It’s been a year since anyone has eaten a juicy rib-eye or a bowl of impossibly fragrant Thai curry—or anything, for that matter—inside a packed Toronto restaurant, an experience once as central to life in this food-obsessed town as piling onto the streetcar at rush hour. (That, we don’t miss.) Since then, more than 10,000 restaurants have reportedly closed across Canada—hundreds in Toronto—taking countless jobs along with them. The rest continue to scrape by on a mix of takeout, delivery and outdoor dining, along with Covid relief funds and, if they’re lucky, flexible landlords. But for all the red ink, the past year has also been one of mind-boggling reinvention and sweat-soaked resilience that deserve the highest of accolades. Take, for example, the bold chefs and restaurateurs plowing ahead with plans to open shiny new dining spaces, pandemic be damned, that will feel like a culinary windfall when it’s safe to once again welcome guests. Or the creative and delicious ways these restaurants, and others, have found to package the in-restaurant experience—from the food to the ambience—for home consumption, making our own four walls feel, if just for one meal, like the real deal. But perhaps the most exciting development of this fraught period is the explosion of entrepreneurial passion projects that have popped up in virtually every corner of the city, with homebound cooks and bakers and enthusiasts of all culinary persuasions selling the food of their dreams with nothing more than an oven and an Instagram page. It all amounts to a reshaped culinary landscape that promises to steer our dining habits long after the pandemic fades and we all start obsessing over OpenTable bookings again. Here’s what that looks like in 2021.
Chefs, bakers and hobbyists used their time in lockdown, and the power of Instagram, to pursue their kitchen passion projects.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL NEUHAUS
With their plan to open a dine-in Chinese restaurant paused by the pandemic, chefs David Schwartz, Braden Chong and Keith Liu needed a way to keep honing their meticulously researched recipes. So they came up with a made-for-takeout concept called Sunny’s Chinese, serving dinners from the back of their would-be space near Avenue and Davenport every two weeks. Each meal is a feast built around a region, from Sichuan to Guangdong. Thoughtful tasting notes accompany the meal, outlining the techniques and ingredients used in dishes like the hidden chicken, which is crispy, spicy and buried under a mountain of aromatics, and practically humming with the tongue-tingling properties of Sichuan peppercorns—in Sunny’s parlance, a “vibrational mouthfeel.” Every meal is like an education, in the most delicious way possible.

How to order: Sign up for the email newsletter at sunnyschinese.com for dates and pickup information.
For super-trendy birria tacos
Tacos Maria Bonita

THE PANDEMIC cost Aldo Lopez his job in construction, and his wife, Maria, lost her job in customer service. That’s when they decided to launch Tacos Maria Bonita, named for Aldo’s grandmothers, mother and, yes, wife. Operating out of a commercial kitchen in the west end, they specialize in Tijuana-style birria de res, the hearty Mexican stew currently on a popularity bender across North America. Lopez marinates beef for 24 hours in a blend of 18 chilies and spices, followed by an eight-hour simmer that yields an unctuous and ridiculously flavourful orange-tinted braising liquid called consomé. The meltingly tender meat is stuffed inside either plain tacos, mulitas (fried corn tortillas with cheese) or quesabirrias (a birria meat-filled quesadilla), and the move is to dunk those bad boys in a cup of the accompanying liquid. Tacos are sold by the kilo or half-kilo of meat, and come with all the fixings. **HOW TO ORDER:** Email tacosmariaبونيتا.tor@gmail.com by Wednesday for weekend pickup at Jane Station.

For oodles of handmade noodles
Pasta Forever

JESS MAIORANO was cooking at Woodlot—making tortellini, tagliatelle and other classic pasta shapes she’d learned to make growing up—before the restaurant went dark at the start of the pandemic. Rather than hunt for a new gig right away, Maiorano kept on doing what she loves doing, and started selling her homemade pasta through Instagram under the name @pastaforeverto. The business took off, and the orders haven’t stopped. Maiorano experiments with variations rarely seen on restaurant menus, like rope-shaped lorighittas or candy-shaped caramelle pasta with roasted beets. Her online shop also features sauces and add-ons like dandelion walnut pesto, truffle butter and focaccia. **HOW TO ORDER:** pastaforever.ca
For a pair of top-chef smash burgers
MATTY’S PATTY’S BURGER CLUB & VICTORY BURGER

IT’S THE SLIMMEST of silver linings, but so many of Toronto’s culinary pros have been pushed toward new passion projects by the pandemic. Count Matty Matheson and Victor Barry among them—they both independently decided now was the moment to create their perfect grill-pressed smash burger. Matty’s Patty’s Burger Club, which opened across from Trinity Bellwoods in October, features lacy-edged brisket and chuck patties with American cheese and a choice of sauces on sesame-studded buns. Victory Burger, which operates out of Piano Piano’s Harbord and Mount Pleasant kitchens, starts with a house-baked Japanese milk bun to cradle its patties, adding cheddar, pickles, onion and Victory sauce. They’re two approaches to the same endgame: full-bellied burger bliss.

HOW TO ORDER: mattyspattysburgerclub.ca; victoryburger.ca

For a festive taste of West Africa
AFROBEAT KITCHEN

VICTOR UGWUEKE learned to cook at his family’s restaurant in Lagos, and dreamed of running his own West African joint. Cut loose by the pandemic from his job as head chef at Tabule, he saw his moment. He’s taken over the kitchen at Bloor West’s Caravan Cafe and Tea House, where he cooks classic and contemporary Nigerian dishes on Thursday to Sunday nights. His specialty is party jollof, the country’s iconic rice dish cooked with lemongrass, star anise, a sofrito reduction, a lingering undertone of smoked crayfish and a choice of spiced chicken, prawns or beef, served with fried plantains and vegetables. Colourful, smoky and spicy all at once, party is right.

HOW TO ORDER: Pickup or delivery via Ritual, SkipTheDishes and Uber Eats
For the closely guarded butter chicken recipe

SPICE GIRL EATS

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC HIT, Becca Pereira was juggling two receptionist jobs. She got laid off, but her newfound downtime gave her a chance to explore an old, handwritten book of family recipes. In October, she started selling her homestyle Indian cooking out of the Depanneur, a Dufferin Grove commissary kitchen, and Spice Girl Eats was born. Pereira’s rotating menus are a tour through her spice collection, which includes blends passed down from her great-grandmother. Her butter chicken is the dish that keeps people coming back: it’s tangier and lighter than most restaurant varieties, and it’s paired with sourdough naan (made by Pereira’s sister) topped with garlic butter and Maldon salt. HOW TO ORDER: Pre-order on Friday at spicegirleats.com

For fat Italian hoagies served out of a temporarily shuttered west-end bar

FLORA’S DELI

FORMER CHANTECLER CHEF JESSE Mutch always wanted to cook food influenced by his grandmother, Flora. He started a sandwich pop-up with pals Thomas Conrad and Ailbhe McMahon over the summer, then turned the slumbering Mahjong Bar at Dundas and Dovercourt into a home base of sorts—a makeshift Italian deli. Mutch draws on childhood favourites from Flora’s table. One of three main items on the menu is the Cantina, a deceptively simple layering of mortadella, smoked turkey and hot Calabrese salami sharpened by giardiniera and deepened with Calabrian oregano, prized for its intense flavour. Also on the menu: Flora’s famous meatballs. HOW TO ORDER: For Wednesday to Sunday pickup, call 416-732-7922; delivery via Uber Eats

For multi-layered slabs of lasagna

PORZIA’S LASAGNE

OSTERIA RIALTO EXECUTIVE CHEF BASILIO PESCE was known for his hefty, ridiculously cheesy lasagna from his days at Parkdale’s Porzia. So during the pandemic, he decided to give the dish new life, selling trays of the stuff from Osteria Rialto’s Bloor and Ossington kitchen every Friday. Ingredients are everything. San Marzanos, the gold standard of canned tomatoes, are the base of both the meatless and bolognese sauces. The pasta, rolled fresh the day it’s sold, is made from bright-yellow-yolked Conestoga eggs and a mix of 00 and semolina flour. He rolls the sheets as thin as he can and squeezes about a dozen layers of pasta, sauce, mozzarella, parmesan and pecorino into a tray, totalling nearly four golden-brown pounds each. HOW TO ORDER: Pre-order Mondays at 11 a.m. at porziaslasagne.com
For pizza so good it helped this couple bootstrap a bona fide east-end pizzeria

ONE NIGHT ONLY PIZZA

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, husband-and-wife team Luke Pollard and Brianna Murray ran a construction and design company. They were also long-time pizza aficionados. Pollard spent years perfecting his ultra-light, crispy crust—he ferments it for more than three days—and the pair hosted pizza nights for friends every weekend. When Covid hit and their day job slowed down, they started selling pizza once a week from the back porch of their Riverdale home. Word of mouth took over from there, leading to thousands of hungry DMs, and—every home cook’s dream—enough momentum to open a brick-and-mortar shop on Pape south of the Danforth. HOW TO ORDER: Find details at @onenightonlypizza on Instagram

For family-style Filipino feasts

Kusinera

AT THE END OF 2020, Keanu Francisco, sous chef at King West restaurant Sara, was rattled by the state of the industry and considering a career change. Cooking at home one day, he made his mother’s kare-kare, a Filipino peanut and beef stew, on a whim. He posted further experiments with Filipino food on Instagram, and, based on the enthusiastic feedback, Kusinera—a pop-up on the last Sunday and Monday of each month—was born. The name means “female cook” in Tagalog, and the project is a homage to influential women in his life—especially his mother. His ensaymada tops soft, sweet bread with condensed milk, smoked cheddar and mozzarella for a taste of cheesy heaven; his tocino, a sweet pork shoulder, is vivid red with annatto and cures for three days. And a kamayan feast, the colourful, family-style medley of garlic fried rice, BBQ pork, crispy shrimp, lemongrass chicken and coconut curry—all served on a banana leaf—is in the works. HOW TO ORDER: Follow @kusineratoronto on Instagram
For homestyle Polish-Jewish comfort food
Godfrey’s Supper Club

CHEF SHAUNA GODFREY left her job as Momofuku Kōjin sous chef in February 2020, intending to travel before looking for a new job in the city. Her plans didn’t quite pan out for the usual 2020 reasons, so she decided to launch her own takeout business. Godfrey’s Supper Club is all about Polish-Jewish comfort food. Her rotating Thursday menus feature four generous courses, like fall-off-the-bone short ribs, a golden beet salad, a razor-thin potato leek gratin, and walnut coffee cake—all with homely, nourishing vibes inspired by the food she grew up on. Golden, just-sweet-enough challah buns—from a recipe by Godfrey’s 91-year-old grandmother—are a mainstay. Alongside a weekly set menu, Godfrey sells fridge and freezer staples in her “blue dot” menu, with items like cabbage rolls, house-made hot mustard and even bake-at-home buns.

HOW TO ORDER: Pre-orders open Sundays at godfreysupperclub.ca for Thursday pickup near Christie and Dupont or Yonge and York Mills

For kid-friendly dinners
Noble House

DUSTIN GALLAGHER, the executive chef of 416 Snack Bar, and his partner, artist Flo Leung, initially conceived of their combined kitchen and art studio near Queen and Brock as a place to host private dinners. The pandemic had other ideas, so Gallagher and Leung decided instead to offer rotating takeout menus every couple of weeks. Each is centred around a different theme, like a French-forward homage to Julia Child or a family-style Italian-American dinner, which featured an enormous tray of cheesy baked ziti, eight giant meatballs, chili-flecked rapini and add-ons like chili oil, pesto and crispy fried shallots. The generously portioned meals are consciously kid-friendly and fit to feed an entire family—even one with mismatched tastes.

HOW TO ORDER: Via noblehouseto.com for pickup Wednesday through Saturday
For a futuristic twist on a Middle Eastern restaurant

BOX'D BY PARAMOUNT

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC struck, Mohamad Fakih of Paramount Fine Foods was already planning to open a casual restaurant inspired by mid-century automat. By the time Box'd opened at King and Yonge in July, the idea of a digitized dining experience completely free of human contact, with orders placed online and collected from a wall of sanitized cubbies, felt extremely prescient—a business model for the Covid age. Rest assured, there are actual chefs working behind the wall of cubbies, making tasty black truffle hummus bowls and Moroccan couscous paired with your choice of tofu or lamb. HOW TO ORDER: Via boxdbyparamount.com to schedule a pickup

For painstaking sourdough baked goods

BREADHEAD

THIS SOURDOUGH-FORWARD bakery project was newly out-of-work baker Lucy Kirby’s solution not only to pandemic fatigue, but the yeast shortage from the earliest days of lockdown. Relying instead on natural leavening gave her baked goods a deeper, more complex flavour. Her home-based business quickly gained enough momentum to take over a commercial kitchen in the east end before moving into White Squirrel Coffee Shop at Queen and Strachan in February. Kirby’s pillowy doughnuts, tangy cinnamon buns, flaky croissants and crackly chocolate-chip cookies are all imbued with sourdough starter. The bakery also specializes in cakes, like whimsical tie-dye vanilla, and rich, golden Basque cheesecake. HOW TO ORDER: Pre-order for Friday-to-Sunday pickup or delivery at breadhead.ca

For fried chicken from a former Cambodian joint

DING-A-WING

BEFORE EVERYTHING WENT sideways last March, the Tuk Tuk Canteen team decided to reinvent their dine-in Cambodian restaurant, south of Bloor on Roncesvalles, as a fried chicken counter. “The branding, recipes and logistics were already planned,” says chef-owner Mike Tan. “Luck is when timing meets being prepared.” Tan’s ultra-crispy buttermilk fried chicken, brined in lemon, smoked paprika and thyme, confirms the pivot was smart in more ways than one. The bestseller is the fried chicken sandwich slathered in honey-dill sauce with pickles and cabbage slaw on a Martin’s potato roll. It’s best with a side of the eternally crispy thick-cut fries spiced with cayenne salt. HOW TO ORDER: Delivery and pickup via dingawing.com
What to Eat 2021

Opening a restaurant in a pandemic takes patience, plenty of PPE and, above all, guts. Here, our favourite newcomers

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN CULLEN

Brave New Restaurants

THE JULY CLOSURE of Yorkville’s tiny Brothers Food and Wine hit Toronto’s restaurant scene like a haymaker. But less than 24 hours after getting the bad news, head chef Joachim Hayward was off the mat, embarking on a new project with his friend and fellow Brothers alum Myles Harrison. Six months later, in the middle of the second lockdown, they opened Crosley’s on Ossington. By day, the space—long and narrow, and decked out in warm wood accents—serves Hayward’s heaping veal sandwiches and scotch eggs for takeout. On weekend nights, Harrison handles bookings for Crosley’s four-course at-home meals, which strive for the simple anglophilic elegance—familiar, but a little showy—at which Brothers excelled: Welsh rarebits with snow crab and mornay sauce; Nunavut flounder with a bottarga, seaweed and herb compound butter; a leek and wild mushroom timpano (a baked slab of rigatoni bound together by béchamel and sheets of pasta). One early menu finished with Hayward’s cheesecake, a lacquered slice of puff pastry sandwiching mascarpone and tiny tart cloudberries. It was incredible—and a promise of things to come.

Crosley’s
214 OSSINGTON AVE. | crosleys.ca
POMPETTE is the pandemic bébé of three accomplished French expats. Chef Martine Bauer comes by way of the Prince Maurice hotel in Mauritius and Hôtel de Matignon, the residence of the prime minister of France. Once here, she worked at Brothers and Pearl Morissette. In her kitchen, she makes contemporary French dishes: poireaux vinaigrette (pictured), buttery and bacon-y tartiflette, and a poultry take on pâte en croûte, sliced thickly and served with pickled veg and grainy mustard. And—staying true to the restaurant’s name, which is French for “tipsy”—Martine’s sommelier husband, Jonathan Bauer, curates the 3,000-bottle cellar, and Maxime Hoerth mixes up excellent cocktails, now available to go in wax-sealed bottles.
ROBERTO MAROTTA has been one of Toronto’s top ambassadors of Sicilian cuisine since he got here in 2010, cooking at Parkdale’s Maialino Enoteca Italiana. In 2016, he and his wife, Jacqueline Nicosia, opened Ardo, on the edge of Corktown, and made a splash with Marotta’s beautiful plates of charred octopus and preternaturally creamy gnocchi. With the August debut of Cabbagetown’s Dova—delayed several months by you know what—Marotta is nearing doctoral status with his native cuisine, each dish a dissertation on his upbringing. Any reservations about takeout pasta should be set aside for his linguine: the key ingredient is ‘strattu, a thick Sicilian tomato paste that brings unimaginable depth of flavour, aided by preserved sardines and accented with Sicilian fennel, pine nuts and raisins. And porcini mushrooms—another Sicilian calling card—zhuzh up the jus of his braised short ribs, a hearty dish of which Marotta’s Nonna Maria, his culinary inspiration—would surely be proud.
Taverne Bernhardt’s

202 DOVERCOURT RD.
bernhardtstoronto.com

THE TEAM behind Harbord Street’s Dreyfus had been planning a casual spinoff since before the pandemic hit. But the precarious state of indoor dining altered those plans slightly. Thus, Taverne Bernhardt’s entered the world in August as a patio-and-takeout-only spot in the former Julie’s Cuban space on Dovercourt. Zachary Kolomeir builds his often-changing menus around seasonal salads and Ontario veg. But his mainstay is the rotisserie chicken, a plate (or box) loaded with juicy golden bird, slaw, fries, Harbord Bakery buns and house-made gravy. It became the must-have takeout dish of fall and winter, a time when we needed such comforts like never before.

Azhar

96 OSSINGTON AVE.
azhartoronto.com

JANET ZUCCARINI’S five-storey Corktown showpiece, Gusto 501, opened weeks before the first lockdown. Instead of waiting for brighter days, Zuccarini took a once-more-unto-the-breach approach, launching the Mediterranean-flavoured Azhar in January. She’s partnered with some heavyweight muscle in Stuart Cameron (Mira, Patria and Byblos), who’s working with a powerhouse wood-burning oven to animate fire-roasted cauliflower draped with zhug and tahini, and butterflied sea bream marinated in harissa and layered with red and green chermoula. Going by the early evidence, this dream team might be one of the best things to happen to Toronto restaurants during the pandemic.
A YEAR largely devoid of indoor dining is a rough time to debut a floor-to-ceiling restaurant makeover. But Yorkville’s formerly French La Société is stunning in its airy new Lebanese incarnation. Restaurant mogul (and Beirut native) Charles Khabouth took no shortcuts in recruiting chef Rony Ghaleb from Lebanon’s fine-dining scene. His grilled meat platters are a worthy centrepiece of any feast, particularly the pair of savoury-sweet beef kebabs he festoons with stewed cherries, carob molasses and ground pistachios, ready to tuck into pieces of herb-rubbed biwaz bread. It all works effortlessly as takeout, and even better as a sign of what we’ll regain when dining in beautiful spaces is back on the table.

Manita
210 OSSINGTON AVE.
manita.ca

THIS NEW LOCAL on Ossington is a café-slash-restaurant that—like its pivoting peers—carries artisanal groceries and wine, alongside a menu of hearty fare. It’s the new project for the team behind Queen West taqueria Grand Electric, and was in the works long before Covid. Here it’s all about simple luxuries: still-warm apple fritters, cheesy croquettes and sandwiches greater than the sum of their few parts. For one, a carpet of cultured butter is layered with pretty-in-pink French ham, paper-thin radish coins and Mahón cheese on a Blackbird baguette. Sure, the bread’s crusty exterior might scrape the roof of your mouth when you take a too-big bite, but it’s just a reminder that you’re eating a perfect sandwich and life could be a lot worse.
Bar Mignonette
794 DUNDAS ST. W. | barmignonette.com

THIS DUNDAS WEST SEAFOOD AND WINE RESTAURANT was a twinkle in Craig Wong’s eye before Covid came around, and was born at the end of summer, in that bubble between lockdowns. For years, Wong wanted to do something with the space above his raucous restaurant Patois. While the name went through a change or two, the concept stayed the same: an intimate spot for seafood-focused small plates and natural wines. The menu leans on Wong’s French culinary training, with influences from his Chinese-Jamaican background. Early on, this translated to steak tartare bedazzled with briny salmon roe and a pasta special crowned with chubby lobes of uni. The current iteration includes only dishes that travel well: a crispy shrimp patty with house Thousand Island and iceberg lettuce on a smooshy potato bun, and garlic coco bread stuffed with blue crab—the delicious love child of Wong’s two kitchens.
This isn’t your average grab-and-go. These prix-fixe multi-course meals package up everything required to replicate the restaurant at home—almost.

For a dinner that creates its own mood

LAKE INEZ

It’s easy enough, relatively speaking, to put together a five-course meal for take-out. It’s harder to package everything else that makes a restaurant meal feel like an escape: the lighting, the scents, the wine list, the music. So along with its weekly takeout meals, Lake Inez might throw in a thimble of aromatic essential oils for diffusing, or a candle to create that special-occasion feeling, along with a bottle of funky natural wine and a curated Spotify playlist that echoes its Little India dining room—from Billy Ocean to the Clash to RZA. It all works because the food is equally creative: chef Jay Moore has cooked everything from precise fine dining (at Ursa and Shōtô) to no-nonsense barbecue (at J and J), so it’s not a stretch when he hops from a fried chicken picnic menu one week to an alpine spread of fondue, tartiflette, schnitzel and apple-almond streusel cake with cinnamon custard the next. Lakeinezto.com
For an almost-too-pretty-to-eat meal
KAISEKI YU-ZEN HASHIMOTO

THERE’S NO WAY to truly replicate a kaiseki dining experience at home: it’s as much a style of service as a set of spectacular ingredients. But the culinary part can be conveyed through Masaki Hashimoto’s exquisite care boxes, the prettiest takeout containers you’ve ever seen filled with eight courses, including a delicately carved dome of turnip encasing sweet rice and pork belly that simmered for four days; an orb of mashed taro root encrusted with dots of five-coloured rice cracker, filled with sautéed wagyu; and a show-stopping selection of sashimi with Hashimoto’s signature daikon crane. If the $300 price isn’t enough of a splurge, supplements like a jewel box of A5 wagyu beef, or a whole Shizuoka muskmelon, can be added. Kaiseki.ca

For an at-home wine bar experience
GREY GARDENS

JEN AGG ONCE SAID that the secret to her success is that she creates restaurants she’d want to frequent, serving food she wants to eat. So it’s no surprise that Grey Gardens now makes the perfect to-go wine bar experience. The changing, mostly pescatarian menu includes five gobsmackingly gorgeous dishes like blush-pink slices of kinmedai and tiny radish cubes with toasted kombu oil; slow-cooked salmon in a leek vinaigrette; and pineapple pie with an otherworldly miso-butterscotch crème anglaise. And the extras here are just that—extra: shrimp cocktail, duck sausage, a tin of sturgeon caviar with all the fixings. There’s wine, too—a collection of off-the-beaten-path bottles to choose from. Greygardens.oftendining.com

For a takeout tasting menu
AUBERGE DU POMMIER

THIS NORTH YORK INSTITUTION, the grande dame of the O&B empire, has been doing what it does best—flawless food and service—for over three decades. In the year of Covid, they channelled that expertise into impeccable experiences for at-home indulgence. Chef Tim Schulte’s changing menu includes dishes that are downright decadent: lightly seared coho salmon with a yuzu emulsion; tortellini in a Périgord truffle butter sauce; unctuous duck two ways (breast, ballotine) in a port wine jus. So, while it might be tempting, try not to fill up on the hunk of still-warm sourdough. For dessert, there are stunning creations from pastry chef Sarah Tsai, like a puck-sized macaron sandwiching matcha ganache and heavenly vanilla creme drizzled with cassis. There is no graceful way to eat it and that’s okay—nobody is watching. Aubergedupommier.com
For New Asian small plates

**DAILO**

**NICK LIU’S BRASSERIE** has always been popular for its flavour-packed sharing plates. And while it will be a minute before we can pass a plate of his Big Mac bao or truffle fried rice around a table in his dining room, we can at least bring the experience home to our own. Liu’s tasting menus are a delight: there’s always an amuse bouche (a miso-flavoured cloud of crab, for example), a starter (noodles with smoked mackerel), some dim sum bites and a main, like bulgogi-braised short ribs with tangy kimchi pomme purée and a sunny-side-up quail egg. Hand-warmers are sweetly attached to packages that contain hot dishes so they stay toasty on the way home. Exploretock.com/dailo

For multi-course Iberian meals

**EDULIS**

**PRE-PANDEMIC, EDULIS** was a go-to special-occasion restaurant—just landing a reservation was worth celebrating. Unsurprisingly, it remains one of the toughest tables in town, figuratively speaking. (The first Edulis at Home meal sold out in 12 hours.) Every week, Michael Caballo and Tobey Nemeth turn out an exciting menu of the French and Spanish small plates they’re famous for—black truffle gougeres, milk-braised veal, John Dory cooked à la plancha. All of the touches remain: adorable stickers denote what’s in each box, and detailed plating notes are included. Take turns offering tableside service with your stay-at-home someone for next-level realness. Exploretock.com/edulis

For a to-go tapas bar experience

**BAR ISABEL**

**REGARDLESS OF THE SPEED** of the vaccine rollout, it’s going to be a while before we’re rushing to share small plates over cocktails in a packed tapas bar. In the meantime, College Street’s Bar Isabel, the city’s foremost landmark for communal Iberian dining, is packaging Spanish dinners that evoke sherry-soaked late-night meals in San Sebastian or Barcelona. The menu features Isabel standards like the sea bream ceviche, brimming with citrus acidity, ripe avocado richness and chili heat; and grilled Spanish octopus in a lemon-butter sauce. After a quick stint in the oven, it’s a revelation. (Who knew seafood could reheat so well?) A vanilla Basque cake is included for dessert, with sherry cream that needs to heat for a few minutes in a saucepan—and if pouring your own glaze over a piece of cake isn’t a brief cure for the late-winter doldrums, nothing will be. Exploretock.com/barisabel
For a classic date night
GIULIETTA

REMEMBER DATE NIGHT? It’s a thing that used to happen before the pandemic, when hiring a sitter, putting on nice clothes and booking a sensibly early dinner reservation were the keys to unlocking a romantic evening. Thankfully, it’s alive and well at Giulietta, where the weekly Date Night menu features chef Rob Rossi’s elegant takes on homestyle Italian. The four-course menu changes weekly, and might start with a classic fritto misto or burrata adorned with blood orange and hazelnuts. But it’s usually tough to top the pasta course (it is, after all, the world’s foremost love language). His pillowy gnocchi with braised rabbit is rustic Italian at its finest, and on one particularly romance-forward mid-February menu, he filled hand-rolled ravioli with ricotta under a heavy dusting of Umbrian black truffles. If that doesn’t help rekindle the flames after a year of partnered housebound sequestration, we’re all in trouble. Glu.ca

For a working lunch worth relishing
DONNA’S

IT’S BEEN A WHILE since we all enjoyed a catered work lunch. Well, it’s time to relive those days—but at your own house and with way better sandwiches. In the before times, Donna’s was a perfect place to share some snacks and wine to the sound of vinyl spinning on their vintage turntable. Now, the Wallace Emerson bistro is turning out takeout meals, including the lunch platter for four, with a choice of salads, sandwiches and cookies. There’s a fried mushroom sandwich for vegetarians, another with house-made ham, and their masterpiece of shaved marinated roast beef, served on a Portuguese roll with parsnip, watercress and horseradish sauce. Eat it at your WFH desk for the full experience. Exploretock.com/donnas

For a five-star family meal
ALO

THE GREAT IRONY of pandemic dining is that top-echelon cooking—which once required jockeying for a reservation months in advance—can now be brought home for slightly more effort than ordering a pizza. Alo chef Patrick Kriss’s five-course menus strike a balance between precise tasting-menu fare and comfort food: the lineup might include Norwegian salmon sashimi and short-rib orecchiette with parm and hazelnuts one week, and smoky grilled prawns and roasted chicken draped in date jus another. Each meal comes with Alo’s signature pain au lait rolls. And for pandemic-fried parents, there’s an add-on for a kid’s entrée—your tot’s never dined like this before. Exploretock.com/alorestaurant