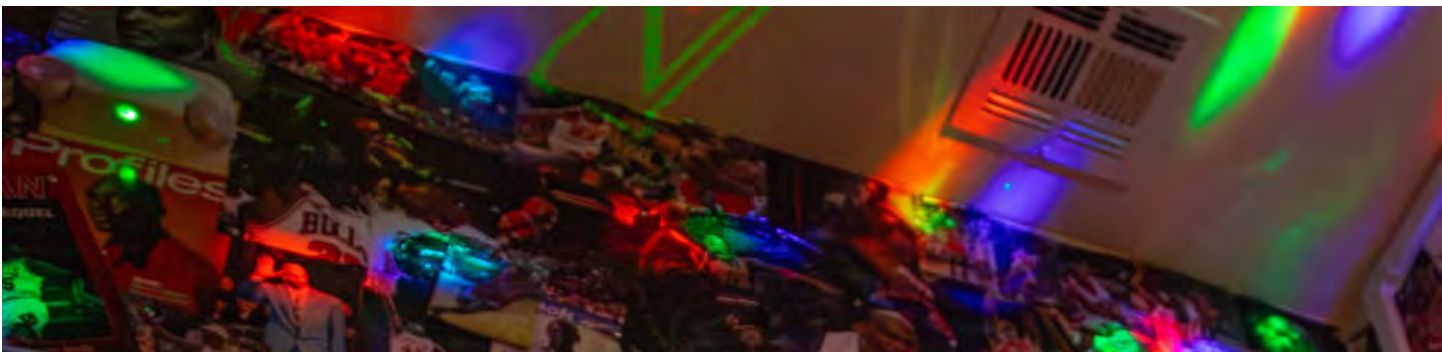
BATHROOM OF THE YEAR



Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

Hot Stuff

New Orleans, LA





hot stuff

You beeline it to the bathroom to wash the fried chicken off your fingers at Hot Stuff, the powerfully delicious meat-and-three from the team behind the beloved Turkey and the Wolf. You look around and one wall is covered with photos of Michael Jordan, another wall is covered with portraits of Kenny Rogers, and to your right there's a red button with handwriting on top that says WHATEVER YOU DO DO NOT PRESS THIS BUTTON. You press the button, of course, and all of a sudden, a multicolored disco strobe light goes off while the chorus of "Cotton Eye Joe" starts blasting from the speakers. Nothing makes sense, and yet, for a short moment, everything is right in this world. —OM