

## The 25 Best Restaurants

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With fine dining ever finer, our critics and dining editor make the tough calls.

**AVENUE** (Long Branch) Chef Antonio Mora's lively food (like his lobster tartine, a BLT on brioche with crisp pancetta and tomatoes) provides cover when your jaw drops at the seaside view. 23 Ocean Ave, 732-759-2900, [leclubavenue.com](http://leclubavenue.com).

**BLACKBIRD** (Collingswood) Alex Capasso cooks (and looks) like a rock star, riffing on frothy seafood "macchiatos," ethereal pastas, and black truffles shaved over anything for a \$20 surcharge. 619 Collings Ave, 856-854-3444, [blackbirdnj.com](http://blackbirdnj.com).

**BLU** (Montclair) The magic Zed Arifai works with seafood dumplings in coconut-chili broth, black olive cake, and all else pales beside his teeny tabs. 554 Bloomfield Ave, 973-509-2202, [restaurantblu.com](http://restaurantblu.com)

**CUCHARAMAMA** (Hoboken) The hearty and varied traditions of South American cooking are revealed with subtlety and care by chef Maricel Presilla. 233 Clinton St, 201-420-1700, [cucharamama.com](http://cucharamama.com).

**CULINARIANE** (Montclair) It is easier to get a table at Ariane and Michael Duarte's gem in warm months, when outdoor seating nearly doubles the size of the tiny restaurant. Artful wonders include cornmeal-crusted oysters and one of the best non-traditional crabcakes we've ever tasted. 33 Walnut St, 973-744-0533, [culinariane.com](http://culinariane.com).

**DA BENITO** (Union) Little known, family run. Authentic, lovingly prepared Italian cuisine. You'll feel like an insider in one visit. 222 Galloping Hill Rd, 908-964-5850, [dabenito.com](http://dabenito.com).

**DARYL** (New Brunswick) This sexy boite is the hip new hang-out of the year. David Drake's small plate delectables, when paired with wine and passed among friends, make the socializing even more fun. 302 George St, 732-253-7780, [darylwinebar.com](http://darylwinebar.com).

**DAVID BURKE FROMAGERIE** (Rumson) Once a bastion of Old World French cuisine, Fromagerie is now a stage for Burke's whimsical design sense and imaginative food. Tongue on rye is deli, but tongue-in-cheek ascends to cuisine under Burke. 26 Ridge Rd, 732-842-8088, [fromagerierestaurant.com](http://fromagerierestaurant.com).

**DAVID DRAKE** (Rahway) The silver domes on the entrées seem precious, but what lies beneath is worthy and substantial, like the duo of juicy veal tenderloin and sweetbreads, with woodsy morels and properly tart rhubarb. 1449 Irving St, 732-388-6677, [daviddrakes.com](http://daviddrakes.com).

**DUE TERRE** (Bernardsville) If you can bear the decibel level (hardly any separation between bar and dining room) your reward is modern Italian-French cooking of unusual verve. 107 Morristown Rd, 908-221-0040, [dueterre.com](http://dueterre.com).

**DUNE** (Margate) Sous chef Marino Rodriguez has risen seamlessly to executive chef, exhibiting a lighter hand than his predecessor, as in the refreshing cold cracked-wheat salad with pecans, baby asparagus, mache and black grapes, or hiramasa fish with green tea and apples. 9510 Ventnor Ave, 609-487-7450, [dunerestaurant.com](http://dunerestaurant.com).

**EDWARD'S STEAK HOUSE** (Jersey City) The speakeasy look of this renovated brownstone is classic steakhouse masculine. But you don't have to be a guy to be wowed by the bravura steaks, the classic sides prepared with unusual finesse, and the wink of the retro atmosphere. 239 Marin Blvd, 201-761-0000, [edwardssteakhouse.com](http://edwardssteakhouse.com).

**FASCINO** (Montclair) The DePersio family back up their warmth and charm with food as sophisticated as it is pleasing. 331 Bloomfield Ave, 973-233-0350, [fascinorestaurant.com](http://fascinorestaurant.com).

**GIRASOLE** (Atlantic City) Exceptional Italian cooking, including brick oven pizzas, handmade pastas, and a Jersey rarity: a large selection of ethereal beef carpaccios and fish crudos. 3108 Pacific Ave, 609-345-5554, [girasoleac.com](http://girasoleac.com).

**LORENA'S** (Maplewood) Cozy, romantic, and a delight for its polished service and chef Humberto Campos Jr.'s entrancingly flavorful and beautifully presented updated French cuisine. 168 Maplewood Ave, 973-763-4460, [restaurantlorena.com](http://restaurantlorena.com).

**MANTRA** (Paramus) Bet you can't settle for just one order of crispy okra tossed with onions, spices, and fresh coriander. It's as addictive as potato chips. Chef Purvesh Patel has lifted classic Indian food to new heights, with French and American influences and surprising subtlety. And the Nirvana Lounge is a blast. 275 E, Rt 4 (Westbound), 201-342-8868, [mantranj.com](http://mantranj.com).

**NICHOLAS** (Middletown) Still a preeminent experience, start to finish. The staff, the setting, the food, and the ambience are so superbly in synch you tend to leave here glowing. 160 S, Rt 35, 732-345-9977, [restaurantnicholas.com](http://restaurantnicholas.com).

**OX** (Jersey City) The namesake braised oxtail on pan-fired polenta with roasted shallot jam and parsley puree shows how chefs Nicole Puzio and Ed Radich give comfort food the royal treatment at comfortable prices. 176 Newark Ave, 201-860-4000, [oxrestaurant.com](http://oxrestaurant.com).

**PLUCKEMIN INN** (Bedminster) A stylish country inn with a great wine list and endearing service seals the deal with chef David C. Felton's sumptuous and satisfying New American cuisine. Can a heart of palm salad be thrilling? It is here. 359 Rt 202/206 South, 908-658-9292, [pluckemininn.com](http://pluckemininn.com).

**RESTAURANT LATOUR** (Hamburg) The vast Crystal Springs Resort complex fades away as you enter this large luxe room with only 12 tables and a glass wall facing west (great sunsets over the low mountain ridgeline). Chef Michael Weisshaupt's food is exciting and exquisite, and the winelist is the most impressive in the state, yet thickly sprinkled with bargains. 1 Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548, [crystalgolfresort.com](http://crystalgolfresort.com)

**SAGAMI** (Collingswood) After an exterior face lift, this sushi sanctuary is still so unassuming you'd drive right by it. But its pristine sushi and exceptional cooked dishes are no secret (despite no website). Even the Philly office crowd crosses the bridge to lunch here. 37 Crescent Blvd, 856-854-9773

**THE FROG AND THE PEACH** (New Brunswick) See story, page 50, and review, page 102. 29 Dennis St, 732-846-3216, [frogandpeach.com](http://frogandpeach.com)

**UNION PARK** (CapeMay) Tucked in the Macomber Hotel, facing the beach, Union Park is a bit off the beaten track, but chef John Schatz's understated, impressively balanced New American cuisine makes the short walk worthwhile. 727 Beach Ave, 609-884-8811, [unionparkdiningroom.com](http://unionparkdiningroom.com).

**VARKA** (Ramsey) Since we reviewed it, this handsomely modern Greek seafood house has steadily improved and now sparkles like the whole fish on ice in the varka, a small replica fishing boat in the dining room. 30 N. Spruce St, 201-995-9333, [varkarestaurant.com](http://varkarestaurant.com)

**VERJUS** (Maplewood) Chef Charles Tutino shows that French food can be most profound at its simplest. 1790 Springfield Ave, 973-378-8990, [verjusrestaurant.com](http://verjusrestaurant.com)