



Restaurants

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Top 25 Restaurants 2011

Long gone are the days when New Jersey, sandwiched between two imposing cities, could only look outward for its best food. Now the top restaurants in the state stand shoulder to shoulder with the finest in the region.

Posted July 11, 2011 by [Eric Levin](#)

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Avenue in Long Branch.
Photo by Jason Varney.

AVENUE

Long Branch

There are few perches more pleasant than the outdoor tables overlooking the ocean at Avenue. And thanks to high ceilings, tall windows, French doors and a tiled floor the color of oyster shells, the restaurant's interior is flooded with light and unbeatable atmosphere, even in winter. But you don't go to Avenue to work on your tan. Executive chef Dominique Filoni, a native of San Tropez, offers a sparkling raw bar; brasserie classics like salade niçoise, trout almondine and steak frites; and enticing seafood dishes such as wild Alaskan halibut with roasted herbs of palm, carrot-ginger mousse and peashoot leaves, or king salmon with tomato-saffron emulsion and a salad of mixed endives. "It's really refreshing for summer," he says. Filoni's Mediterranean menu, completely in synch with Avenue's sybaritic outdoorsy vibe, delivers sunshine on a plate. 23 Ocean Ave, 732-759-2900, leclubavenue.com



Due Mari in New Brunswick.
Photo by Erik Rank.

BLU

Montclair

Zod Arifai, chef/owner of Blu, used to play bass in a heavy-metal band that toured the U.S. and Europe. Given a bassist's role in a band, you might expect a bassist-turned-chef to turn out food that is balanced, well grounded, confident and subtly sexy. Arifai's food is all that and affordable, too (top entrée price \$26). Self-taught in both music and cooking, Arifai has a gift for compelling and unexpected flavor harmonies—mussels with black-bean purée and garlic-ginger-cilantro broth; octopus with chick-pea purée, apples and pomegranate juice; gravlax with unsweetened ice cream, wolfberries and dried vinegar. These dishes come from a recent tasting menu, which Arifai calls the "What's On Zod's Mind" menu. It changes not only daily, but sometimes within a given service. "If another table is eating a tasting menu next to you, they may get something completely different," he says. "Because I'm cooking what I'm thinking and feeling at that moment. There are ideas floating all the time. Sometimes I wish I could shut it off and not think so much about food all the time, but I can't." That's good news for customers, whether they try what's on Zod's mind or what's on his à la carte menu. 554 Bloomfield Ave, 973-509-2202, restaurantblu.com



Maritime Parc in Jersey City.
Photo by Laura Moss.

CAFE PANACHE

Ramsey

Between the salad vegetables he picks himself every morning at the Abmas Farm in Mahwah and the organic veggies he gets from Blooming Hill Farm in Monroe, New York, chef/owner Kevin Kohler is practically giddy with possibilities this time of year. Yet after 26 years in business, Kohler is becoming more of a purist. Italian, French and Asian have long been the wells he draws from, but this summer he is narrowing the mix. "I was one of the first to use Asian overtones on the menu," he says. "Now everybody has jumped on that bandwagon, so I'm jumping off. I'm going to do more with my soul—I'm half Italian—more pastas, be truer to Italy, which works really well in the summer because everything is so fresh." The menu will change two or three times a week, depending what's at the farms and fish market. Proteins like roast chicken or Kobe beef will be more simply prepared to bring them to a quintessence. Regulars, fear not. Luscious mainstays, like the ravioli filled with red wine-braised filet mignon, cipollini onions and fontina in a butter-truffle oil and Parmigiano-Reggiano sauce are staying put. 130 E. Main St, 201-934-



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We asked some of the top chefs in New Jersey to design their ideal burger. Click on the links below to watch video that captures their culinary creativity.

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*The Peacock Inn in Princeton.
Photo by Laura Moss.*

0030, cafepanachenj.com

CHEZ CATHERINE

Westfield

"French cuisine," says proprietor Didier Jouvenet, "people say is very expensive and nothing on the plate. We are not that." Indeed, it is hard to top Chez Catherine for classic French cuisine impeccably executed (but easy on the butter and cream) at reasonable prices (three-course lunch menus start at \$20; weekday dinner menus at \$39) and in portions that leave you sated but not stuffed. Jouvenet grew up in Lyon, France, in a family of restaurateurs, but made his mark in New York, where for 20 years he was maître d' at La Grenouille. At Chez Catherine, he and his wife, Edith, take you under their wings when you enter their small, lovely dining room, with its peach walls and warm Provençal decor (Edith's touch). Chef C.J. Reycraft Jr., an American, makes you understand with every bite why dishes like sole meunière, steak au poivre, seafood crêpes and escargots with butter, garlic and parsley became classics in the first place. Not that Reycraft is a slave to tradition. Try his

cheesecake, for example, made with cream cheese, sour cream and vanilla, with a walnut-and-ladyfinger crust, smothered in sabayon. French cuisine done the way Chez Catherine does it never gets old. 431 North Ave W, 908-654-4011, chezcatherine.com

CUCHARAMAMA

Hoboken

Down with Peruvian imperialism! Are we kidding? Only a little. The food of Peru has long been a backbone of the cavalcade of South American cooking (and art, implements and seductive cocktails) that is chef/co-owner Maricel Presilla's enchanting flagship, Cucharamama (Mother Spoon). But enough is enough. "I love Peru and Peruvians, but it's become almost an invasion in terms of its presence in restaurants," she says. "It pains me because the continent has such wonderful food that is unknown—like Ecuador, a tiny country where the food is fantastic." This summer the much-travelled Presilla is giving the menu an injection of Ecuadorian delights such as juicy-crispy cubes of fried grouper with a piquant camarillo sauce or a shrimp ceviche served as a soup, sprinkled with crumbled, flaky-crisp plantains and dabs of fresh-ground peanut butter. Not that she is fostering a new imperialism. You can still get her superb, baked-in-the-wood-burning-oven Argentinean empanadas (beef, spinach and cheese, or blue cheese and onion confit). Then there are the world's best chicken fingers, greaselessly fried, crunchily crusted with quinoa, moist inside, served with a tangy, distinctive sauce. Oops, they're Peruvian! Just shows, no hard feelings at Cucharamama. 233 Clinton St, 201-420-1700, cucharamama.com

CULINARIANE

Montclair

If chicken is the Rodney Dangerfield of restaurant proteins—and usually the lowest priced entrée—you've got to love a chef who invests thought and creativity into showing how much more it can be than the meal you make at home. "I feel if I'm going to have chicken on the menu," says chef Ariane Duarte, "it has to be wild, meaning out there, a little different." Thus, the chicken breast "pot pie"—the menu's quotation marks because there is no crust. Instead, you get a perfectly cooked breast with crispy skin nesting on tender pierogies filled with a purée of caramelized onions, potato and white cheddar, all garlanded by pearl onions, peas, carrots and cream of celery sauce. It's hard to imagine a dish more absorbing and satisfying. But Duarte's spring menu was studded with such creations, including another set of quotation marks for a sautéed halibut served with a "corn chowder" of cockles, applewood smoked bacon, potatoes, jalapeños and clam-corn broth. Then there is the \$135 jaunt known as the chef's table, a seven- to eight-course tasting menu for which the guests sit right in the heat of the kitchen (which is why it's offered only in the cooler months). "If somebody gets angry, well, words fly," says Duarte's husband, Michael, the manager. "But at the end of the day everything gets done the way it should." Partly that's because the team is so solid, anchored by chef de cuisine Juan Pablo Gonzalez, who, Duarte says, "has been with me 10 years"—long before CulinAriane's auspicious founding in 2006. CulinAriane's location on a residential part of Walnut Street several blocks away from other restaurants and businesses was formerly considered snakebit. But the Duartes have shown that if you do something that excites people, they will find you. 33 Walnut St, 973-744-0533, culinariane.com

DAVID BURKE FROMAGERIE

Rumson

Over the five years he has owned the Fromagerie, chef and multi-restaurant-owner David Burke has been easing it to a more casual vibe, adding a Sunday brunch, a \$25 three-course Sunday dinner, a Tuesday-night \$25 burger (with salad and glass of beer or wine) and a bar menu. He's also added a 1,400-degree broiler and a beef-aging room, where steaks are dry aged a minimum of 30 days—a move that brings a more masculine, dressed-down clientele to the bar. Though the Fromagerie, he says, is no longer just "a special occasion, reservation-only, romantic kind of place," it hasn't slacked off in those areas. (And the luxury cars out front let you know the Rumson regulars haven't forsaken it.) The food is still modern, American, seasonal, a tad whimsical (lobster dumplings with a mini claw jutting out to serve as a handle) and expertly prepared under executive chef Larry Baldwin and pastry chef Stuart Marx. It's the kind of place you can trust to get the details right—from the excellent service to the dark, puffy cheese popovers that are fun to tear apart and slather with butter (which they don't need) to the finger-licking spice on the famous Angry Lobster cocktail. 26 Ridge Rd, 732-842-8088, fromagerie-restaurant.com

DUE MARI

New Brunswick

The eminence overseeing the Italian menus of Due Mari and its sister restaurant in Bernardsville, Due Terre, is acclaimed New York chef Michael White (of Marea fame). But what puts Due Mari in the Top 25 is the team on the ground, led by co-owner Francois Rousseau and chef de cuisine Alex Stotler, a David Drake alum who has been with Due Mari since the beginning. The emphasis at Due Mari (Two Seas) is, as you would expect, seafood—all of it sparkingly fresh, simple yet sophisticated. ("We sell a lot of oysters because people trust us," says Rousseau.) One of the best sellers is the tender, White-inspired, marinated grilled octopus with a chickpea, olive, sweet pepper and radicchio salad. Another is the grilled whole branzino with oven-roasted tomatoes, Caribbean white shrimp and black-olive vinaigrette. Due Mari also serves terrific brick-oven pizzas and ravishing pastas such as the garganelli with Parma prosciutto, mushrooms, fresh peas and killer white-truffle butter. The big, high-ceilinged dining room is an elegant

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space in which to enjoy it all, and this year there is also a new, awninged patio on the Albany Street side for al fresco dining. 78 Albany St, 732-296-1600, duemarinj.com

ELEMENTS

Princeton

Though 2½ years old and a modernist architectural and culinary landmark, Elements, executive chef Scott Anderson's baby, "is still in its infant stages," he says, adding, "I'm looking to do bigger and better things." Not that he has a roving eye. "This," he explains, referring to Elements, "is going to be my life's work." Right now he is adding between-course "snacks," as he calls them, to his tasting menus and presenting things like ducks, squab and whole fish tableside before cooking to show "we stand behind the products we use. It's more of an old-school French mentality." New-school values like local sourcing and seasonality, which Elements practices, are actually old school if you go back far enough. But old school is not Elements' only alma mater. Anderson says his goal is to be "super creative," and he succeeds in a logical way without running amok. Riffing off the Mexican combination of lime and cumin, he substitutes tart rhubarb for the lime and serves them as a broth or as a sauce with fish. In the spring, he offered a heady white-asparagus soup with foie gras, sweetbreads, lavender and jelly-like green almonds, all three non-meat ingredients being seasonal. The menu may include an Israeli couscous or a house-made tagliatelle, both using summer fennel in different ways. Elements embraces surprise but never at the expense of pleasure. 163 Bayard Lane, 609-924-0078, elementsprinceton.com

ENO TERRA

Kingston

Chris Albrecht, executive chef of Eno Terra, is adapting the ethic of nose-to-tail eating (using every part of the animal) to vegetables. "When you have access to farm-fresh produce, literally just hours out of the ground"—and Eno Terra does, having doubled the size of its own farm this year from 1 to 2 acres, supplying the restaurant with more than 80 percent of its produce—"you can use parts of the plants you used to throw away, like garlic scapes or mustard leaves, which include the vein." Albrecht uses scapes—the long green tendrils that have to be clipped to permit the garlic bulb to mature—to make a sun-dried tomato pesto for a mozzarella rollatini with grilled zucchini, and in a pan-roasted halibut with morel and scape broth. Eno Terra, which is certified by the Green Restaurant Association as ecofriendly, is nominally an Italian restaurant. Albrecht defines Italian this way: "For us, it's really a sensibility about using what's local and seasonal and incredibly flavorful. We also do a lot of preserving, like Southern Italians—we make our own strawberry preserves, pickled ramps, preserved vegetables. And we make a lot of handmade pastas, like half-moon ravioli filled with puréed beets and smoked ricotta." Albrecht, who serves as his own pastry chef, also offers, unofficially, four-course dessert tastings that start with a fruit-based dessert, then escalate to cake-based, cream-based and finally the richest, a chocolate-based sweet. 4484 Route 27 (Academy St), 609-497-1777, enoterra.com

FASCINO

Montclair

When Ryan DePersio was cooking his way through Italy about 10 years ago, many of the best restaurants he worked in cooked in a style he calls "Italian without borders. They were always trying different things"—ingredients, and sometimes techniques, from beyond Italy—"and following what was fresh in the markets." Eight years ago, when the DePersio family opened Fascino (meaning fascination; accent on the first syllable), DePersio, the executive chef, adopted "Italian without borders" as his own ideal. Another influence was the two-plus years he had spent working for Jean-Georges Vongerichten at Jean-Georges in New York, which brought in Asian influences. (An example of an American-Italian-Asian trifecta at Fascino is DePersio's crab-stuffed zucchini flowers dipped in tempura batter and deep-fried.) "My style of cooking is very simple," he says. "Bring out the freshness of the ingredients and don't fuss with it too much." Since the DePersios opened a second restaurant, Bar Cara, in nearby Bloomfield in 2010, DePersio and his brother, Anthony, the general manager, have had to divide their time between the two. But the refinement and appeal of Fascino has held firm, thanks to the on-site presence of the brothers' parents—Cynthia, the pastry chef, and Anthony Sr.—and to the stability of the kitchen staff, headed by sous chef Ernesto Aguilar, who has been with Fascino since the beginning. 331 Bloomfield Ave, 973-233-0350, fascinorestaurant.com,

THE FROG AND THE PEACH

New Brunswick

Now in its 28th year, this pioneer of modern fine dining in New Jersey remains fresh and relevant thanks to the vigilant ownership of Betsy Alger and Jim Black and the exemplary kitchen of executive chef Bruce Lefebvre. This summer one of the seasonal treats is the six-course, \$59 peach dinner with Jersey peaches in every course. The signature dish is the peach carpaccio with crispy duck confit, prosecco dressing and spiced almonds (inspired by Harry's Bar in Venice, where carpaccio and the Bellini originated). Lefebvre's cooking draws from the local bounty, including a Middle Eastern market in North Brunswick, the Phoenician, that fuels such dishes as grilled quail with Lebanese-style stuffed baby eggplant with lemon-sumac dressing. Then he gets all downhome with a duo of smoked pork spareribs and apricot-glazed pork tenderloin with a Tuscan kale slaw in avocado dressing. August 19 brings a five-course, \$135 opera dinner, including Italian wine pairings, Italian food and a soprano singing Italian arias. The F&P's sunny, year-round garden room is the perfect place to savor it all. 29 Dennis St, 732-846-3216, frogandpeach.com

FUJI

Haddonfield

Although in its current, handsomely modern location only four years, Matt Ito's Fuji has been in business (previously in Cinnaminson) continuously since 1979. "I was trained in Japan, working in very high-class hotels, so there were many different types of things to make," the chef says. "There is a lot of things I can still introduce the customer to." And whether it is a cooked dish or a different preparation of a mainstay like tuna (his tartare with American sturgeon caviar), Ito relishes the challenge. "Every day is a brand-new day, with brand-new people, brand-new cooking. That's what people come for, a little bit of change every day. I enjoy, so I think the customer enjoys." Two fine ways to experience the range of Ito's creativity are his tasting menus—omakase (five courses, \$50) and kaiseki (eight or more courses, \$80 and up). Of course, restaurants don't last 32 years if they go nuts continually reinventing themselves. Fuji also shines in its sure hand with the classics, and its service is always gracious. 116 East King's Highway, Rt 41, 856-354-8200 fujirestaurant.com

LORENA'S

Maplewood

With people figuratively knocking down doors to get into this romantic jewel of French-inspired cooking, the owners are literally knocking down walls to make more room. "We're turning away hundreds of people a week," says executive chef and co-owner Humberto Campos Jr., more chagrined at disappointing people than happy his 30-seat restaurant is in such demand. Campos and his wife, Lorena, who manages the front of the house, are taking over a vacant nail salon next door and using part of the space to build a 10- to 12-seat dining room where private parties can be held. Campos will also offer a chef's tasting menu in the new room. An expansion of the kitchen is next on the drawing board. What won't change is the romantic French country setting, the gracious service and the gratifying food. For an Asian touch on the spring menu, Campos introduced a crispy duck confit served with a spicy green cabbage-and-jicama salad with peanuts and lime. Tacking back to France, he came up with an escarole-and-bean stew with an offbeat accent, a bouillabaisse emulsion. There's always something here worth knocking down doors for, but let's hope now you won't need to. 168 Maplewood Ave, 973-763-4460, restaurantlorena.com

LUKE PALLADINO

Northfield

The years Luke Palladino spent living and cooking in Italy, and the research he's done since on old Italian foodways, combine on the plate to create a cuisine that honors tradition but is confident enough to be creative and spontaneous. "Over the years, I've developed a culinary voice, a gut feeling that I want things to be delicious and simple but innovative," he says. "When I was younger I put a lot of ingredients on the plate, but I've pulled back, and every time I pull back I realize it's better." This month, his intimate Atlantic County BYO will be serving fresh Jersey figs stuffed with Gorgonzola, wrapped in speck (smoked ham), roasted and served in a walnut vinaigrette with locally grown mustard greens. There will be saffron lasagnette noodles layered with marinated local vegetables and shaved ricotta salata cheese. About whether the big Italian restaurant he is opening at Harrah's in Atlantic City will distract him from what he calls "our little gem," he notes that the two restaurants are only seven miles apart, and his home is between them. "I didn't take anyone from Northfield to Atlantic City, not even a server," he adds, referring to his veteran team in the kitchen (take a bow, chef de cuisine Eddie Affinato and sous chef Brett Johanessen) and in the dining room (manager Rosanna Pang). In its first full year, the Northfield restaurant has achieved stellar results. Our bet is that Palladino's pride and passion will keep it stellar. 1333 New Rd, 609-646-8189, lukepalladino.com

MARITIME PARC

Jersey City

From the second- and third-floor balconies of Maritime Parc, you can feast on the sweeping view of Jersey City, downtown Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, but since there are no tables up there, that's a mere aperitif. Dining on the outdoor patio you clink glasses amid a forest of masts and clanking rigging in the Liberty Landing Marina. Those tables are lovely, but during the warm-weather months you may have to wait to get one. Meanwhile, in the dining room, the shipboard decor is done in a subtle and classy way, but the views are somewhat limited. The point is, nobody is schlepping out to Liberty State Park just for Maritime Parc's visuals, special as they are. What's drawing a crowd is the synergy between the location, the atmosphere, the friendly and capable service and executive chef Christopher Siverson's engagingly modern food. His seafare is not just fish on a plate with two sides, but bold flavor combinations which, in his words, "are not very complicated but make the plate more alive." Prime examples include his pan-seared black cod with lobster hash, his bacon-wrapped trout stuffed with mushrooms, sorrel and honey and his spirited twist on surf and turf: scallops and short ribs with a creamy-pickley-eggy gribiche sauce. Talented pastry chef John Sauchelli continues the theme with assertive desserts, including a don't-miss chocolate layer cake with cola frosting and dried, crumbled orange peel forming a thin bright roof. 84 Audrey Zapp Drive (Liberty State Park), 201-413-0050, maritimeparc.com

NICHOLAS

Red Bank

It took a few minutes for Nicholas Harary to come to the phone. It turned out the executive chef and co-owner (with his wife, Melissa) of Restaurant Nicholas was filleting bass when we called. The Hararys may have a staff of 52 (and two young children at home), but they are everyday presences in their restaurant and roll up their sleeves on a regular basis. Harary recently polished the one-of-a-kind sculpted glass chandelier in the dining room. One thing that could hardly get brighter is the reputation of the 10-year-old restaurant—top rated anywhere you look. Restaurateurs have mixed feelings about being thought of as a special-occasion place (what about all the other days?), but the Hararys have reveled in it, polishing every aspect of presentation and hospitality, down to the complimentary take-home loaf of banana bread. Harary acknowledges "the pressure of so many customers coming in for special anniversaries and birthdays and wedding proposals. You have a certain responsibility to those people to make it magical and special." Harary is not the only Nicholas on the premises. Chef de cuisine Nicholas Wilkins, 28, arrived about five years ago from England, worked his way up and has been subtly modernizing the restaurant's French-influenced cuisine. The Hararys don't worry about their big-night rep because they long ago worked up an appealing, seasonal, \$29, prix-fixe menu for the casual bar room, which they recently christened Bar N. So there is a Nicholas for all reasons. 160 Route 35 South, 732-345-9977, restaurantnicholas.com

NINETY ACRES

Peapack-Gladstone

High expectations are built right into the winding two-mile drive from the front gate of Natirar park, past the stream, through the brick gates, up the long, stately hill with the view of the vast 1912 mansion on the left, to the wooded hilltop, finally arriving at the mansion's former carriage house, now expanded and converted into the Ninety Acres Culinary Center, the heart of which is the large, handsome Ninety Acres restaurant. Under the direction of executive chef David C. Felton, Ninety Acres meets expectations, though in a way more earthy than the ethereal suggested by the long ascent to the front door. Part of what anchors Ninety Acres is the farm that starts just outside the back door. As the two-year-old farm matures, its yield of things like rhubarb, asparagus and a variety of greens will expand. Chickens, sheep and pigs are being raised, destined for the table. Now fruit trees are being planted. "I want a fun, lively, exciting restaurant that maybe teaches people a little more about farm-to-table dining," Felton says. The learning isn't hard to swallow. That's because it's cloaked in variety, freshness and satisfying flavor combinations. Try one of the creative wood-fired pizzas (duck confit, shitakes, Fontina, sweet-and-sour raisins, for example), hearty entrées (pan-roasted Chatham cod with royal trumpet mushrooms, runner beans, sunchoke, Meyer lemon and lobster sauce, from the spring menu) or the daily farmer's plates (like Tuesday's Natirar farm fried

chicken, cheddar biscuits, mashed potatoes and gravy). Or leave it all to Felton and his crew by saying "BMF," short for Bring Me Food, the code name for the five- to six-course tasting menu (\$75). You can crank it up to 10 courses if you like. BMF, says Felton, "is fun, challenging and keeps me on my toes." A good place for a chef to be. 2 Main St, 908-901-9500, ninetyacres.com

THE PEACOCK INN

Princeton

Evenings are starry at Princeton's year-old boutique hotel and specifically at its restaurant, a tipping-point addition to an area coming into its own as a dining destination (see Elements and Eno Terra). Not only does the Peacock shine in greater Princeton's firmament, it sheds romantic starlight on its own happy patrons in the form of hundreds of pinlights twinkling in the deep mauve ceiling of the central dining room. The clarity and depth of this faux night sky is found in edible form on the plates emerging from executive chef Emanuel Perez's kitchen. Formerly with Le Bernardin in Manhattan and Nicholas in Red Bank, Perez cooks with flair and confidence, highlighting assertive, complementary flavors like softshell crab fried in a frothy tempura batter and served with pickled radishes and red plums, shredded romaine and a sesame vinaigrette. Also exemplary is his seared duck breast with duck confit, fresh cherries stewed in vanilla and ginger, and an almond-milk pain perdu, or French toast. Service, like the ceiling, is heavenly. "One of the biggest compliments for us," says Perez, "is we have a lot of regulars." 20 Bayard Lane, 609-924-1707, peacockinn.com

PICNIC

Fair Lawn

Before launching her catering business and then, a year ago, her delightful little BYO, Picnic, Christine Nunn was a food writer and restaurant critic at The Record. "With a good writer," she says, "you hear their voice, you get a little taste of them in the story, and the same holds true in food. I personally keep my food very simple, but I try to have a little bit of something I love in there." One thing she loves is the contrast of sweet and salty, leading to a halibut dish with a blueberry-thyme gastrique and salted walnuts. Another thing she loves is lobster, leading to an outrageously good dish called lobster fricassee. Love is not too strong a word for her seven-year relationship with her sous chef, Javier Ordonez. In fact, she says, "I like him so much I married him." With Ordonez in the kitchen, Nunn, who designs the menu, can sometimes stroll through the dining room during service and get to know her patrons. "I want to make sure they're happy," she says. "Sometimes if they can't decide what to order, I'll say, 'Let me bring you a sample.'" 14-25 Plaza Rd N (Plaza Bldg), 201-796-2700, picnictherestaurant.com

PLUCKEMIN INN

Bedminster

"Eat your vegetables!" we were all commanded as kids. Surely our parents weren't talking about executive chef Juan Jose Cuevas's vegetables, which seem to belong to another kingdom, one that has shed its dutifulness and emerged in stardom. He has nothing against proteins, but in his kitchen, vegetables are not relegated to the back of the bus. He gets many of them fresh from Three Meadows Farm, a six-minute drive from the inn. He loves them for their own infinitely varied sake and for their Clark Kent-into-Superman ability to transform into juices, infusions, emulsions and purées that make sauces leap tall buildings in a single bound. He serves roast Spanish mackerel with a sauce of sautéed mushrooms and the tasty green called lamb's quarter (a weed, to some). The sauce is a warm vinaigrette made from carrot juice, spicy sausage, lobster broth and—as an exotic thickener—uni (sea urchin). "My food looks very simple," he says. "I don't want people to scratch their heads and wonder what they have in front of them. But every detail is important. The simpler you are, the more detail oriented you have to be, because you don't have anything to cast a shadow, so to speak." Backing up Cuevas is a gifted pastry chef, Joseph Gabriel, a passionate sommelier, Brian Hider, a polished dining room staff and, overseeing all, owner Gloria LaGrassa. 359 Route 206 S, 908-658-9292, pluckemininn.com

RESTAURANT LATOUR

Hardyston

New Jersey chefs are not just talking the farm-to-table talk, they're practically pushing the plow. And the exquisite Restaurant Latour is strutting its stuff with the best of them. The Crystal Springs Resort, of which Latour is the premier dining establishment, raises its own chickens just down the road, has a lamb-producing ranch in Colorado, contracts with a farm just over the New York border to grow vegetables, and has its own extensive garden for greens and herbs right on the property. Resort executive chef Michael Weisshaupt and Latour chef John Benjamin transform the goodies into heady celebrations of freshness, flavor, color and texture. Exhibit A might be Benjamin's roasted monkfish on a saffron-and-Parmesan-infused panisse of sautéed polenta surrounded by razor clams in a seafood broth. The setting itself is pretty special—widely spaced tables bathed in sunset glow from a broad, west-facing picture window. Add to this an extremely knowledgeable staff, a world-class wine list and an atmosphere that is luxurious but never snooty, and you have one of the summits of New Jersey dining. 1 Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548, crystalgolfresort.com

VARKA

Ramsey

When Varka opened a little more than six years ago, the serving of whole fresh fish—priced by the pound—was rare at Greek restaurants in New Jersey. "People told us, 'It won't work, it's too expensive, people don't want to eat a whole fish, they don't want to see it at the table with its head on,'" says Stavros Angelakos, general manager of Varka. But it turned out the public had no such qualms. Serving whole fish is no longer unusual at upscale Greek restaurants in the state. Still, nobody does it better than Varka. About 40 percent of its dinner business is in whole fish, Angelakos says. But more than fish swim the sea, and chef George Georgiades (there from day one) brings forth the bounty temptingly as stuffed calamari; lobster gyros; baked shrimp with white wine, tomato broth and feta; mussels ouzo and much more. The classic dips and starters like saganaki (pan-seared kefalograviera cheese), keftethes (spiced meatballs) and stuffed grape leaves are presented with equal pride and care. And at the hostess's desk there is always the three-tiered complimentary offering of Greek cookies, each so good you'll want to grab a handful. 30 N Spruce St, 201-995-9333, varkarestaurant.com

VERJUS

Maplewood

Disadvantaged by being on the outskirts of town rather than in the heart of the village, Verjus has nonetheless reached its 10th anniversary in good health. How? Partly, it's having things like its own parking

lot and a liquor license (the wine list is a discerning bouquet of small producers and big value). More centrally, there are the owners—the genuine warmth and care of host Jane Witkin and her husband, Charles Tutino, the self-effacing perfectionist chef. When Tutino comes out of the kitchen, he almost seems to be blinking, as if emerging from a cave. But happiness jumps off the plates and onto the faces of the customers. All Tutino does with his French training (under the legendary Jean Jacques Rachou of Le Côte Basque) is make everything taste better than you think possible. His roast chicken with tarragon butter under the skin is a modest meal fit for a king, and his boeuf bourguignon, braised in red wine until pillow tender, is as concentrated in flavor as a haiku. Then there is brunch—light, delicious, relaxed, with faultless French omelettes and caramelized apple pancakes. At any time, Verjus is worth seeking out. 1790 Springfield Ave, 973-378-8990, verjusrestaurant.com

THE WASHINGTON INN

Cape May

Locally grown vegetables make farm to table alive and well here, but so is boat to table. To get a jump on what will be available, executive chef Mimi Wood and sous chef Doug Marandino contact fishing boats while they're still heading for port in Cape May. The contemporary and the traditional marry well at the Washington Inn. The Craig family is always refining and upgrading their big 1840 farmhouse without sacrificing its charm—the latest change being a brightening of the clubby bar room, a tapas-like menu there and a major expansion of the wine-by-the-glass program. Wood has a penchant for the retro—her steak Diane, a cousin of steak au poivre, has been outselling the popular filet mignon with caramelized onions and crumbled gorgonzola, and for dessert there's an updated bananas Foster. The dishes are so well executed you can't but succumb to them. A wood-burning grill, meanwhile, lends an appealing smokiness to meats, chops and fish. 801 Washington St, 609-884-5697, washingtoninn.com

The Top 25 Restaurants were chosen by our panel of food critics and reporters, headed by senior editor Eric Levin. The panel: Jill P. Capuzzo, Adam Erace, Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, Sam Kadko, Karen Tina Harrison, Julia Lawlor, Rosie Saferstein and Pat Tanner.

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