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Dining: Top Ten of 2014 _

IN 2014, PHILADELPHIA EXPERIENCED a resurgence of French cuisine. ICON featured a trio of Philly restaurants specializing in French fare: a newcomer, Paris Bistro & Jazz Café; the enigmatically under-sung Amuse, and Bibou, the current standard-bearer of Philly French cuisine. Bibou still impresses with gems like escargots in a soulful ragout, with fava beans and trumpet royale mushrooms flavored with tarragon. But Amuse, too, achieves classic French bistro perfection with its hanger steak: tender succulence cooked perfectly to order, invigorated with béarnaise aïoli and bordelaise sauce,



Georges Perrier and Chef Al Paris.

and sided with crispy pommes frites. Meanwhile, in its first year of operation, Paris Bistro's "Food" was ranked #1 by Zagat among all Chestnut Hill restaurants, beating out heralded Chef Chip Roman and his securely established Mica. In fact, Zagat tagged Paris Bistro as one of Philly's Top Seven French restaurants—a coup given that the other six all reside on far more visible centercity turf. Maintaining the French tradition in the suburbs, Chef Chris Connors' pan roasted duck breast à l'orange at Lambertville's Anton's at the Swan is as classic and outstanding as ever.

We raved about Chef Alex McCoy's spectacular physics-defying sushi constructions at Umai Umai. Rolls like the Krakken, Eternal Sunshine, Pingu, and Godzilla boast a veritable cult following. But Alex also blew us away with excellent non-sushi items like savory whitefish carpaccio, the city's most soulful tuna bibim, and crispy Brussels sprouts brightened with red onion, purple cabbage, scallions, shallots, and sweet chili-tamarind-shrimp dressing.

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For rabid loyalists, **Kanella**'s has few peers. Fans of **Chef-Owner Konstantinos Pitsillides**' distinctive Cyprian cooking invade nightly for full-flavored compositions like Manti, tantalizingly presented Armenian ground lamb dumplings with yogurt sauce with paprika, mint, and parsley; Guinea Fowl



Crow and The Pitcher with owner Michael Franco.

with walnuts, wheat berry and pomegranate and celery; and Organic Pig Cheeks with Bulgar Wheat, roast fennel and yogurt. All are worth the trip and the wait.

Agricola has transformed the Princeton scene owing to Chef Josh Thomsen's knack for cobbling seasonal menus together from a bountiful pantry of fresh, local ingredients. The springtime menu's Wood-Oven Roasted Duck Meatballs and Veal Sweetbreads gave way seamlessly to summer winners like Crispy Duck Rillettes sided with sweet potato



Umai Umai, Philadelphia

purée and pickled red onion. Agricola's wood-fired oven turned out our favorite 2014 flatbread: Shibumi Farm's Mushroom Flatbread, where marvelously textured bread with winsome smoky essence is topped with oregano, chili flakes, and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese crowned with a mammoth egg.

Agricola vies with the Paris Bistro & Jazz Café for top French cassoulet of 2014. Both eateries create heart-warming, soul-nourishing, rib-sticking versions whose taste and authenticity would wow in Saint Germain-des-Prés. Paris Bistro & Jazz Café also boasts one

of 2014's top appetizers: cauliflower and Comté Custard, which doubles as one of 2014's top vegetarian dishes, as does Wellington of Butternut & Medjool Dates at Al's sister Chestnut Hill restaurant Heirloom.

Nonetheless, top veggie honors go to 3501 Grille for a savory six-tiered compilation where successive layers of diced sweet potatoes, sautéed spinach, roasted baby carrots, pan-seared tofu, and grilled sweet red peppers rise above a base of jasmine rice—a gastronomical and architectural feat.

New Hope's Nikólas owns one of 2014's top plates: a Seared Octopus dish where mango slices radiate outward from a mound of arugula, diced onions, pepper, and tomato spritzed with aged balsamic and extra virgin olive oil and supplement to perfection succulent octopus infused with divine smoky essence and a nonpareil kiss of charring. Best pasta goes to DeAnna's in Lambertville, par-



Deanna's Restaurant in Lambertville, NJ

ticularly any pasta that includes **Chef Diana Menz Paterra**'s in-house sundried tomatoes.

Alma de Cuba's fare matches and actually exceeds its spectacular décor. Yes, I'd go anytime just for the vibe, but equally to savor the spicy tingle of Thai Mixto with crab, shrimp, octopus and fluke with coconut leche de tigre & mango or the unusually deep, dark sweetness of Rum Cured Duck Breast with creamy yucca and duck vigoron with smoked currants. Speaking of unusual, we enjoyed the menu rarities at Taqueria Feliz in Manayunk, which earns the most unusual dish of 2014 hands down. Tacos de Chapulinas, or crispy grasshoppers with onion, cilantro, and guacamoles is de rigeur for all who boast eclectic taste.

ICON also heralded the 2014 return from NYC of one of the finest on the Philly scene, Michael Franco, former GM at Le Bec-Fin. He and Chef Alex Capasso opened Crow & the Pitcher, whose mélange of upscale offerings and bar noshes did not disappoint. The eatery is also a veritable "reliquary" of Philly culinary patrimony since it gives sanctuary to Le Bec-Fin's iconic cheese cart. ■