

30 Best Meals 2014: Jersey's top first-date restaurants



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Looking for a great space to get to know that new person in your life? Our 30 Best Meals project concludes with the 10 best places to share a first date.

THE FIRST-DATE RESTAURANTS

Many places in Jersey qualify as first-date wonders. But these 10 Best First-Date Restaurants were chosen, in part, because of their newsworthiness. Why not prove right from the start that you're au courant?

AGRICOLA

Start with a great product, then don't screw it up. That's the philosophy of Agricola in Princeton, one of the newest additions to the growing list of farm-to-table restaurants in the state. What sets this restaurant apart is its evolved, convivial approach to the concept; it's not a novelty here and this is no temple of precious ingredients. Agricola is a brilliantly refreshing renovation of the historic space that was Lahiere's, the formality of which defined fine dining in this town for 91 years. But Agricola is downright fun, attracting a bar crowd that is remarkable for its diversity — in age, ethnicity and personal philosophy. Restaurateur Jim Nawn, who also owns the 112-acre Great Road Farm, once owned 37 Panera stores. He clearly knows how to create a space that attracts a crowd. Rustic, charred flat-breads are gorgeously photogenic and inventive (chorizo and calamari, mushroom topped with a farm egg) and old-fashioned desserts are packed

with emotion. Entrées are simple celebrations of the best the farm has to offer (roasted lamb, Lancaster chicken). The chef here is Josh Thomsen, a Jersey boy with Napa Valley training (including French Laundry) and he brings that celebratory approach back east. (Plus, he's grateful for the local scallops.) Even the martini gets dressed up with pickled vegetables from the farm, and the ginger beer is made in-house.

• **Agricola** | 11 Witherspoon St., Princeton | (609) 921-2798 | agricolaeatery.com

ESCAPE

You likely have heard that Pittsburgh and Charlestown, S.C., have become adventurous culinary scenes. You live in New Jersey, so you likely view such declarations with skepticism. Enter Bryan Gregg, a Jersey boy who worked for years in Pittsburgh kitchens and who is inspired by nouveau Southern cuisine. He's now in Montclair, in a tiny, boisterous BYO, allowing you to witness the revolution for yourself. His foie gras of the day is advertised right next to his barbecue of the day. His savory madeleines, made twice daily with local honey and coarsely ground local corn, are a genius idea that may prompt some unsavory table manners — you'll want to hoard. His menu boasts farm-fresh ingredients (he offers a list of vendors), tilts to the South (biscuits, grits, bourbon) and combines high and low (sweetbreads, mac and cheese). Fresh seafood is delicate, often with a nice textured edge, but Gregg also offers a burly burger with foie gras and bacon jam. Lobster and parsnip purée is downright luscious, and desserts startle, both as architectural wonders and as rich delights. A feel-good reason to go? Gregg, a cancer survivor, often hosts prix fixe charity dinners with other renowned Jersey chefs (among them Anthony Bucco, Michael Weisshaupt and Thomas Ciszak). The dinners raise money for the Carol G. Simon Cancer Center in Morristown.

• **Escape** | 345 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair | (973) 744-0712 | escapemontclair.com

GOLDIE'S



John O'Boyle

Clever you, all purist and high-minded, taking your date to a vegan restaurant. And clever you, finding one that also serves robust, virile food. But wait — Goldie’s also has a liquor license. Can you be any more astute? (Drink specialties include a grapefruit colada, with house-made coconut-infused rum, and a limonada, with crisp, freshly made lemonade.) Goldie’s is so not what you expect from a vegan restaurant in so many delightful ways, from the exuberant gold-and-white textured paint on the walls, to the glossy mid-century retro tables and chairs, to the menu itself, which has any number of clean, vegetable-driven specialties, but also features more than its share of hearty seductive dinners. Is this a New Jersey restaurant? Or have you somehow become one of the healthy but fun-loving people of Santa Monica? Chef Chris Calabrese is a street-food fan and an omnivore, so he gets you. The ever-changing menu (recently with inspirations from Mexico) features decadent yucca fries, but also a refreshing and virtuous watermelon ceviche. In the back, a name in lights will be your take-away, the real philosophy of the restaurant: Blanche Devereaux. It’s an homage to the daring and flirtatious “Golden Girl.” Goldie’s is a restaurant for fabulous people.

• **Goldie’s** | 550 Cookman Ave., Asbury Park | (732) 774-5575 | goodgoldies.com

LAN SHENG

Best bet for a second date is to offer more on the first date than expected. Lan Sheng offers that surprise. You can casually say that you’re just going to a Chinese restaurant. But you’ll be going to an authentic Szechuan restaurant in Wallington, a surprise by itself. (Wallington is primarily a Polish town; to expect a Chinese restaurant here is illogical.) Another surprise? By association, Lan Sheng has a Michelin star (earned by its sister restaurant in Manhattan). Plus, Lan Sheng has a liquor license, and an inviting bar, with aqua-colored back-lighting. Service is courteous, and at times charmingly goofy (smiles are always good on first dates). But it’s the food that will surprise you most. Yes, tripe is on the list, as are pig’s intestines, if you’re feeling really adventurous. But safe classics, such as beef and scallions, are executed exceptionally well, and house specialties, such as the braised pork smothered in a secret family-recipe sauce and the whole grilled fish, are Instagram show-stoppers. Most dishes, in fact, are show-stoppers, because the vegetables here are not tired, but are abundant, crisp, bright and fresh. It’s Szechuan, so a few spicy bites catch you off-guard, and the heat, at times, escalates. Choose another spot for dessert; it’s not important here.

• **Lan Sheng** | 209 Paterson Ave., Wallington | (973) 773-7100 | lanshengnj.com

ORANGE SQUIRREL



Cathy Miller

The plump and juicy dry-aged rib-eye, served in a cast-iron skillet with chipotle butter and garlic confit, may be the most alpha-male rib-eye you've had in your life, so amazing that the chef himself feels pangs of jealousy when it goes out of the kitchen. Share a bite, though, because this is not simply a brute piece of meat; it's alluringly coy and subtle, and that confit just makes it deliriously rich. Then again, veal meatballs also impress, and inventive dishes, such as a vegetarian BLT or the carrot gnocchi, offer marvelous discussion points. Orange chairs lift anyone's mood, and, look, you've discovered the unpolished gem that is Bloomfield. By the way, did you know chef Francesco Palmieri appeared on "Today" with Kathie Lee and Hoda? Palmieri's recipe for lobster Cobb salad (with deviled quail eggs) appears in the book "Eat, Ink," a compilation of stories and recipes from famed chefs with tattoos that was released last year. Copies of the book are sold at the restaurant, and, hint, a signed copy offers a ready-made souvenir. Desserts include cheesecake and a Meyer lemon tart, but playful souls prefer the restaurant's signature trio of "dirt" flights, combining mousse, whipped cream and cookie crumbs.

• **Orange Squirrel** | 412 Bloomfield Ave., Bloomfield | (973) 337-6421
[|theorangesquirrel.com](http://theorangesquirrel.com)

OSTERIA MOORESTOWN

The original Vetri is in the same Spruce Street townhouse that once housed Philadelphia's famed Le Bec-Fin. And last year, Vetri tured back time for three days with a Le Bec-Fin-style menu, complete with tableside flourishes. The original Vetri is an extravagance. This sixth Vetri restaurant is located in the Moorestown Mall in South Jersey. Despite its location, a factor that leads to a relatively early end to the dinner crowd, Osteria is notable simply because of the name behind it: Marc Vetri, a 2005 James Beard award winner (Best Chef Mid-Atlantic). Osteria may be Vetri light, but it is not the equivalent of Danny Meyer opening a Shake Shack or Bobby Flay with his

Bobby's Burger Palace. This is the Vetri philosophy at a bistro level (witness the seven-hour slow-roasted pig, the porcini béchamel). Osteria serves everything from its famous thin-crust pizzas, which are baked in a custom imported oven, to house-aged steak, rabbit Bolognese, piselli with slow-cooked guanciale and spaghetti with lobster. The restaurant is often crowded, but there's good news if your date lives near the mall. Distrito, owned by "Iron Chef" Jose Garces, also recently opened in the shopping center. Vetri, meanwhile, is working on his own new restaurant, Lo Spiedo, planned for the Philadelphia's Navy Yard campus.

• **Osteria Moorestown** | 400 Route 38, Moorestown | (856) 316-4427
| osteriajersey.com

OSTERIA MORINI



Cathy Miller

If you can't woo someone with a warm bowl of pasta followed by olive oil cake and ricotta crème, well, then, perhaps someone is not worth wooing. Osteria Morini, one of the early restaurants in the Altamarea Group, recently revamped its menu to more closely match the energy of its sister restaurant in SoHo, a casual, boisterous celebrity hangout, one that's filled with artifacts and woodwork gleaned during scavenger hunts in the barns of Italy. You likely know the story by now: Executive chef Michael White fell in love with the rustic village food of Italy. It's also where he met and fell in love with his wife, Giovanna. Ironically, this former Midwestern football player has become perhaps the nation's biggest champion of the simple power of flour and eggs. (His chef de cuisine in Bernardsville, Kevin Knevals, from Morristown, is also a former football player.) At Osteria Morini, the garganelli, with prosciutto, English peas and cream, is a favorite, as is the gramigna, with sausage ragu. The menu also includes a selection of cured meats and cheeses, along with a collection of small plates, should you just prefer to graze. The wine list is smart, and craft beers are served.

• **Osteria Morini** | 107 Morristown Road, Bernardsville | (908) 221-0040
| osteriamorini.com

PIG & PRINCE

Any restaurant that offers prosecco and a cupcake for Ladies Night understands the modern dating scene. It's not just fun here; it's grand, in this gorgeously repurposed historic train station, designed by an architect who went down on the Titanic. You'll gawk at the chandelier, that bar, that burnished woodwork, but it's not so grand as to intimidate. Pig & Prince offers urban bustle and cheeky small plates (duck fat grilled cheese, with Muenster and Boursin). Meat, obviously, is royalty. Charcuterie (soppressata, capicola and nduja) is done in-house, and gently so (no nitrates). Chef Michael Carrino butchers his own pigs, following a nose-to-tail philosophy. (Thus, the pig ear lettuce wraps.) Burgers are made from the meat of a single steer. Although it's a gastro-pub, Carrino, whose first restaurant was a more of a fine dining spot, also knows his way around a formal meal. Risottos are a good bet, as is the duck. Desserts range from cute-sweet (a bread pudding with cereal) to sophisticated (fruit tart with black pepper ice cream).

• **Pig & Prince** | 1 Lackawanna Plaza, Montclair | (973) 233-1006
[|pigandprince.com](http://pigandprince.com)

PILSENER HAUS & BIERGARTEN



Cathy Miller

Of course, it's the beer and the pretzels and the communal tables that attract the dating crowd, so collegial and fun. But the beer at Pilsener Haus is sophisticated, with more than 60 dizzying choices, such as award-winning cider from Warwick, N.Y., pale ambers from Belgium and German beer that tastes of bananas and bubble gum. Who expected such frivolity? The Bavarian soft pretzels are imported, served warm, with homemade Liptauer cheese. And yet, it's not all about beer and pretzels. The spaetzle is homemade, the chicken is farm-raised, the Wiener schnitzel is old-school, with lingonberries. Chef Thomas Ferlesch grew up in Vienna (which translates into spectacular desserts) and spent years in important New York restaurants. Thus, the Pilsener Haus is a biergarten

with nuance. Try the house radler, a Ferlesch favorite, two scoops of house-made lemon sorbet dropped into a beer, a nice, refreshing drink. And beware the sports schedule, which could infringe on first-date conversation. This year's World Cup final attracted about 800 people. Otherwise, what could go wrong? "After all, it's just a biergarten," says Ferlesch. And no worries about pretensions, even as you debate the merits of ancient German brews vs. American crafts. It's not snobbery if it's beer.

• **Pilsener Haus & Biergarten** | 1422 Grand St., Hoboken | (201) 683-5465
| pilsenerhaus.com

RAZZA PIZZA ARTIGIANALE

Dan Richer nerds out on butter. That was the topic of a late summer video produced by The New York Times, a loving eight-minute tribute to the process and philosophy behind chef Richer's approach to the throwaway table staple. He bakes the bread himself, of course — a loaf with a crust he describes as rustic and caramelized, offset by an elegant center. He churns his own butter from cream sourced by a farm in Chester County, Pa., certified organic cream that comes from grass-fed cows. It's a sushi master's approach to bread and butter, two perfect ingredients, served at exactly the right temperature, at exactly the right time. At Razza Pizza Artigianale in Jersey City, the bread and butter is served on a stone slab. If you know Richer, you know that he nerds out on all his ingredients, which is what makes him a consistent James Beard nominee, and makes his restaurants, which also include Arturo's Pizzeria in Maplewood, so popular. We've heard him go on forever about pizza and meatballs. As for pizza, he'll talk endlessly about how he grows his own yeast culture, how he favors local and seasonal ingredients, how he chooses the right beer to pair with it. For meatballs, it's about how much the consistency matters, the importance of the breadcrumbs and the milk, and their ratio to the meat. About how he was inspired by a perfect meatball in Italy and how he returned, years later, to see if he'd met its match. Not a bad philosophy to help you impress your special dinner companion.

• **Razza Pizza Artigianale** | 275 Grove St., Jersey City | (201) 356-9348
| razzanj.com

• **Arturo's Pizzeria** | 180 Maplewood Ave., Maplewood | (973) 378-5800
| arturosnj.com

A FEW OTHERS OF NOTE: **Amuse**, newly opened in Westfield, offers classic French dishes in an unpretentious setting, and **Bin 14** in Hoboken, with its small plates and its outrageous selection of wines, is always a fun experience.