The Best New Restaurants

By Mark Pupo

Photography by Michael Graydon and Nikole Herriott

Even if restaurants aren't directly responsible for floods, heat waves or the overnight disappearance of polar ice sheets, they're starting to accept that they're part of the problem. So what can they do? For a start, if they're not ready to go full-on plant-based, they can prioritize as-local-as-possible suppliers, low-intervention natural wines and sustainable fish and seafood (this is the year of the mollusc). They can, in the name of zero waste (and also because there are great eats to be had), make a fetish of cooking with every part of every product. Okay, there are a few holdouts in the following list, like a sushi chef who imports everything from Japan. The rest are great places to eat that are gradually pushing us to be greener, because it's time we all were.
Chef Haan Palcu-Chang (bottom left) is head flamethrower at Favorites, and he has a variety of tools at his disposal—it’s a Thai barbecue restaurant, after all. But several items on the menu are spared the high heat, like the leafy shrimp wraps (top right), which are sprinkled with peanuts and laced with a punch-you-in-the-mouth dressing packed with fish sauce, galangal and tamarind.

The entrance—at the back of a coffee shop, through a shadowy corridor of metal mesh walls—takes some sleuthing. The house specialty is the Thai miracle combo of sour, briny and charred. If you’re looking for pad Thai, keep looking. Days after my first visit, I was still daydreaming about a snack of shrimp, peanuts and a fish sauce, tamarind and galangal dressing, wrapped in a fresh betel leaf. How did they pack so much mighty flavour into something so tiny? Same question about the fresh-shucked oysters funked up with fish sauce and flecks of garlic chips, about a dip of pork and shrimp paste that beats the best bolognese, and especially about the vertiginous smoky depths of a red curry with P.E.I. scallops. And once I got past my omigod-omigod-omigod panic sweats, I had to admit the octopus with banana blossoms, chunks of pomelo and an unholy dose of bird’s-eye chili was absolutely terrific, too.

I went back to Favorites five times in the next two months, including for a ridiculously extravagant, 10-course New Year’s Eve dinner that ended with a jam jar of black rice pudding and passion fruit. Simple though it was, it managed to be the most delicious part of the night, and seemed to put everything—Russian hyper-sonic missiles, Saved by the Bell reboots, life—in perspective. Yes, we had a lot to drink. And I might be a little obsessed with Favorites, but it’s justified. It’s run by three of the city’s most innovative
restaurateurs: Monte Wan of the Thai street food spots Khao San Road and Nana, and Jesse Fader and Jonathan Poon of the casually perfectionist hangouts Bar Fancy, Superpoint and Paris Paris. By hiring the chef Haan Palcu-Chang to run Favorites, they’ve levelled up.

Palcu-Chang is new to Toronto restaurants, even though he’s from here. He’s 35 and grew up in the Beaches, son of a Romanian mother and a Taiwanese father. After chef school, he cooked in progressively more high-flying kitchens in Vancouver and Europe, including the Thai upstarts Maenam and Kiin Kiin. For a few minutes, he returned to Toronto to work for Grant van Gameren at Enoteca Sociale, and to run a series of pop-ups called Farang Ki Nok (a Thai phrase for “cheap-skate foreigner,” an ironic jab at himself). He spent a year as a Singapore-based restaurant consultant, using every spare weekend for eating tours of Thailand. One day, out of the blue, he received a text message from Poon asking if he’d be interested in coming home. He told me he lives for the long restaurant nights and the pleasure of physical exhaustion. But he’s also one of our most cerebral chefs (before he found his calling, he was about to enter into a graduate program in history), taught Thai cooking at George Brown and talks about his Favorites menu as his manifesto to challenge received notions about Thai food. He’s a disciple of the seasons, prioritizing what’s freshest and grown nearby. What’s freaking a few unsuspecting people out (see the social media jabber about Favorites) is how he magnifies flavours. He’ll spend hours perfecting that seafood curry, slowly reducing coconut cream, frying shrimp paste until it caramelizes, fine-tuning it with palm sugar and tamarind and a glug of fish sauce. A spoonful is guaranteed sensory overload.

By the way, he has nothing against pad Thai. They even serve it here, but strictly on Mondays, and it’s off-menu. Perversely, there are only 10 orders available. The night I lucked out, he made it with soft-shell crab. It was pad Thai heaven.

Few dishes are more ingredient-intensive than a saucy bowl of curry, and there’s a multipart spicy-sweet-funky symphony that comes to a crescendo in every bowl of Favorites’ chicken curry with banana pepper and pineapple. The 18 ingredients that comprise the tongue-tingling base must be chopped (galangal, culantro, lemongrass), peeled (shallots, garlic), portioned (puffed chilies), toasted (dried coconut, coriander seed, mace, cloves, cumin, nutmeg, peanuts, star anise, cinnamon) and reduced (coconut cream), with lots of palm sugar and fish sauce to give the dish its signature oomph. And that’s before the chicken thigh, banana pepper, pineapple and coconut water are added as the dish is being plated.

SECRET SAUCE

The painstakingly prepped aromatics and herbs that give Favorites’ curry its depth
Be ready to clap. On any particular day, there will be a happy birthday sing-along or suddenly the room will fall into a hush as someone pulls out a ring and proposes. I might be partly to blame, since anytime someone asks me where to take someone for a special but not stupidly fancy dinner (a frequent question, and a hazard of this job), I send them to this note-perfect bistro. Dreyfus pulls off the trick of seeming like it’s been around for ages, between the vintage flowery plates, bentwood chairs packed close together, flickering candles, jazz standards and shelves of curios seemingly pilfered from a Victorian explorer’s private museum. But it’s also wholly original. Zach Kolomeir, the chef and owner, and previously the chef de cuisine at Montreal’s cult favourite Joe Beef, had a specific vision in mind: a restaurant that shows off his personal network of Ontario and Quebec small-scale farmers, cheesemakers and the like, while building on bistro staples with frequent diversions into Jewish deli. The kitchen is small, and he often delivers dishes to your table. He seems to be a friend or soon-to-be-friend of almost everyone in the room, which I recognize as particular to the DNA of Montreal’s restaurants.

I’ve taken my own someone special here, too, for what turned out to be one of the most delicious meals I’ve had this year, or any year. We had potato-choux puffs topped with crème fraîche and caviar, skate schnitzel in a lemony grenobloise sauce, slow-roasted squash and pepitas, bite-sized cubano sandwiches made with house-smoked ham and a wafer of pickle, and a peppery rack of Ontario lamb, the last of the night. We drank well, from a list of elusive bottles from natural winemakers in France, Italy and Prince Edward County. And for dessert, despite reaching peak stuffed capacity, we snuck in a plate of sugar-dusted, warm-from-the-oven madeleines. They were better than any birthday cake.

Chef Zach Kolomeir and front-of-house and beverage manager (and partner) Carmelina Imola

The menu at Dreyfus is handwritten (in French) every night—and it may include a lobster salad with spring peas (bottom left), or a stack of irresistible madeleines (bottom right) for dessert.

Clockwise from top left: pickle-topped cubano finger sandwiches, baked oysters with smoked eel and parmesan; and pommes dauphine filled with trout roe and Champagne fraîche.

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If everything else wasn’t first-rate, I’d still head for this buttoned-down spot just to gawp at the hand-painted murals in gold, silver and midnight black, of bamboo, twisting vines and a tiger sneaking through a bamboo grove. Nowadays, nearly every new restaurant, coffee bar and vape kiosk has custom wall art, but here, combined with deep azure upholstery, an elegant oval bar and the fire show in the open kitchen, they’re more than just a design statement—they’re at one with the overall mood of being transported to the trendiest restaurant in Manila, which just happens to be neighbour to a midtown Shoppers. The chef, Daniel Cancino, already proved himself a wizard of Filipino barbecue, pancit and adobo at Lamesa and Lasa. Here his cooking is even more focused and refined. His menu evolves with the seasons, but there are usually dumplings (perhaps stuffed with liver mousse), squid-ink pancit (perhaps with scallops and uni), fresh oysters or tuna ceviche, and a bowl of hand-cut egg noodles with a grab-bag of mushrooms in a just-rich-enough Thai basil-flecked truffled duxelle sauce. Brassicas, seafood and steaks all benefit from precise timing at an inferno of a charcoal grill. The dish you’d be a fool to overlook is the grilled pork, sugary from a bath in 7UP, five spice and ginger. Wrap pieces in lettuce and perilla leaves, plus a dab of calamansi aioli. You’ll wonder why all barbecue can’t be so incredible.
Five hundred dollars—per person. That gets you three to six bite-size appetizers, like, say, an expertly torched morsel of Spanish mackerel or yuzu-dusted monkfish liver, slow-cooked for three days in red wine and soy until it earns its sobriquet as the foie gras of the sea. Then comes the main event: a dozen pieces of sushi, maybe fluke, Japanese barracuda, needlefish or fatty tuna, all sourced at the Tokyo fish market and presented on seasoned rice at a precisely monitored, still-warm temp. Masaki Saito is one of the few sushi chefs in North America who has mastered the art of edomae—a near-mystical process of partially preserving raw fish and seafood through curing, cooking or salting, to heighten flavour and improve texture.

After a bowl of miso soup (so fragrant you’ll fall into a meditative trance) comes a no-less-decadent dessert of a matcha blancmange, its jiggly surface crowned with gold leaf.

Is it worth the price? Strictly by frequency of unreal bites per minute, yes. But I’d hazard as many people are drawn here to say they’ve sat in the city’s most exclusive restaurant (the eight-seat counter, reached up a flight of marble stairs, books well in advance) and met the man himself. Unlike his generally taciturn, media-shy peers, Saito arrived in this city in a tornado of hype about his talent (two Michelin stars in New York) and his persona (he’s a proudly unreconstructed playboy and connoisseur of luxury brands). He poses for selfies with customers. His staff tremble at his every word.

The exotic seafood, Baccarat water tumblers and gold leaf may add to the impression that you’re toasting the end of the world in a room of James Bond villains. One night, I was seated beside a Polish-Canadian industrialist who ordered two bottles of Burgundy for himself, had just returned from a friend’s Caribbean island, recommended I try pig fetus in Buenos Aires (“you haven’t lived!”) and complained unprompted about Trudeau’s tax policies, which have driven him to move his companies to the U.S. For some, a $500-plus feast is just another Tuesday.

Chef Masaki Saito
A year after I settled in Parkdale, a small Italian restaurant opened around the corner called Local Kitchen and Wine Bar. It didn’t look like much—the walls were covered in ragged barnboard, you could see the basement through holes in the floor, and every chair and table wobbled—but the pasta, handmade and often inventively stuffed with whatever was in season by a new chef named Fabio Bondi, was awesome. I can’t count the times I’ve eaten there since—it’s my local, in the true sense. And I’m not the only one who loves it, as the room, which acquired even more bric-a-brac over the years, is always packed, the front window steamed over.

Last fall, Bondi and co-owner Michael Sangregorio—he’s the jovial front-of-house, as much part of the formula as the food—opened this second trattoria on a block of Dupont that’s becoming a micro-Little Italy, alongside the fantastic Mattachioni pizzeria and bakery. The new room may be sunnier and more polished, but Bondi’s cooking is still pure and proudly rustic, and makes ample use of produce he and Sangregorio grow themselves on a couple of acres in King City (they were early locavores). To start, plump grilled sardines and jammy smoked cherry tomatoes on a thick slice of Mattachioni sourdough. Bondi magically lightens mozzarella-stuffed gnocchi with a grating of orange zest, builds layers of tang and sweetness in a tomato and stewed lamb sauce, and intensifies the butteriness of turbot fillet with a pool of puréed roasted cauliflower. Come summer, there’s a 40-seat side-street patio, the new prime spot to sip an Italian lager and count the advantages of moving nearby.
At this rate, wine bars might soon outnumber pubs. The best of the incoming class is a prime draw for Queen West next-gen yuppies craving a plate of Spanish olives and a glass of wine before returning to their loft-condo and Netflix queue. The chalkboard list of wines gets updated daily; they’re curated—with an emphasis on artisanal, personality-driven, small-scale makers with a natural, low-intervention bent—by two of the city’s most interesting sommeliers, Nathan Morrell and Ellen Shrybman, who between them have built the lists at Bar Isabel, Quetzal, Bar Raval and Tennessee Tavern. That should be a clue that this is a Grant van Gameren establishment, his ninth, which means there’s also a thoughtful menu of quietly trendy, Mediterranean-inspired sharing plates. It’s hard to make a bad choice, but some of the recent standouts include boat-like baguette toasts smeared with ’nduja and straciatella; kampachi crudo with slices of fall apple and pickled celeriac; a fatty, pistachio-studded country pâté; and a simple but maximal-impact salad of shaved fennel, radishes and bonito tossed in a lemony tonnato dressing. Do they make desserts? Who knows? There were too many curiously interesting wines to try instead.
Dinner and a flick can’t get much better than at the Paradise Cinema, which has been restored to its snazzy, 1930s art moderne glory and upgraded with plush theatre seats, two bars and, reached by the side street, this Basilio Pesce restaurant. He was the secret weapon in the kitchens at Porzia, Canoe and, most recently, Ossington’s francophile playground La Banane. Now he’s turned his attention to the unapologetically heat- and garlic-laced pasta and seafood of southern Italy. If you need one last hurrah before cutting out carbs, make it his pasta with crab. It’s “A.O.P.,” a term you don’t encounter much outside of Sicily, meaning there’s no sauce aside from a good amount of olive oil, garlic mince and chili, plus a sprinkle of parsley. No better way to show off his springy, eggy, hand-cut tagliarini and the fluffy delicacy of Fogo Island snow crab. There are light snacks like crispy arancini stuffed with cuttlefish, or a selection of premium cheeses (he’s got connections, having once served as executive chef of the Cheese Boutique), sharable plates of peppery boar sausage stained mahogany after baking in chianti, root veg so paper-thin you barely notice they’ve been breaded in cornmeal and deep-fried, and always a porterhouse seasoned with salt and rosemary, like they do in Florence. Pesce also had the fine idea to hire Jill Barber, who created many of the extraordinary sweet things at Blackbird Bakery, as exec pastry chef (a rare position in restaurants these days). I’ll be stopping in just for my favourite dessert of the year, a stack of speculoos and honey-flavoured mousse, finished with a half moon of Marcona almond butter and slices of just-ripe fig. It’s so sophisticated, you’d never guess it’s a play on an Instagram-fashionable topping combo for a humble breakfast toast. But, like in the movies, sometimes eating out should be larger than life.

Anthony Rose’s thing is to make everything big and, when possible, bigger. Whole heads of roasted cauliflower, patty melts topped with a fried egg, and fat—good-for-you, flavourful fat—on everything. (One of his businesses is called Schmaltz Appetizing, if there were any doubts.) So maybe it’s not a total surprise that he closed his still-popular side-by-side restaurants Rose and Sons and Big Crow, then reopened them as one decadent-to-the-hilt spot inspired by the King himself. On the menu: mascarpone-enriched grits, grilled thick-crust pizzas heaving with whole balls of burrata and a city garden’s worth of rapini, Nashville-style hot chicken topped with pimento cheese and roasted peanuts, and, of course, a half-pound bacon cheeseburger with suet mixed into the chuck for good measure. The wine list includes no less than 15 magnums, some of which get opened and sold by the glass. But the most notable addition is the massive charcoal grill at the back of the covered outdoor dining area, said to reach the hottest temperatures in the country. Almost everything on the menu gets a turn in the flames, including my favourite item, a bowl of B.C. mussels. They also prove that even small things can make a sizable impression.
Maison Selby is a monument to gilded francophilia, including caviar service with buckwheat blini, chopped egg and crème fraîche (top left) and filet mignon steak frites (bottom).

John Horne, O&B executive chef
Anthony Walsh and chef de cuisine Patrick Forest

There’s definitely something awkward—unseemly?—about ordering champagne and caviar in a Victorian mansion in the middle of St. James Town, one of the city’s poorest and most densely populated neighbourhoods. But that’s where O&B, the company behind so many of the GTA’s best restaurants (Canoe and Auberge du Pommier among them), took over a three-storey house—at different points a girl’s boarding school and a gay dance club. It’s now swanky enough to be a residence for a pair of unofficial royals, with an abundance of florid wallpapers and crystal chandeliers that set the tone for traditionally executed tartare, French onion soup, boeuf bourguignon and other typical bistro fare. John Horne, who oversees Canoe and O&B’s other top-tier kitchens, is exec chef. Everything is perfect and polished, including the presentation of said caviar, from wild-caught East Coast sturgeon, the tin resting on a bed of ice and accompanied by buckwheat blini, chopped egg and crème fraîche. Each salty, sybaritic spoonful feels like a step closer to class warfare.

Julian Bentivegna, all of 26 years old, is the youngest head chef on this list. By several years. He’s also one of the most ambitious and artistic. Everything he conceives for his jewel box of a restaurant is mind-bogglingly intricate and very, very pretty. You’ll be one of 10 diners facing a counter where Bentivegna and his assistant chefs prepare your 10-course tasting menu (the source of the restaurant’s name should be coming clear). He’s also admirably principled: there’s an emphasis on sustain-able seafood and seasonal produce, and a strident avoidance of food waste (what isn’t used that day gets pickled or preserved or upcycled in some other inventive manner). The night might include scallop crudo in a Thai-style curry; a sourdough brioche with a carrot butter and a herbaceous purée of pickled stinging nettles; cod tongue, slow-cooked and flaky, paired for contrast with the sweet crunch of sunchoke chips; or a marvelously meaty chunk of a foraged lion’s mane mushroom grilled then glazed with fermented apple cider and dressed with a pickled scallion. His imagination goes into overdrive with sweets, which could see preserved peaches paired with frozen cookie dough and nasturtium or a picture-perfect mini Meyer lemon meringue pie, its crust made from crumbs and cold-pressed canola oil. You regret breaking apart the compositions on your plate, then you remember you’re there to eat. Oh well!
To anyone who believes the city’s restaurant universe revolves around Jen Agg, her closing of the meat-and-offal-focused Black Hoof in 2018 was unimaginable. Last year, after a remodel and a rethink, she reopened in the same space with an Italian sandwich joint that’s also a wine bar serving upscale small plates and maybe also a late-night haunt with trays of nachos—she’s never shied from concept blurring. The Hoof’s white walls are now covered in posters for Sonic Youth, the Jesus and Mary Chain and other Gen X heroes, the floor in rec room lino. Still no reservations taken, so try your luck. And for the first few months, it was closed on Friday and Saturday to appeal more to locals than weekend partiers. Those locals should be flattered: the pastas are all very good, especially bucatini with bone marrow, braised onions and a powerful shaving of horseradish, though I found a version of cacio e pepe too sweet and lemony. There’s sometimes a terrific tuna crudo with cracked almonds and endive. But the star of the menu is a plate of meatballs flecked with an extra-generous amount of fennel seeds and buried under a blanket of shredded parmesan. They’re just light enough to soak up the accompanying pool of bright, acidic tomato sauce. Everyone orders it—you should, too.
If you’re not stumbling out of a wine bar this year, you’re likely seeking new summits of virtuousness and lowering your climate impact at a restaurant that’s vegetable-forward or vegan (or both). The most accomplished of these new wholesome temples opened on a quiet strip of century townhouses near Yonge and Wellesley. The restaurateur Roger Yang last ran Awai, the Bloor West vegan restaurant. A collective of cooks operates his new kitchen, and the hive-mind approach could explain why there are so many things happening on each plate of the seasonal tasting menus (available in three, five or eight courses). Mostly, it works out. A pretty threesome of ravioli includes a triple hit of truffle: in the mushroom stuffing, in a cauliflower purée and in a topping of fresh slices. Slices of seafoam-green celtuce are made more interesting by a beet-pomegranate reduction, but not necessarily by a stringy net of dehydrated zucchini. Similarly, a woodfire oven–baked flatbread arrives at the table with one too many toppings (creamy vegan feta doesn’t need creamy baba ghanouj). There’s usually at least one life-altering plate, like a variation on lobster risotto, made with wheat berries instead of rice and, instead of seafood, a slice of grilled lobster mushroom under a blanket of lobster mushroom foam. It was luscious and earthy and incredibly tasty, and could very well convert the most devout carnivore to the cause.
Suzanne Barr’s fan club (I’m a card-carrying member) prayed night and day for her return after the great tragedy that was the end of her Gerrard East restaurant, Saturday Dinette. Now she’s back in an airier and just-as-busy space, with a menu that revives many of her all-time classics. It instantly became my new favourite weekend brunch destination. No one else makes such massive yet fluffy buckwheat pancakes, loaded with clouds of whipped, thyme-scented ricotta and a pool of apple compote; such juicy burgers, the patty combining brisket and ground lamb; or, my go-to, a scrambled egg plate with cheese grits and a sublimely buttery biscuit. There are lighter options, including superb salads and a white bean shakshuka, but who said the weekend was a time to hold back?

True True Diner
169 King St. E.

True True’s menu pays homage to various cuisines and hours of the day, with stacks of thick buckwheat flapjacks (top) joining gochujang pepper shrimp (left) and a hefty burger made with brisket and lamb.
It’s a taco truth that they always taste better eaten standing, moments after they’ve been assembled, ideally before the tortilla soaks up too much salsa or meat grease and falls apart. At Gus, a spinoff of nearby Mexican street-food spot La Chilaca, you have your pick of stools, but the prime position is next to the door, where there’s a view of the never-dull Kensington Market parade. The taco options are fairly standard—barbacoa, pastor, carnitas and so on—but the handmade corn tortillas are uncommonly tender, the guac bright and fresh, and everything is grilled, fried and assembled with precision. The best option, based on my careful study, is pescado, usually made with swordfish from the market, lightly spiced with chili and paprika, and cradling a ripe spear of pineapple. You have your choice of ladle-your-own salsas, plus a full fridge of fruity Jarritos—Mexico’s national soft drink—to wash it all down.
T_thanos Tripi runs Mamakas, without question the chicest Greek restaurant around (it’s been blessed by a long list of passing-through movie stars, lately Cate Blanchett). This winter, he took over another prime Ossington corner and opened—yes, yes, I know—a wine bar. But the focus here is Greek everything, including the wine, which, like all those strange unfiltered Eastern European orange wines that are suddenly everywhere, is worthy of closer inspection. They’re certainly not shy, and hold their own against the bright sourness of pickled octopus, lovage and red onion, the tang of the tzatziki smeared on lamb ribs charred from the grill, or a hot phyllo tart stuffed with feta and coated with black sesame and pomegranate seeds.

The plates are all small and sharable; they show up in quick succession, and you’ll find yourself ordering more. Some options, like a two-bite sandwich of fried trout, briny taramasalata and shredded lettuce, you’ll be tempted to get twice.