

THE CITY'S BEST NEW RESTAURANTS 2024

Our 42nd annual ranking
of the best places to eat
right now

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and Erin Hershberg



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DESPITE THIS ERA of inflationary belt-tightening, the city's leading restaurateurs and brightest chefs have doubled down on luxury. In the past year, we saw the openings of multiple swish steakhouses as well as over-the-top resto-clubs that trade their chef toques for party hats when the clock strikes 9. We saw caviar as a cocktail garnish, a baked-potato topping and a "bump" to be consumed off the back of the hand. And multi-course tasting menus—the ultimate diner indulgence—came back

in a big way. In fact, most of the places in this package offer the option to enjoy a procession of superlative small plates. Yet the number-one restaurant bucks the trend toward extravagance. It's a tiny one-room spot in Bloorcourt run by a husband-and-wife team who serve up petite, perfect Japanese and Korean bar snacks. You have to applaud a chef who can turn humble soybeans into a main event. Warning: what follows is 20-odd pages of wall-to-wall deliciousness; it's best not to read it on an empty stomach.

No. 1

Mhel

276 Havelock St.,
@mhelisanchovy

The sweetest
little sake and
snack bar
in Bloorcourt



IN A ONE-ROOM RESTAURANT at Bloor and Havelock, husband-and-wife team Young Hoon Ji and Seung-min Yi fill almost every role: chef, sommelier, owner. They're also first-time restaurateurs, which makes Mhel's brilliance even more impressive.

Before Mhel (which means anchovy in Korea's Jeju dialect), the couple spent six months in South Korea, immersing themselves in the country's culinary scene. Ji staged at Ichie, a seafood-focused izakaya in Seoul; Yi worked the front of house at the two-Michelin-star Joo Ok, inside the Plaza Hotel. It was all in service of their shared dream. "We always knew we wanted to open a restaurant that served what we like to eat and drink at home: Korean and Japanese food—and a lot of sake," says Yi.

A meal at Mhel is almost never the same twice. In fact, ask Ji what he's serving next week and there's a good chance he won't know. His menu depends on the ingredients he can source from local suppliers and import from afar, like wild sesame oil pressed at a mill outside of Seoul or koshihikari rice from Japan's Shimane prefecture.

Everything is concocted on the fly (though you would never know it), and the stress motivates Ji. Yi says he's an obsessive experimenter: when he was learning about eggs, he'd cook a dozen a day; when it came to chicken, it was six whole birds over the course of a week. He can't help himself. The ever-changing menus aren't a marketing strategy—that's just how Ji works.

Highlights have included ruby-red dry-aged tuna from Oroshi Fish Co., lifted with a tare sauce of tamari and soy-pickled sansho peppers (think Sichuan but fruitier) and topped with egg yolk, some of that wild sesame oil, and spinach and shiso flowers. There was also an unforgettable ochazuke: a lightly smoky dashi poured over yaki onigiri (a rice ball grilled to a delightful crisp), brightened with umeboshi plum and served with tamagoyaki, a butter-yellow cloud of rolled omelette.

Ji transforms the humblest ingredients into sublime delicacies. Soybeans from Tokyo's Tsukiji market take a long bath in a kombu and shiitake dashi before being topped with a citrusy, garlicky confit miso. They may just be legumes, but in Ji's hands, they become teeny-tiny umami bombs.

With no investors or bank loans—just a little help from family and a lot of savings—Mhel is entirely independent. Yi says she worries about the finances every month, but she wouldn't have it any other way. They put quality first and adjust everything else—profitability, practicality—to make it work. This is a project grounded in passion and a place where something special is going on behind the pass.



1. Young Hoon
Ji and Seung-
min Yi



2. Suma katsuo belly (striped skipjack tuna) is smoked over hay from Tamarack Farms



3. The katsuo again, two ways: smoked (left) and soaked in yuzu ponzu



4. White asparagus cooked in asparagus stock and topped with salted egg yolk, chives and edible shiso flowers





No. **2**

Bar Prima

1136 Queen St. W.,
barprima.ca

A new old-school
Italian kitchen
from the
La Palma team



1. That shiny ceiling?
It's covered in gold leaf

2. Scallops do the job
of oysters in this twist
on Rockefeller



THERE ARE PLENTY OF modern restaurants and old-fashioned ones, but those that do both are rare. That's what Craig Harding and Julian D'Ippolito accomplished with Bar Prima. The lavish space—all mahogany, gold and cobalt, with mosaic tiles and white tablecloths—is as lavish as a mid-century steakhouse. And a glance at the menu (Rockefeller, piccata, caprese) may deceive guests into thinking they're about to enjoy vintage Italian American. But look again.

That Rockefeller isn't made with oysters—the starring bivalves are pristine Nova Scotia scallops on the half shell, broiled with a lemon-parsley gremolata, tangy pecorino romano and salty shards of prosciutto. Meanwhile, the caprese trades tomatoes for roasted beets, plated with buffalo mozzarella and dressed in a heady reduction of Madeira, beet purée and sherry vinegar, punctuated with basil oil.

And instead of the traditional veal, the piccata uses buttery swordfish, grilled to a perfect medium and balanced with capers and lemon. Tableside, a server pours over a sauce of white wine, saffron and cold-smoked butter to a backdrop of Italo disco hits. To finish, there's a twist on the classic American pairing of apple pie and cheddar: an elegant crostata filled with slow-cooked apples, golden olive oil gelato and Italian goat cheese, finished with a drizzle of Tuscan olive oil. It's briny and slightly savoury—but also just sweet enough to qualify as a dessert.



3. From left: Craig Harding, executive chef
Julian D'Ippolito and chef
de cuisine Nicholas Iaboni



4. The Ramos gin fizz-like
Pazzo Bianco

No. **3**
Takja
BBQ House

962 College St.,
takja.ca

A deluxe Korean
barbecue experience
in Little Italy



KOREAN BARBECUE is typically a DIY affair—a real hands-on experience that involves cooking cuts of meat over an open flame. But, for amateurs (i.e., most diners), the result is often tragically overdone bulgogi. Wouldn't it be much more civilized if you could offload the grilling to professionals? Enter Toronto's fancy new fireside experience, courtesy of the team behind Orosi Fish Co. (Jeff Kang, Edward Bang, Jason Ching). At Takja

BBQ House, the servers double as cooks who do all the necessary slicing, dicing, flipping and basting. Everyone else gets to sit back, sip soju and enjoy the glow of the embers.

The best way to experience Takja is by ordering the hansang, or tasting menu. It starts with a seafood tower stacked with oysters, bluefin tuna with kimchi sauce, scallops with mustard seaweed vinaigrette, snow crab legs and shrimp with chojang—a gochugaru-



1

1. Cold buckwheat noodles with perilla three ways



2



3

spiked cocktail sauce. Up next is a crisp-tender seafood pancake topped with briny sea urchin.

Then, in typical Korean fashion, comes the banchan—if only all restaurants got on board with the idea that meals should include multiple complimentary snacks. There's not one but two kinds of kimchi (white and radish); sweet-and-salty soy-pickled mustard greens; and a refreshing mix of watercress, cabbage and chrysanthemum.

Delicious on its own, this salad also cuts through the richness of all the meat that follows.

There's pork jowl, gorgeous prime striploin that's spent at least 30 days in Takja's dry-aging room, buttery A5 Wagyu and sweet soy-garlic marinated galbi. The idea is to alternate the meats with bites of banchan, top them with condiments like ssamjang (Korean miso) and freshly grated wasabi, or bundle up a bit of everything into a

leaf of lettuce or perilla (an aromatic green with notes of star anise) for a DIY wrap.

Buckwheat noodles, served cold with a parade of perilla permutations (seed, oil, leaf), cleanse the palate. And just when stomachs seem stretched to capacity, a bowl piled high with bingsoo (shaved ice) and flavoured with things like caramel and sweet potato hits the table—and spoons fly.



5

5. The seafood pancake, topped with fat lobes of sea urchin



6. Bingsoo, or shaved ice, flavoured with sweet potato and caramel

7. A tower of under-the-sea delights



7



4

2. Insert sizzle sound

3. A spread of banchan, obligatory Korean accoutrements

4. Jeff Kang and Edward Bang



1. Quinton
Bennett
(second from
right) with
his team



No. **4**
**St. Thomas
Restaurant and
Wine Bar**

23 St. Thomas St., unit 2,
stthomasyorkville.com

Tapas, tasting menus
and one heck of a
happy hour



2. Set off from the main dining
room is the Champagne Lounge



ANY CHEF with a sizable budget can select fancy-pants ingredients; compress, ferment or foam them; and paint a pretty picture on a plate. It takes an artist to make that picture greater than the sum of its extravagant parts.

In an opulent emerald-hued room inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, chef Quinton Bennett (who opened the adjoining Michelin-star Enigma in 2022) does just that with his Basque-esque dishes decked out in all kinds of house-made gels, infusions, nitrogen-shattered herbs and peculiar spice mixes. Something he calls dukkah furi, a hybrid of Egyptian dukkah and Japanese furikake,

is sprinkled over wild-caught tuna basted in fermented chili. A punchy black-garlic-and-black-bean hummus dots the plate along with warm yuzu jelly, lemon-pickled daikon and sharp mint-pickled compressed cucumbers. There's a lot going on, but it works: the acidic pickles play against the sweet jelly, the umami-enriched hummus amplifies the fish and the best-of-both-worlds spice mix brings it all together.

A truffle custard, made in the style of a Japanese chawanmushi (savory egg custard), is topped with crispy kale, candied horseradish and roasted yeast caramel, then finished with a tarragon dressing. It's not at all obvious that these components should work together—in fact, it sounds a bit like a dare—but it all adds up to something transcendent.



For dessert, the aged Manchego cheesecake is an absolute must. It's a sweet and savoury confection that features the nutty, tangy cheese three ways: in the crust, in the filling and shaved all over.

Between 5 and 6 p.m., the bar offers walk-ins an after-work indulgence: for \$45 a head, guests get a choice of three pintxos—like Wagyu tartare on house-made brioche with a punchy celeriac remoulade or rosemary focaccia with whipped goat cheese and red onion marmalade—with a glass of Catalanian sparkling wine. It just might be the fanciest happy hour this city has ever seen.



3. Guests can choose from a regional tasting menu, à la carte options or snacks from the pintxo station

4. Fingers of rosemary focaccia topped with whipped goat cheese and red onion marmalade

No. 5

Savor Thai

1226 St. Clair Ave. W.,
savortoronto.ca

Molecular Thai
from an Iron
Chef comes to
Corso Italia

1. Massaman-
braised short rib
with jasmine rice

2. Scallop with
citrus, herring
roe and micro mint





6. The Boom Bang Fai Fizz comes with a fiery garnish



SOMETHING SUBLIME has landed in Corso Italia—home of red-sauce joints, bridal boutiques and soccer-screening sports bars. Savor, led by Bangkok-born Iron Chef Prasopchok Trakulphat (also known as Chef Art), offers some of the most interesting and innovative Thai cuisine Toronto has seen since Kiin introduced us to Royal Thai dishes in 2017.

Both Trakulphat's avant-garde seven-course tasting menu and his à la carte offerings are loosely inspired by the traditional dishes his grandmother made. "I don't get hung up on the correct ingredients," he says, "as long as the balance of salty, spicy, sour and sweet is there." In other words, his kitchen is a shrine to the ancient flavours of Thai cuisine—with the odd dash of molecularism.

The lemongrass shrimp mousseline is grilled lollipops of puréed shrimp enriched with densely packed flavours of red curry. A trio of them arrives proudly lined up on a bed of shredded, fried lemongrass along with a spicy cranberry dipping sauce, hazelnut praline and makrut lime gel. The salad course comes in the form of delicate slices of pan-seared scallop, dotted with caviar, alongside tender arugula and a fried rice-flour sphere. Once smashed open, the crispy orb unleashes a deluge of roasted chili and lemongrass dressing. But the most exciting course is the khao soi, poured tableside over pan-seared lobster, shards of crispy rice, and tortellini stuffed with ricotta and funky fermented cabbage. Its textures roll and bump inside your mouth like a rickshaw along a country road.



3. Iron Chef Prasopchok Trakulphat (a.k.a. Chef Art)

4. A take on pla goong, a dish that falls somewhere between a ceviche and a salad

5. The Gomedakam Fusion is a Thai tea-infused spin on the classic manhattan





No. **6**
DaNico

440 College St.,
danicotoronto.com

A contemporary Italian
restaurant with
a Michelin connection



THE INTERSECTION of Bathurst and College, long-ruled by Sneaky Dee's, was hit with a Mediterranean glow-up last summer, when DaNico opened in a heritage building across from the graffiti-covered student bar. The lavish fortress of Italian fine dining is adorned with reclaimed palazzo doors, an eight-metre-tall Corinthian pillar, gargantuan gothic artwork and Victorian velvet banquettes. It's slightly intimidating to passers-by, and that's not totally an accident: Daniele Corona, the former chef of Michelin-star Don Alfonso, serves a set menu more suited to celebratory splurges than to spontaneous drop-ins. Looking for happy hour specials? Keep walking.

This isn't your nonna's Italian. Each course is made with top-tier ingredients—many of which are Asian, surprisingly—using modern techniques. For starters, there's caprese reinvented as a canapé. Organic tomato gel—so packed with sweet tomato flavour that it's like eating a San Marzano straight from the vine—

is filled with buffalo mozzarella and sprinkled with “mozzarella snow” and micro basil. For the spaghetti al funghi, the noodles are treated like risotto: slow-cooked in a reduced stock with locally foraged mushrooms, then finished with Abruzzo truffles, aged-parmigiano foam and a binchotan-smoked king oyster mushroom.

Corona swaps out the veal in vitello tonnato for a glistening carpaccio of bright yuzu-inflected Japanese Chutorro tuna and finishes it with a drizzle of fine olive oil, a dollop of sturgeon caviar, shavings of kohlrabi and a few edible petals. On the side: a creamy veal-based tonnato sauce bejewelled with toasted pine nuts and a cured caper leaf.

1. Even the bread course is a work of art

2. A reimagined two-bite caprese salad

3. Executive chef Daniele Corona

No. **7**

Aera

8 Spadina Ave., 38th floor,
aerarestaurant.com

O&B's new high-flying steakhouse on the top floor of the Well



OLIVER AND BONACINI (the Toronto brand that gave the Bay Street crowd Canoe, Jump and Biff's Bistro) is at it again with Aera, a steakhouse 38 storeys above Front and Spadina. Perched on the top floor of the Well, the restaurant—which takes its name from the Greek word for air—is all about that view. The 5,000-square-foot space benefits from three stunning exposures: the Toronto Islands to the south, a panoramic cityscape to the east and an uninterrupted sunset vista to the west. Even diners without window seats are in for a visual feast: to ensure that everyone has an optimal vantage, Solid Design Creative (the firm behind Bitter Melon, Paradise Theatre and Koukla) put the central tables on a raised platform.

Aera is a symbol of Toronto's post-pandemic culinary resurgence, a beacon of celebratory extravagance. Corporate executive chef Anthony Walsh tips his hat to 20th-century classics like oysters Rockefeller, shrimp cocktail and wedge salad. A seared porterhouse harkens back to *Mad Men*'s heyday, especially with a decadent stuffed, double-baked potato on the side. Up against showy dishes like PB&J foie gras, lobster spaghetti, and truffled mac and cheese, the creamed spinach is easy to ignore—but it's the menu's dark horse. The greens, which don't skimp on cream or Gruyère, are coated in a blanket of buttery breadcrumbs, with just a whisper of horseradish to rein in the richness. It's a side meant for the whole table to enjoy, yet it's almost too good to share.

There's also a comprehensive sushi program, and that Japanese influence is woven seamlessly through other parts of the menu. The steak tartare is reimagined with tempura crumble, nori and rice crisps. The sablefish is marinated in miso and maple, a nod to Nobu's famed black cod. And the maki, generously filled with fat-marbled New Brunswick-caught tuna, leans more toward an American style in its opulence, topped for an additional \$45 with caviar and gold flakes—a fittingly flashy luxury embellishment.



1. Executive chef Binit Pandey
2. The PB&J foie gras is equal parts nostalgic and extra
3. Aera benefits from unparalleled views of the city
4. A selection of top-tier sashimi

1. Crispy potatoes
drowning in fonduta

2. Mike Vieira, Jessie
Mak and Patrick Groves



1



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3



4



3. Cod and
cannellini beans

4. Chicken liver-
packed pasta pockets

No. 8 Contrada

537 College St.,
contradarestaurant.com

Little Italy's
unconventional new
Italian kitchen



THE TRIO BEHIND Contrada—Mike Vieira, Jessie Mak and Patrick Groves—call their approach “gonzo Italian,” which means Vieira cooks using mostly Italian techniques and ingredients but weaves in what he and his team like to eat. And what they like to eat is “Toronto food”: genre-melding dishes that reflect the city’s culinary diversity. So it’s Italian—but with a Japanese touch here, some French influence there.

Agnolotti stuffed with chicken liver was inspired by a dish Basilio Pesce made at his Parkdale restaurant, Porzia.

The little giblet-filled pockets of pasta are cooked in brown butter and paired with piped dollops of roasted butternut squash purée, charred cipolini onions and fried sage; a drizzle of aged balsamic adds some welcome acid. In another dish, delicate cod comes with cannellini beans soaked in a vegetable stock fortified with kombu and emulsified olive oil. Baby scallops bring the brine, poached artichoke lends a vegetal note and lemon lightens it up. Each component is delicious on its own, but when you get a bit of everything in one bite? Fireworks.



No. 9 The Fall Bright Tavern

840 Bloor St. W.,
thefallbright.com

Home cooking (and out-of-
this-world chocolate cake)
in Christie Pits



LONG-TIME friends Joe Rutherford and Brett Healey spent years in Toronto's restaurant industry—Rutherford was a sommelier at Momo-fuku Shoto; Healey worked front of house at Edulis—before deciding to open their own place. But they wanted theirs to be less of a special-occasion destination and more of a cozy

neighbourhood local. They've succeeded: this may be the city's most comfortable dining experience outside your own home.

With exposed brick, an antique hutch that functions as a server station and an eclectic mirror collection playing the part of wall art, the Fall Bright has a lived-in family room feel. Chef Healey cheekily describes his style as “home cooking, but with enough salt.”

To start, there's olive roulette: a grab-bag of meaty Castelvetrano olives stuffed with either white anchovy, preserved lemon, hot pepper or blue cheese. Midwinter, the Fall Bright served a homey chicken stew topped with crispy cubes of rosemary- and thyme-laced panisse, a chickpea fritter from the south of France. And a side of cauliflower was roasted and shot through with a creamy pistachio-tarragon vinaigrette—as if the brassica married potato salad and went honeymooning in Sicily.

The chocolate cake—a thick slab served with a generous dollop of crème diplomat (a mix of pastry and whipped creams)—is wickedly rich. It pops on and off the menu, so cross your fingers before heading over.

3. The Fall Bright's delectable comfort foods include olive roulette, chicken stew, roasted cauliflower and that killer chocolate cake



1. Joe Rutherford and Brett Healey

2. A preserved-lemon twist on the vesper





No. 10 The Rosebud

498 King St. E.,
rosebudto.com

A charming
French bistro blooms
in Corktown



CHEF AMIRA BECAREVIC and her husband, Justin Cheung, opened Mira Mira, a charming '50s-style diner, in the Beaches three years ago. Now they've transformed Corktown's former Kingsbrae Diner into a French fine-dining destination. It's a concept they'd been dreaming up for years. While mulling over "Rosebud" among a few other potential names, they came upon a photo of national treasure Eugene Levy filming *The Man* in the Kingsbrae back in 2005. The Rosebud is, of course, what Levy's character Johnny Rose calls the family's motel in *Schitt's Creek*; it seemed like fate. Between its walnut finishes, crushed velvet upholstery and whimsical art (featuring subjects like piano-playing cats), the room is adorable. Set toward the back, the small open kitchen sends out a rotating menu of French classics, each with a playful twist.

There's a golden-hued beurre blanc infused with briny BC uni and put through an aerator for an extra-velvety texture. It's poured over house-made tagliatelle and finished with orange powder, espelette pepper, chives and glossy pearls of trout roe. Rich and with a delicate oceanic sweetness, it's an unexpected showcase of the butter-based sauce. Lamb tourtière goes without its usual full pastry armour: instead, clove-and-nutmeg-spiced meat laced with a deep jus is piled beneath a puff pastry hat. It's finished with brandy-poached prunes, confit leeks and sweet-breads—all wrapped around the lamb like a wreath. Just like the restaurant, it's elegant, understated and cheeky in all the right ways.



2



1



3

1. Chinese turnip cake meets panisse

2. Jumbo shrimp with salmorejo for dunking



4



3. Executive chef Jeffrey Yap (left), Justin Cheung (right) and team

4. Uni-infused tagliatelle



No. 11

And/Ore

1040 Queen St. W.,
andorerestaurant.com

A Queen West
restaurant with
an actual cave



1. A jagged LED tube runs the length of the cavern's ceiling like a bolt of lightning

2. Hui's jian bing-inspired devilled egg



MINING ENGINEER

Jaime Donovan decided during the pandemic that she wanted to abandon her career and open a restaurant. So, in 2022, she bought an Edwardian row house and put together a team of talented women (including former Fabbria chef Missy Hui) to create a place with otherworldly ambience, incredible food, champagne by the glass and...a cave.

The surreal space—with a mezzanine under a circus tent and a cellar designed to look and feel like a grotto—is a real trip. And Hui's food, a menu of snacks straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*, is just as extraordinary.

Small plates with big flavours include a tiny katsu tea sandwich on Wonder Bread. It's stuffed with fried mushrooms and crunchy brined slaw, then slathered with Kewpie mayo and Bull-Dog sauce. And stracciatella cheese with jammy red wine-pickled figs, walnuts, pan-roasted grapes and parsley-lemon zest pesto hits all the right notes.

The pinnacle is a devilled egg on hoisin-dolloped baby gem lettuce, sprinkled with chives and crispy wonton bits, which arrives on a crystal dish. It riffs on the flavours of jian bing, a traditional Chinese breakfast crêpe—and it totally deserves its grandiose vessel.



3. Behold: the many mesmerizing layers of Porzia's lasagna

No. 12 Porzia's

319A Oakwood Ave.,
porzias.com

Lasagna with a cult
following arrives
in Oakwood Village



PORZIA'S started its life as a pandemic pop-up

made famous by chef Basilio Pesce's 14-layer lasagna—a wodge of noodles and rich Bolognese that's surprisingly delicate. Now, Pesce's cubic pasta has a home at his Oakwood Avenue restaurant, along with other sensational dishes like ricotta-and-pecorino-stuffed tortellini in a buttery mushroom sauce with browned mushrooms and a flurry of

ricotta salata. They're easy to overlook because of that show-stealing lasagna, but they're all worth trying—Pesce really has a way with carbs.

There's more to Porzia's than pasta, though. Even the simplest salad—a canvas of citrus painted in sunset hues and dotted with mint, parsley and Calabrian chili-stuffed olives—is a delight, and it begs for focaccia to mop up every last drop of dressing. When swordfish is available, make room: mild, meaty and crowned with sweet-and-sour caponata, it's a trip to the Mediterranean without leaving Toronto.

No. **13**

MSSM

154 Cumberland St.,
2nd floor, ms-sm.ca

Sushi master
Masaki Saito's
laid-back
omakase spot



1

1. Toronto's
only chef with
two Michelin
stars, Masaki
Saito

2. Akami, a
ruby-hued piece
of bluefin tuna

2



UP THE NARROW neon-lit stairwell of a Yorkville Victorian is Masaki Saito's new Edomae-style sushi house. Inside, an army of chefs trained by the sushi master stand side by side behind the counter, building works of edible art. At his eponymous \$680-a-head, two-Michelin-star restaurant around the corner, Saito runs the show as sole chef. Here, he will never lay a finger on the fish—and in the strange economy of the sushi world, that means a 14-course omakase at MSSM goes for the comparatively low price of \$98.

The procession of fancy fish dishes begins with a toro hand roll, a deliciously oily snack that tastes of the sea with a binchotan kiss, and ends with an oh-so-sweet strawberry wrapped in red bean and mochi. In between, there are several courses worthy of shout-outs, including the madai, an unctuous piece of torched sea bream dotted with fermented chili-radish paste, and the ikura, bright and bursting salmon roe wrapped in lightly roasted seaweed—a dish that lands somewhere between brunch at Bubbe's and the Tsukiji fish market.



3

No. **14**

Conejo Negro

838 College St.,
@conejonegro_to

A bustling kitchen on
College churning out Cajun
and Creole classics



4



ALYCIA WAHN CALLS herself a "grandma cook" in that she aims to make everything from scratch. And she means everything: she churns her own butter—cultured from cream, blended with honey and destined for cornbread—every two days. In her 20s, Wahn lived in Nashville, Memphis and New Orleans. It was then that she developed her Creole spice mix and learned that, to achieve the ultimate roux, you have to stir it for three hours, uninterrupted. Her gumbo—which features that roux as well as a lobster-clam

broth, tomatoes, chicken, Cajun-fried shrimp and chorizo (instead of the usual andouille)—is rich, deep and smoky. Wahn is a master of blackening.

She's just as adept at delicate dishes, like her ahi tuna ceviche with mango, avocado, OJ and pickled red onion. It's served with corn chips fried in-house. (If Wahn could grow her own corn out back, she surely would.)

3. A bowl of
that most
excellent gumbo

4. A Deep South
spread in Little
Italy



No. 15 915 Dupont

915 Dupont Ave.,
@915dupont

A Japanese-inspired
listening lounge, restaurant
and cocktail bar



YOU CAN'T SWING a bottle of natural wine on Geary without hitting a hotspot—and now, just a short walk away on an erstwhile industrial stretch, 915 Dupont could kick-start another trendy strip. Before officially opening the restaurant, owner Nigel Wang built up his customer base by using the space to host dance parties and culinary pop-ups.

Then, last November, he started running it as a café by day, restaurant and listening bar by night.

The vibe, set with the dulcet tones of funk, disco, soul and jazz deep cuts, is warm. The relaxed staff, taking cues from the low-key and stylish Wang, is welcoming. And the room—furnished with hanging plants, comfy couches and vintage teak—is pure '70s-apartment kitsch.

Head chef Arush Singh's roster of plates combines flavours from east and west, dropping in Indian spices and ingredients here and there. While a hungry couple could eat their way through the short menu of punchy small plates, there are a few highlights, beginning with the house pickles—artfully arranged paper-thin slices of daikon and green onion kimchi compressed in a kicky Korean vinaigrette. The shrimp on toast—chunks of poached prawn served chilled on a thick slice of Bakery Pompette's brioche—covers the crustaceans, as well as delightful bites of maitake mushroom, in a creamy yuzu-kosho emulsion and a crunchy Asian brassica slaw. A side of chargrilled caulilini (like broccolini but cauliflower) is dressed in an 'nduja vinaigrette on a swoosh of cashew-sesame tahini and finished with salsa macha and gremolata. The cruciferous veggie dish gives off big baked-potato-with-all-the-fixings energy.

For dessert, a soft serve machine churns out plump spires in rotating flavours. Recently, a swirl of vanilla was topped with maple caramel, frosted walnuts and rum-soaked raisins. Alternatively, one of the bar's highballs—like a less-saccharine version of a well drink—makes for a perfect not-so-sweet ending.



1. Beef tartare with harissa, plum, tomatoes, yogurt and mint

2. Wang (centre) and his team

3. The highball is having a moment in Toronto

4. Crunchy, sweet and spicy caulilini

No. **16**

The Old York Tavern

167 Niagara St.,
@theoldyorktavern

A new team
breathes life into
a neighbourhood
institution



IN A WAY, this is the new Old York: a glowe-up version of the cozy diner that doled out hangover-curing grub for almost 50 years.

When its previous owner decided to close after the pandemic, David Le, Katie Bradley and Saad Ali—won over by its history, location and weird angular construction—stepped in. They got to work preserving the restaurant's romantic vibe while ushering in a bistro menu that left fried-from-frozen tater tots in the past.

Lacy waffle-cut potato chips come with a dip that builds on a yogurt aioli base with a trinity of onions: shallot oil, scallions and crispy shallots—it's chips and dip for the mature palate. The eggs Benedict is super indulgent, with Cones-toga eggs and chunks of East Coast lobster set on challah from Lev Bakery and bathed in a pool of golden hollandaise. And the burger gets its deep meatiness from a dry-aged patty layered with onion, charred onion sauce and pickles. There's no flat-top in the kitchen, so the beef gets a smoky char from the grill, something that can't be achieved with a smash burger—and doesn't the city have enough of those paper-thin patties?



1



1. Grown-up chips
and dip

2. David Le, Katie
Bradley and Saad Ali

3. The extra-
indulgent lobster-
topped eggs Benny

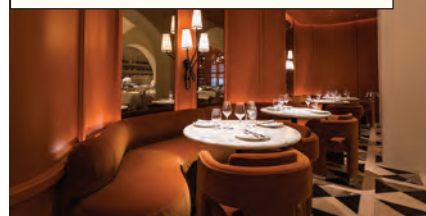


3

No. 18 Daphne

67 Richmond St. W.,
daphnetoronto.com

A massive mid-century-modern-esque American brasserie



2

No. 17 Bar Goa

36 Toronto St.,
bargoa.ca

Tasting menus
from India's top
vacation
destination

1

THIS IS CHEF and serial restaurateur Hemant Bhagwani's third restaurant inspired by the cuisine of Goa, India's vacation destination on the Arabian Sea—popular with beachgoers, backpackers and aging hippies. But there's no vindaloo or prawn curry here: Bar Goa's à la carte and tasting menus are a meditation on the new, cosmopolitan identity of the coastal region.

Bhagwani's take on chaat marries chickpeas and potatoes with sweetened yogurt and fresh blackberries in a two-bite tartlet that somehow doesn't taste like dessert. Tableside, rosewater is poured over dry ice beneath the dish for a dramatic, aromatic flourish. The chaat

is served with crisp cups of pani puri, hollow wheat shells filled with chickpeas, potatoes and chutney. A shot of mint-and-coriander water comes on the side, to be poured into the shells and consumed with haste.

Then there's something called a "legendary" lamb chop—a confident descriptor indeed. The thick-cut chop is twice-marinated in garlic, chili, fenu-greek and mustard seed before hitting the charbroiler, then the tandoor. It's crisp on the outside, tender on the inside and, as it turns out, deserving of its title.

1. A tarted-up take
on chaat



CHARLES KHABOOTH and Danny Soberano's latest addition to their empire—a 3,900-square-foot brasserie full of velour, mirrors and sweeping archways—is their first restaurant to focus on American cuisine.

In a place that calls itself a brasserie, the steak game has to be strong, and it is. The high-end cuts are tops, but even the skirt steak—the cheapest cut on the menu—is wood-grilled Wagyu that tastes more like a million bucks than its \$60 price tag. On the side: a stuffed baked potato crowned with caviar.

From the surf, tuna carpaccio pounded flat comes on a dish painted with bergamot mayo and Calabrian chili hot sauce. Yuzu-pickled radishes, cucumber, pearl onion, arugula sprouts and fried shallots create some crackle-and-pop textural magic. It's like a CNE snack prepared in a high-end kitchen—explosive and super fun.

2. No ordinary spud, the Daphne Potato comes with Beluga caviar



No. 19

Romi's Bakery

744 St. Clair Ave. W.,
romisbakery.com

A temple to
tahini on
St. Clair West



1. Everything at Romi's, including the velvety hummus, is made in house

2. Romi's is chef Tomer Markovitz's first solo venture



ANYONE WHO hasn't yet tried Tomer Markovitz's falafel should make a beeline for Romi's, the café and bakery on St. Clair West named for his three-year-old daughter. After she was born, the former head chef of Parallel Brothers decided to open a spot that would free up his evenings for family. So while Romi's is open until 8, it's mostly about early morning and afternoon delights. His falafel—a holdover from his days at Parallel—are crunchy on the outside, moist and Incredible Hulk-green on the inside, and bursting with parsley, coriander, mint and scallion. And they come three ways:

on their own, in a bowl of velvet-smooth hummus, or tucked into house-made pita or challah along with lettuce, pickles, tomato, cucumber, and a saucy trio of tahini, amba and schug.

The marvelous sesame-coated house-made challah is just one of many loaves that line the "challah wall"—there's also Nutella-rich rugelach, double-fudge brownies and chocolate chip cookies that weigh half a pound each. In every one of his desserts, Markovitz uses high-end ingredients like local butter and Madagascar vanilla paste. But, ultimately, it all tastes so good because he's been honing these recipes for nearly a decade.

No. 20 Fish and Loaf

41 Lebovic Ave., unit A117,
fishandloaf.com

An Asian-fusion steakhouse
in a Scarborough
strip mall

3. Surf and turf à la
Fish and Loaf



TUCKED AWAY in a Scarborough plaza, between a shisha lounge and a food court, is chef John Situ's debut restaurant. A former IT worker and realtor, Situ gave up the corporate grind a decade ago to attend chef school. Freewheeling with inspiration from China, Japan, Europe and Canada, his menu focuses on grilled protein and clay pot rice.

There's grass-fed Australian rib-eye, dry-aged for 40 days, then simply seasoned and served with a lustrous demi-glace, buttery mashed potatoes and grilled veggies (or, for a bit extra, lobster tail). Octopus is double-boiled, Chinese-style, in sake and dashi, then grilled in Mediterranean spices and plated with sautéed fingerlings and Brussels sprouts. Ibérico ham and Chinese sausage are cooked together in a clay pot with duck fat and jasmine rice, then topped with an egg and a sprinkle of scallion. Ibérico is an odd pairing for clay pot rice, but the nuttiness of the acorn-fed ham brings depth to the dish—and it's right on brand for Situ's genre-blending approach.

