

Restaurants

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New Jersey's Top 25 Restaurants of 2013

Our critics pick from New Jersey's diverse dining scene to bring you 2013's best places to eat in the Garden State.

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Executive chef Scott Anderson's kitchen in Princeton, NJ.

Photo courtesy of Elements



Executive chef Manuel Perez brings Princeton's Peacock Inn back on top

JDK Pro Photo

AGRICOLA (*Princeton*)

Several questions stirred the pot before the most buzzed-about opening of 2013. Not counting how to pronounce Agricola, they were: Could the sad shell of 91-year-old Lahiere's be turned into an exciting, contemporary space? Could new owner Jim Nawn, developer of 37 Panera Bread franchises, transpose his acumen to the key of upscale-casual fine dining? Could chef Josh Thomsen, a Woodcliff Lake native long decamped to California, find happiness on the grittier coast after working with the likes of Thomas Keller at the French Laundry? Happily, the answer to these questions is a resounding yes (though Thomsen is still adjusting to Princeton rolling up the sidewalks a lot earlier than his last location, San Francisco). "We are rustic, we are American; that's first and foremost," Thomsen, 42, says of his food. "Another spoke in the wheel is seasonal and local"—a spoke supported daily by Nawn's Great Road Farm, four miles from Agricola. Make no mistake: Thomsen and his chef de cuisine, Manlee Siu ("my right arm"), who came with him from San Francisco, handle proteins beautifully. But the love they lavish on vegetables, and their knack for elevating them to costar status, fulfills Agricola's farm-to-table promise. When a simple kale salad sells out nightly (albeit one made with a tender hybrid of red and curly kales, served in a puréed vinaigrette made with toasted pumpkin seeds and cilantro), you know you're doing something right. 11 Witherspoon St, 609-921-2798, agricolaeatery.com

BLU (*Montclair*)

"I think I've become a dinosaur," worries chef/owner Zed Arifai. "When I opened Blu eight years ago, nobody was doing what I was doing. But they are now." All three parts of that statement exaggerate the reality. But that's what makes Arifai, 50, worth following. His ego may be supersized, but so are his energy and creativity. His response to perceived Zodosaurhood is to introduce an ever-changing six-course tasting menu, creating "new sensations for your palate, making things work together that have never been made to work together." Like, say, cheddar soup with fig sorbet and sweet celery, or broccoli panna cotta with sea urchin, lemon froth and trout roe. Sounds extreme. Yet the secret of Arifai's success is that, while his rhetoric is radical, his creativity makes perfect sense on the palate. BYO 554 Bloomfield Ave, 973-509-2202, restaurantblu.com

CAFE PANACHE (*Ramsey*)

Kevin Kohler gets his hands dirty in a way few of his fellow farm-to-tablers do. From spring to fall, the 56-year-old chef/owner stoops through the fields of nearby Abma's Farm in Wyckoff to pick his own produce. "If it's sunny, I like to get there around 8 am for the zucchini flowers," he says. "I don't mind mud to my ankles. Root vegetables pull easier when it's wet. I like chard and lettuces later in the afternoon, when things dry out." He's been a daily presence at Abma's for 12 years, which is less than half the age of Cafe Panache; it turned 29 in July. Restaurants, especially BYOs, don't last that long just on the awesomeness of same-day produce. Kohler long ago lightened up on cream and butter, but never met a bone he didn't roast for stock. "Whether you lean Asian or Italian, French is the root of all culinary, in my book," he says. The menu changes often, but regulars would rebel if he didn't periodically rotate in his all-time hits like filet mignon ravioli, duck with ginger, halibut with wasabi and crispy-skin salmon with cherry tomato vinaigrette. If you've never had the pleasure, what are you waiting for? BYO 130 E Main St, 201-934-0030, cafepanachenj.com

CUCHARAMAMA (*Hoboken*)

Maricel Presilla went from best of times to worst of times last October. First her magnum opus, *Gran Cocina Latina*, was published. (The 900-page cookbook would win a 2013 James Beard Award to go with the one she took home last year as Best Chef: Mid-Atlantic.) By the end of the month, her restaurants, Cucharamama and Zafra, and her Latin food store, Ultramarinos, were out of commission, flooded—like much of Hoboken—by Sandy. Miraculously, all three reopened in two weeks, thanks to tireless work by her employees (whom she paid), friends and family. Since opening in 2004, Cucharamama has shown that the earthy and the ethereal are inseparable in South American food, art and design. Through good times and now bad, that spirit has kept it vibrant and relevant. 233 Clinton St, 201-420-1700, cucharamama.com

CULINARIANE (*Montclair*)

After 7½ years at the stoves of her and husband Michael's New American, chef Ariane Duarte proudly says, "I still work the line." Her food, though technically simple, draws from many influences. Her grilled porterhouse pork chop, for example, starts with a superb, 2-inch-thick specimen she preps in a grain-mustard marinade. Grilled to perfect juiciness, she serves it with pickled hot peppers, smoked Gruyere-barley risotto and a Belgian-ale gastrique. "There are no secrets to my recipes," she says. "I cook food that I like to eat. Really good flavors. Not a lot of stuff. Just clean." BYO 33 Walnut St, 973-744-0533, culinariane.com

DARYL (*New Brunswick*)

A year and a half into chef/owner Zod Arifai's reinvention of Daryl, the kitchen and bar are sashaying strongly to his idiosyncratic beat. The food—intended to be slightly more accessible than that of Blu, Arifai's flavor lab—leans toward the luscious, as in duck meatballs with yogurt and apricot, or veal short ribs with sweet-and-sour glaze. Factor in reasonable prices and 58 wines by the glass (including 2-ounce pours, \$3-\$5) and Daryl lays down a compelling beat. 302 George St, 732-253-7780, darylrestaurant.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: As of early August, Daryl has **closed**, the result primarily of a business dispute between Zod Arifai and the previous owner. More information as it becomes available.

ELEMENTS (*Princeton*)

Executive chef Scott Anderson's kitchen is in ferment. Literally. In the vanguard since it opened in 2008, Elements early embraced the revival of artisanal techniques of preserving food, from curing to pickling to, most recently, fermenting. "As the bacteria break down cellular walls, vegetables can take on flavor in just a couple days," he says. "After a couple months of fermentation, the dynamics of the vegetable completely changes." The point is not to impress Princeton scientists (although Anderson did that in a lecture/lunch at Elements this year), but rather "to explore flavor profiles and create new things." First timers apprehensive about what they will encounter usually leave satisfied and smiling. Regulars look forward to the journey. "We like people to travel with us and explore the world of food," Anderson says. "It's wonderful out there." 163 Bayard Lane, 609-924-0078, elementsprinceton.com

ENO TERRA (*Kingston*)

Some say God is in the details, others say the devil. The best chefs these days take the positive view, Christopher Albrecht among them. That's why he grows 14 varieties of beets at Canal Farm, half a mile from Eno Terra. And serves Jersey-caught golden tilefish with a sublime quenelle made from a carefully proportioned purée of potato, onions, celery root, bacon and the liquid from steamed clams, folded into a little whipped cream. Or rescues salmon tartare from the doldrums with slices of rhubarb poached in rhubarb stock with cardamom, thyme and bay leaf. But the favorite example here is his arancini, the traditional Italian rice balls. In each crunchy bite, a tantalizing flavor pulls you into the creamy interior. It's not the bauble of melted goat cheese at the center. Faintly fruity-spicy, it turns out to be candied kumquat, star anise and cinnamon. A delightful, if devilish, detail that contrasts bracingly with the broccoli rabe pesto on the side. 4484 Rt 27 (*Academy St*), 609-497-1777, enoterra.com

FASCINO (*Montclair*)

Just after Fascino turned 10 this summer, the DePersio family closed it for a complete renovation. The new look is younger and brighter, and comes with a menu restructured to give people more options for creating their own tasting menus. A less visible change was the departure earlier this year of chef Ryan DePersio's brother Anthony, 37, Fascino's GM, to pursue other ventures, though he remains a partner. As a result, the family decided to sell its popular Bar Cara in Bloomfield and double down on keeping up the flagship. A sad moment for the family, it should reassure Fascino's devoted followers that 35-year-old Ryan's lively, creative "Italian-without-borders" cuisine—not to mention mom Cynthia's endearing desserts—will continue to flourish in the place where the magic began. BYO 331 *Bloomfield Ave*, 973-233-0350, fascinorestaurant.com

THE FROG AND THE PEACH (*New Brunswick*)

For sheer cheekiness, it's hard to top first-time restaurateurs Betsy Alger and Jim Black, who in 1983 named their ambitious new restaurant in a rundown part of town after a Peter Cook and Dudley Moore comedy routine about a "nauseating" establishment with a two-item menu: frog with a peach in its mouth, and peach stuffed with squiggling tadpoles. Fortunately, when longtime executive chef Bruce Lefebvre bought the restaurant from the founders when they retired last year, the neighborhood had gentrified and the name Frog and Peach had become synonymous with excellence. Now celebrating F&P's 30th year, Lefebvre, 43, is stripping the walls, exposing the original brick of the 1876 printing plant that houses the restaurant. He calls it "enhancing some of the natural elements of the building," and it parallels what he's doing on the plate: "letting the natural aspects of each ingredient shine." Take his shrimp broiled with lime salt, served on a disc of avocado (vacuum-compressed to intensify its flavor and texture) with a corn pudding made only from highly reduced fresh corn juice "for the true essence of corn." Adding a sprinkle of crispy spaetzle made from Mexican masa flour completes the dish with a gonzo globalism. 29 *Dennis St*, 732-846-3216, frogandpeach.com

FUJI (*Haddonfield*)

Since 1979, chef/owner Masaharu “Matt” Ito has been serving some of the most authentic and adventurous Japanese food around. His menu of cooked dishes alone is worth a trip to his serenely modern restaurant, to say nothing of the raw treasures and the pleasure of sitting at the eight-seat sushi bar, handcarved out of a single trunk of champagne-hued maple. Lately, more customers have been requesting Ito’s omakase and the larger kaiseki tasting menus, the best way to experience the full spectrum of Japanese tastes. “These days a lot of young people are trying the tastings,” Ito says. “They have more freedom, I think. But many omakase customers are regulars. So,” he adds with a laugh, “all the time I have to make something different.” BYO 116 E Kings Hwy (Rt 41), 856-354-8200, fujirestaurant.com

LORENA’S (*Maplewood*)

A year after Lorena—chef Humberto Campos Jr.’s wife and the restaurant’s co-owner—gave birth to son Liam, Humberto is back in the kitchen full-time. Energized, he’s tweaking the bistro classics that made Lorena’s an instant hit when it opened eight years ago, and reveling in his roots. “I was trained by Craig Shelton and David Drake,” he says. “They bled French. I took to it. There may not be a French word on my menu, but it’s my foundation.” The tweaks are small—a new goat-cheese dressing for his beet salad, or ripe apricots adding plush tartness to bread pudding—but the pleasures of a meal at this 36-seat jewel box remain large. BYO 168 Maplewood Ave, 973-763-4460, restaurantlorena.com

LUKE PALLADINO (*Northfield*)

The chef/owner knows the knock on his 35-seat trattoria tucked into a strip mall. “Yes, it’s noisy and cramped,” Luke Palladino admits. “If you’re not a social person, it’s not for you. Still, people love it, despite everything going against it.” Why? The energy itself is infectious—even more so, the aromas emanating from the open kitchen, which consistently pay off on the plate. Palladino, 44, who has traveled and cooked widely in Italy, does what they do there: surf the seasons, adding and subtracting menu items weekly. Small as the place is, he has lately gone whole hog. In June, he turned a whole pig into lardo, pancetta, porchetta (roast pork), lonza (cured tenderloin), cooked prosciutto and pork-liver sausage—which, despite the L word, sold out in two days. He’s done similar things with whole lamb. And there are always unusual items, like his signature grilled caciocavallo cheese sautéed with garlic, mint and Sambuca, and the summery kale and wild-greens ravioli with walnut-ricotta pesto. BYO 1333 New Rd, 609-646-8189, lukepalladino.com

MARITIME PARC (*Jersey City*)

Overlooking a marina in Liberty State Park, on a cobblestone road named for park cofounder and environmentalist Audrey Zapp, Maritime Parc seemed out of the way when it opened three years ago next month. But people on both sides of the Hudson have found it not that hard to get to. “We’re getting a clientele that is letting me push the limits of what we can do,” says executive chef/partner Christopher Siversen. Fascinated with kung pao chicken, he recently created a soy-and-sake-braised pork belly in a spicy kung pao glaze with peanuts and quince. It has become one of the most popular appetizers. Despite its name, Maritime Parc is far from a traditional fish house. But whether combining scallops with short ribs or accenting Chatham cod with a ragoût of crawfish, cockles and tasso ham, Siversen goes all

out to keep Maritime Parc's food as compelling as its view of the Manhattan skyline. 84 Audrey Zapp Dr, 201-413-0050, maritimeparc.com

NICHOLAS (*Red Bank*)

Nicholas Harary will not turn 40 until December, but already he wakes up some days feeling, he says, like “the old guy.” That may be the price of keeping his restaurant at the pinnacle of New Jersey fine dining since he and wife Melissa opened it 13 years ago. “Success,” he says, “is the sum of a lot of little things done right—and failure is the opposite.” The biggest little thing? “We keep our finger on the pulse.” Most recently that has meant a new, more casual and modern look for both dining rooms, including stunning new blown-glass chandeliers by artist Robert Kuster, who was not yet a superstar when he designed the restaurant's first one in 2007. If the look has evolved while remaining recognizable, so has the food under chef de cuisine Nicholas Wilkins, 30. “People are more willing to try new things now than in 2000,” Harary says. For subtlety, try hake two ways (sous vide and seared), with watermelon radishes, almond water and nasturtium flowers. For boldness, there's sous vide halibut in “charred onion milk,” a rich, strained sauce made from deeply charred sweet Vidalia onions cooked in milk and cream. “The smokiness,” Harary says, “lifts that dish to another level.” 160 Rte 35 S, 732-345-9977, restaurantnicholas.com

NINETY ACRES (*Peapack-Gladstone*)

Here's a simple way to test a kitchen's prowess—its seriousness, we're tempted to say. Order the house salad. If they can make that exciting, you should be in good hands. Ninety Acres, whose farm begins a few yards past the tables on the back patio, aces the test with mixed lettuces, sliced radishes and cucumbers, toasted honey-spiced cashews—and a frisky carrot ginger vinaigrette. Want another test? Order what sounds like the most unprepossessing appetizer. One night, that seemed to be cucumber gazpacho. Whoa! When did cukes lose the Clark Kent glasses? True, herbs help power this tangy purée, deep green and luscious (and the dollop of crème fraîche doesn't hurt). But what both dishes exemplify is the devotion of chefs today to heightening each ingredient and giving them room to mingle and dance. Executive chef David Felton and his experienced team do this extremely well, as in a recent entrée pairing two all-time seductive proteins, pork belly and scallops, with a sprightly supporting cast of snap peas, radishes and shiso leaves on a bed of avocado purée enlivened with salt, lime and a touch of citric acid. 2 Main St, 908-901-9500, ninetyacres.com

THE PEACOCK INN (*Princeton*)

What's love got to do with it? In the resurgence of executive chef Manuel Perez and the Peacock Inn's return to the Top 25, perhaps more than a little. After serving as chef de cuisine at Nicholas, Perez opened the Peacock Inn in 2010. His food, like the romantic dining room and the service, was exquisite. But as time passed, he seemed to squeeze out everything but the exquisiteness. Now the passion and pleasure are back. It comes across in a delightful corn-and-coconut soup with roasted shiitake mushrooms and rice vermicelli; in delicate roasted tilefish with a curried shellfish emulsion; in a unique parsnip-and-apricot purée to accompany veal two ways, as a sliced loin and as a playful schnitzel croquette. What happened? Perez, 41, and his pastry chef, Cynthia Lukens, 30, fell in love a year or two ago. Now she is Cynthia Perez. “Meeting Cindy brought balance into my life, and it carries over,” he says. “The crew we have now is strong and influenced by all the good things I have to show them. Being at ease with myself makes me more at ease with them, more patient and open.” Love isn't all you need, but

with it, the Peacock is strutting again. 20 Bayard Lane, 609-924-1707, thepeacockinn.com

THE PLUCKEMIN INN (*Bedminster*)

Owner Gloria LaGrassa's decision to promote CIA grad Andrew Lattanzio to executive chef after the departure of Juan Jose Cuevas last year keeps looking better. Lattanzio, now 33, creates dishes whose components illuminate and animate each other. A moat of avocado gazpacho surrounding a mound of peekytoe crabmeat pits daring vs. demure. Grilled octopus, tender and almost juicy inside, plays earthily with lentils and a chorizo vinaigrette. Suckling pig with morels, favas and grilled romaine exudes unexpected refinement. With a top wine program under Brian Hider and desserts like Kim Schielke's dark chocolate and salted caramel pretzel tart with (take a deep breath) spicy mustard ganache, stout-glazed peanuts and Guinness whipped cream, the Pluckemin still has plenty of pluck. 359 Rt 206 S, 908-658-9292, pluckemininn.com

RED STORE (*Cape May Point*)

Like many Shore eateries, Lucas Manteca's Red Store cuts back in the fall and shuts down from roughly Thanksgiving to Easter. Ordinarily that would rule out Top 25 consideration. But Manteca, who grew up in Buenos Aires, has packed a lot of living, learning, cooking and traveling into his 36 years, including stints with Alain Ducasse, David Bouley and Dan Barber and two years as executive chef of the Ebbitt Room in Cape May's fine Virginia Hotel. All of it led him and his wife, Deanna Ebler, to buy the Point's red-shingled little general store in 2012 and turn its windowed back room into the most personal expression yet of who he is as a chef. "The techniques are simple," he says, "the flavors are complex." Attention to detail invests even a sweet potato soup with surprising nuance. Secluded and idyllic, the Point is just three miles from Cape May, but a world apart. So is dinner at Red Store. BYO 500 Cape Ave, 609-884-5757, capemaypointredstore.com

RESTAURANT LATOUR (*Hardyston*)

Latour clings to a formality of service a bit out of style, but the elegance of the room, its romantic view of the sun setting over the Kittatinny ridge and the sophistication of chef John Benjamin's cuisine, transports you to a realm of pumpkins become horse-drawn carriages. The late Gene Mulvihill, developer of the Crystal Springs Resort, built Latour nine years ago to showcase his world-class wine collection there and installed Benjamin—a French Laundry and Aureole alum—as opening chef. Benjamin, now 44, may be the most under-the-radar, highly accomplished chef in the state. It's time he was on everyone's screen. 1 Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548, crystalgolfresort.com

THE RYLAND INN (*Whitehouse Station*)

Reincarnated last year by new owners Frank and Jeanne Cretella, the Ryland quickly proved itself a temple of modern cuisine under executive chef Anthony Bucco. Yet there were growing pains. Service aimed high but lacked the kitchen's consistent polish. Now, entering year two, "we are growing into our skin here," Bucco says. Service is noticeably smoother, and the cocktail program is clicking along. The wine list is, well, a work in progress, as is wine service. Yet the food and atmosphere remain exemplary. Bucco, 37, and chef de cuisine Craig Polignano, 32, make a top-notch team. "We're having fun, and driving home who we are," Bucco says. Consider their take on spaghetti carbonara. They toss house-

made squid ink pasta with chopped fresh surf clams, Mangalitsa pancetta, peas and a little chile, and finish it with a silky cream sauce that slyly slips in sea urchin with the traditional raw egg yolks (here, quail) for the signature sunny color. The tab for this ravishing dish: \$17. 115 Old Hwy 28, 908-534-4011, rylandinnnj.com

THIRTY ACRES (*Jersey City*)

Here's how chef Kevin Pemoulié, co-owner with wife Alex of this hip urban eatery (now with a liquor license), measures its success. Opening a year ago, he put hanger steak on the menu. It sold like crazy. To him it meant people were shying away from his more personal dishes. Recently Pemoulié put hanger steak on again. "I'm really, really happy it did not become a sales hog," he says. "That shows we've built the trust of our customers, and that means a lot." 500 Jersey Ave, 201-435-3100, thirtyacresrestaurant.com

URSINO (*Union*)

Its unusual location on the campus of Kean University hasn't kept Ursino from becoming an essential destination for area gastronomes. The uniquely airy modern space, with its two-story wall of glass facing a fountain and garden, is one reason. Fine service is another. Above all is executive chef Peter Turso's imagination and patient technique. Recently he has been rethinking peasant dishes like gazpacho, ratatouille and cannoli. He reinvents gazpacho as a silky purée of white almonds, garlic confit, sherry vinegar, water and bread. Into this chilled soup go spicy-sweet little treasures he calls chorizo caramel: diced chorizo rendered until crispy, then caramelized with brown sugar and paprika. His ratatouille resembles a terrine and comes with oregano purée and stuffed zucchini flowers fried in a tempura batter made with polenta for extra crunch. He fills his tuile-like cannoli with a coconut-coffee semifreddo and serves it with a carrot-chili chutney and almond foam. In two years, Turso has rarely repeated himself, making each menu a don't miss. 1075 Morris Ave, 908-249-4099, ursinorestaurant.com

VERJUS (*Maplewood*)

French chefs are reputed to be imperious, Italian ones effusive. Charles Tutino, who grew up in an Italian-American family in Brooklyn and cooks French food to swoon over, is neither. Soft-spoken and self-effacing, he seldom ventures into the dining room, the province of his gracious wife and co-owner, Jane Witkin. But his gentle manner belies an exactitude he once honed as an economist at the New York Fed before deciding to apply it to mastering French cuisine. Verjus' restrained joie de vivre cuts loose the third Friday of every month with Bistro Night. The servers don berets, butcher paper replaces the white tablecloths, and Chevalier and Piaf replace jazz on the soundtrack. Meanwhile, a \$42 three-course prix-fixe celebrates classics like moules frites, onion soup gratinée and sautéed skate wing with black lentils. Bon appetit! 1790 Springfield Ave, 973-378-8990, verjusrestaurant.com

ZEPOLI (*Collingswood*)

About the only criticism of Joseph Baldino's 32-seat salute to the cooking of Sicily, ancestral home of his father's family, is how loud it gets when full—which it does every weekend. Baldino, 35, is looking into sound-damping ceiling panels for the two-year-old restaurant, but as he tells customers, "It's very much like Sicily. It's always a party when you go out to dinner there." And here. Customers initially reluctant to

try spaghetti with squid ink sauce and calamari, a Sicilian staple, now call to request it. It's the real deal, temporarily turning the tongue black, just like in the Old Country. BYO 618 Collings Ave, 856-854-2670, zeppolirestaurant.com

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The Top 25 Restaurants and Critics' Picks were chosen by our panel of food critics and reporters, headed by senior editor Eric Levin, who wrote our brief overviews. The panel: Jill P. Capuzzo, Adam Erace, Sam Kadko, Melody Kettle, Suzanne Zimmer Lowery, Karen Tina Harrison, Rosie Saferstein, Pat Tanner and Robin Damstra & Tim Salant.