



### Restaurants

A | A | A       ShareThis

## 25 Best Restaurants 2009

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

Posted July 13, 2009




Select City { select city } ↕

Select a Radius { No Limit } ↕

Select Price Range { Any Price Range } ↕

Select Cuisine { Any Cuisine } ↕

Select Star Rating { Any Rating } ↕



**Dining Newsletter**

Sign up for our free dining newsletter, Side Dish. You'll get weekly updates on reviews, restaurant news from Table Hopping with Rosie, recipes and more. [Learn more about our newsletter here.](#)

Email Address: \*

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

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

#### AVENUE • Long Branch

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### BLACKBIRD • Collingswood

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### BLU • Montclair

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### ELEMENTS • Princeton

"I'm super shy," says executive chef and partner Scott Anderson (below), explaining why he doesn't venture

into the dining room. But there is nothing bashful about the ambitions of elements (despite its affectation of a lower case initial). Its combination of audacious food, informed service, and striking architecture make it one of the most significant openings of the last twelve months.

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **CHEZ CATHERINE • Westfield**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **COPELAND • Morristown**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **CUCHARAMAMA • Hoboken**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **CULINARIANE • Montclair**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **DARYL • New Brunswick**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **DAVID BURKE FROMAGERIE • Rumson**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **DAVID DRAKE • Rahway**

At 50, the Summit native has become one of the more influential chefs in the state. But with two restaurants to run, he isn't resting on laurels or his baby lettuces. His flagship can still be counted on for fine service and

gustatory triumphs such as seared sea scallops with caramelized endive, morels, and a sherry reduction.  
1149 Irving St, 732-388-6677, [daviddrakes.com](http://daviddrakes.com)

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **DUE MARI • New Brunswick**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **FASCINO • Montclair**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **THE FROG AND THE PEACH • New Brunswick**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **FUJI • Haddonfield**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **GIRASOLE • Atlantic City**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **IZAKAYA • Atlantic City**

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **LORENA’S • Maplewood**

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

“Balance of flavor is my priority,” says Campos, a CIA grad who was raised in Rahway and helped open Nicholas in 2000. “I try to stir all the flavors on the palate—sweet, salty, sour, acid.” His wife’s gracious, attentive touch seals the deal. “Lorena’s would not be the same without her,” he insists. She, a native of Santiago, Chile, was working as an ICU nurse when they met. Eventually they found their charming

Maplewood nest. "Maybe if I'd been by myself I would've done something different," Campos says. "But it had to reflect both of us." She adds, "We always say we love our little restaurant. And that's why it works."

168 Maplewood Ave, 973-763-4460, [restaurantlorena.com](http://restaurantlorena.com)

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **MEHNDI • Morristown**

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **NICHOLAS • Red Bank**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **NISI • Englewood**

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **PLUCKEMIN INN • Bedminster**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **RESTAURANT LATOUR • Crystal Springs Resort, Hardyston**

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

1 Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548, [crystalgolfresort.com](http://crystalgolfresort.com)

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **VARKA • Ramsey**

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

\*\*\*\*\*

## VERJUS • Maplewood

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

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

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

**[Click here to read the 2009 Readers' and Critics' Choice Restaurant Poll.](#)**

For more stories about: [Jersey City](#), [Englewood](#), [Atlantic City](#), [Hoboken](#), [Morristown](#), [Red Bank](#), [New Brunswick](#), [Princeton](#), [Long Branch](#), [Montclair](#), [Rumson](#), [The Frog and the Peach](#), [Blu](#), [Cucharamama](#), [Fascino](#), [Fuji](#), [Girasole](#), [Lorena's](#), [Verjus](#), [Mehndi](#), [Collingswood](#), [Maplewood](#), [Ramsey](#), [Westfield](#), [Haddonfield](#), [Rahway](#), [Avenue](#), [Restaurant Nicholas](#), [Daryl Restaurant and Wine Bar](#), [CulinAriane](#), [Chez Catherine](#), [Copeland](#), [Hardyston](#), [Blackbird](#), [Nisi Estiatorio](#), [Due Mari](#), [Elements](#), [David Burke Fromagerie](#), [David Drake](#), [Izakaya](#)



[ShareThis](#) | [Print This](#)

By submitting comments here you grant permission for all or part of those comments to appear in the print edition of New Jersey Monthly.

### Add your comments

Your Name: Required

Your E-mail address: Required (will not be published)

Your Hometown: Required (will not be published)

Subject:

Comment:



If you have trouble seeing this image [click here!](#)

Please enter the code in the image above.

Note that it is case-sensitive.:

Submit

---

HOME RESTAURANTS LIFESTYLE JERSEY SHORE ATLANTIC CITY TOWNS & SCHOOLS TOP DOCTORS EVENTS  
ADVERTISE CONTACT US SUBSCRIBER CUSTOMER SERVICE SUBSCRIBE GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS BACK ISSUES SITE INDEX

---

**New Jersey**  
MONTHLY

Copyright © 2009 New Jersey Monthly Magazine | [Legal Disclaimer/Privacy Statement](#)  
Please visit our other sites: [ParkPlaceMagazine.com](#) & [NewJerseyBride.com](#)