

Restaurants

The 25 Best Restaurants of 2014

Our annual list of the best restaurants New Jersey has to offer. You'll find some rising stars, and plenty of old favorites.

Posted July 15, 2014 by [Eric Levin](#)

Agricola, Princeton

11 Witherspoon St., 609-921-2798

The products and produce of [Great Road Farm](#)—the handiwork of farmer Steve Tomlinson—fuel the imagination of executive chef Josh Thomsen and fulfill the furrow-to-fork vision of Jim Nawn, who owns the farm and the restaurant.

Depending on the season, [Agricola](#), now a bustling one-year-old, might offer a beautifully deep orange-yellow egg salad. That color generally tells you the hens were free to peck around a pasture, eating an omnivorous diet. (Great Road supplements the birds' foraging with corn, soy, oats and vitamins.) Equally seasonal would be a kale salad, its leaves glistening with the very popular toasted pumpkin-seed vinaigrette. A pork chop from [Eden Farms in West Milford](#) might come with braised Great Road collards and a chutney made from Terhune Orchards apples infused with beet juice and tossed with crushed, toasted pistachios, house-cured bacon and pomegranate syrup. The pickled and fermented vegetable plate is plucked from glass jars that decorate the bar. "They're not just a pair of pretty legs," deadpans Thomsen of the jars, packed with house-cured fiddlehead ferns, napa cabbage and the like.

There is a poignancy to seasonal menus. One ingredient comes on, another wanes. "Which one of your children do you love the most?" asks Thomsen. Earlier this summer he was making his own burrata, serving it with asparagus, English peas and local strawberries. Now it's tomato prime time; thus his tomato menu. But a standard since day 1 has been the Shibumi Farm mushroom flatbread, a fresh-from-the-oven celebration of umami, with accents of oregano and Parmigiano-Reggiano.

In readying an *Agricola* cookbook, due this fall, Thomsen has been reading David Tanis, chef and author of *A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes* and *Heart of the Artichoke and Other Kitchen Journeys*, while simultaneously rolling out *Agricola's* pickles, kimchi and kale salad dressing (with tasty toasted pumpkin seed) as products for sale.

Blu, Montclair

554 Bloomfield Ave., 973-509-2202

Since he opened [Blu](#) in October 2005 (with a seemingly physics-defying dish he called steam-seared chicken), chef Zod Arifai has kept himself at the forefront of New Jersey's ever-ascending restaurant scene. But Blu will not be on the scene much longer. Arifai, 51, says he has decided to shut down the BYO—no sooner than December 31, but no later than March 2015, when his lease expires.

If you have never had the pleasure of eating his duck breast with fig-and-red wine emulsion, braised red cabbage and caramelized turnips, now's the time. Always flouting convention, Arifai recommends it not rare or medium rare, but medium. And he's right. The flavor comes forward as the flesh firms up a bit. Counterintuitive, perhaps, but this self-taught chef (and one-time rock bassist) has always followed his own compass.

Where his compass points now, at least as far as fine dining is concerned, is New York City. "I'm hugely grateful to my customers, who have supported me all these years," he says, "but younger people, say 25 to 45, are not into BYOs. They want to order cocktails and craft beers. Older customers like to bring their best wines, but they eat out less often. In New York, the idea of high-level food in a super casual space is understood. Here, it doesn't quite click."

There is a chance Arifai (pronounced ar-EE-fay) will stay on this side of the Hudson, but only if he can buy the building that houses Blu and its more casual, lower priced, offshoot, [Next Door](#) (which won [NJM's 2010 Burger Showdown](#)). He says he would then turn it into one big Next Door. "I might open more Next Doors in other Jersey towns," he says. "One hundred percent of the population understands that food."

Either way, Blu heads for the last roundup. It knocked down barriers between cuisines and combined flavors and textures in bold, successful ways. In these final months, Arifai is bringing back some of his benchmarks: the duck; charred octopus with chickpea purée, raisins and yogurt; seafood dumplings in chili-coconut broth; and the daring black olive cake with basil ice cream and orange sauce. The clock is ticking. Why wait?

Café Panache, Ramsey

130 E Main St., 201-934-0030

For any restaurant to last 30 years is remarkable. For a BYO to do it—lacking the profit stream a liquor license provides—is exceptional. And for the chef of that restaurant, after 30 years on his feet, to still be at the top of his game—well, that's extraordinary.

The chef, Kevin Kohler of [Café Panache](#), actually figures he has been on his feet almost every day for 40 of his 57 years, counting apprenticeships.

“One reason I succeeded,” he says, “is that I knew what I couldn't do. I couldn't, and still can't, be cool, or hip, or trendy. What I am is consistent. I make food that is impeccably fresh and not overcomplicated, not froufrou or over-garnished. I focus on the product and I try to get my chefs to keep the flavors clean.”

Long before farm-to-table became a buzz phrase, Kohler was picking his own fruits and vegetables every morning at [Abma's Farm in nearby Wyckoff](#). Sparklingly fresh ingredients are just the beginning. Whether you're having his warm mushroom salad, his hand-made agnolotti in basil cream, last spring's softshell crabs with ginger-carrot sauce, or for dessert back then, his intense, lip-smacking, hot blackberry soup with lavender-flower ice cream, Kohler's food is pleasing, never ponderous; satisfying, never stupefying.

Chez Catherine, Westfield

41 North Ave. W, 908-654-4011

Last year, owner Didier Jouvenet's long-time chef left to start [a more casual French restaurant](#) across town. Jouvenet, 65, a native of Lyon, France, kept right on clicking, like the ceramic crickets on his tables that are the emblem of Marseille, hometown of his wife, Edith. Under new chef de cuisine Alex Gomes, 32, who has worked at Blu and Lorena's, [Catherine's](#) modernly light yet soulfully classic French food also clicks along, perhaps better than ever.

Jouvenet still fillets imported Dover sole tableside (as he did at New York's La Grenouille for two decades). His wine pairings are masterful (Burgundian pinot noir with duck confit; Chateauneuf du Pape with roast chicken; Sancerre with smoked salmon). He personally presents the truly grand Grand Marnier soufflé, cracking the puffy top and pouring in the golden sabayon sauce. He is charming and gracious, never stuffy, but he won't be doing this forever. You owe it to yourself to experience French food as it was meant to be.

Cucharama, Hoboken

233 Clinton St., 201-420-1700

Chef/owner Maricel Presilla lets no moss gather under her two James Beard Awards. For the Peruvian trade office, she created new Pisco cocktails, including one called Blood Moon that is all the rage at [Cucharamama](#), her pan-Latin flagship. Made with purplish acai juice, orange and lime, “it looks like something Dracula would like to drink,” she says. Now using her wood-burning oven to cook whole vegetables (like a cauliflower stuffed with Peruvian garlic bread, parsley and almonds), she calls the dome-shaped oven, “the best investment we ever made.” From a recent trip to the Dominican Republic, she brought back the makings of mamajuana, a native drink made from vines cured with wine and honey. “It has this woody, fascinating flavor,” she says. “Every time I go anywhere, I find new stuff to work with. So I never get bored.”

Fascino, Montclair

331 Bloomfield Ave., 973-233-0350

Sounding quite boggled, Ryan DePersio says, “I have over 40 cooks working under my name at three locations. When I was 25, I thought no way would that ever happen.” At 36, DePersio is the consulting chef of [Nico at NJPAC](#), executive chef of the stunning new [Battello](#) on the Hudson River in Jersey City, and executive chef of [Fascino](#), his family's BYO pride and joy in Montclair.

You might say he has a lot on his plate. What's key here is how he feels about Fascino. “It's my baby,” he says. “It made me who I am and I always want to make sure it is at the top of my priorities.”

In recent months he has updated the menu, removing some proven winners and replacing them with dishes that are proving to be as good or better. Bye-bye, barramundi with paprika-and-sweet-onion sauce; hello, pancetta-wrapped

branzino stuffed with tomato confit. So long, porcini-dusted scallops; c'mon in cumin-dusted scallops with beluga lentils, sunchoke purée, hazel oil and lobster foam.

Some dishes will never take a hike, like the ricotta gnocchi with sweet-sausage Bolognese. Factor in the updated decor and the delightful desserts made by Ryan's mom, Cynthia, and you have a spunky 11-year-old still feeling its oats—or rather, its red quinoa with salsa verde on the branzino.

The Frog & The Peach, New Brunswick

29 Dennis St., 732-846-3216

Do kielbasa and fine dining belong in the same sentence? They do at [the Frog and the Peach](#), still dynamic after 31 years, thanks to chef/owner Bruce Lefebvre and his splendid staff. The kitchen makes the kielbasa from scratch, cold smokes it, roasts it until crisp. Meanwhile, the sauerkraut, also made from scratch, is mixed with fresh cabbage “to get two flavors,” Lefebvre says. On the plate go luscious whipped potatoes, soulful caramelized onions and a dollop of impossibly delicious mustard, also made in house in a time-consuming process involving seven ingredients, from lager beer to egg yolks. All this time and effort for one \$16 lunch item. Insanely inefficient! But standard procedure for every Frog and Peach dish—be it seared red snapper with beer-braised calamari; the amazing \$7 side dish of cauliflower-almond purée studded with golden raisins and capers; or the unique rice-pudding strudel with apricot coulis created by pastry chef Brian Dymnioski.

Fuji, Haddonfield

116 E Kings Hwy, 856-354-8200

“I start early in the morning and finish late,” says chef/owner Masaharu “Matt” Ito, 61. “I’m old-fashioned that way.” Nowadays his son Jesse, 25, can be found full-time at the sushi bar. He’s the next generation, but the first gen isn’t slowing down. In cooked food as well as sushi, [Fuji](#) has always been a bastion of authenticity. Now Ito is about to bring back various techniques and ingredients he says even traditionalists like himself seldom see in the United States. “My son says, ‘Why you work all the time?’ I say, ‘Because I’m a cook. I don’t sit in an office. Every day is new. That excites me.”

Latour, Hamburg

Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548

The late Gene Mulvihill, builder and owner of the [Crystal Springs Golf Resort](#), created Latour in 2004 to showcase his world-class wine collection, led by its matchless ranks of his favorite Bordeaux, Chateau Latour. In 2008, he hired Robby Younes—born and raised in Lebanon and at 28 already a seasoned hotel and restaurant executive—to modernize Latour’s menu and service. In February, Younes, now the resort’s perfection-obsessed wine director and vice president of hospitality and lodging, made his boldest move yet, hiring New Zealand native Jean Paul Lourdes as Latour’s executive chef.

In a few months, Lourdes has taken Latour’s five-course and seven-course tasting menus from excellent to exciting (and, yes, more expensive: now \$115 and \$145). A smoked wagyu brisket he served in May—infused with Kansas City-style barbecue spices, cooked sous vide for 76 hours and served with foraged spring ramps three ways (charred, pickled and smoked)—was so flavorful and paradoxically firm yet yielding, it would make burly pitmasters weep. At the other end of the flavor spectrum was his first course of a wild black radish cooked in an olive tapenade and garnished with a gel made from sparkling cider, freeze-dried black olives and immature grapes. Its flavors and textures were as delicate and precise as a Japanese folding fan.

Lourdes, 35, has a unique background. A former pro rugby player, he holds a master’s degree in food science and nutrition and is the author of a children’s book about food. He has worked with the three-star Michelin chefs Pierre Gagnaire in Paris and Anne-Sophie Pic in southeastern France. Lourdes cooked with Joël Robuchon in Tokyo and ran the restaurants of the Shangri-La Hotel in Beijing, where he became interested in scent and developed a cocoa-infused perfume for the hotel. When Younes tracked him down, Lourdes was director of culinary research and development for the Stephen Starr organization.

The move to Sussex County was not a hard sell. Lourdes says he and the Philadelphia-based mogul “were going to do a restaurant together, but I did not want to do the large format Starr wanted. If someone dictates the menu to you, where is the freedom to be creative?”

Freedom, Younes convinced him, is exactly what he would have at Latour. The veep has kept his promise, rebuilding the kitchen to Lourdes’s exacting specifications; flying in whole fish twice a week from Tokyo’s famed Tsukiji market; hiring teams of foragers on both coasts; upgrading the dishes, silverware and glassware; and modernizing the decor of the dining room, already blessed with a panoramic view of the sun setting over the Kittatinny Ridge.

In May, Lourdes debuted Latour’s first brunch. Like his dinner menu, his brunch exhibits bravado, not a word previously

associated with Restaurant Latour. A baked flatbread with maitake mushrooms and kale was loaded with fiery Calabrian peppers, an invasion on an empty stomach first thing in the morning. A Swedish open-faced sandwich was equally aggressive in spiciness and in the daunting layer of dense fat on the chunk of pork belly on top.

But Lourdes's creative daring mostly succeeds, as in his Moroccan pancake with tandoori apples or his tartine of Iranian figs, burrata and lavender honey. Both the \$55 and \$75 prix-fixe menus come with a parade of marvelous house-made breads, pastries, jams, sodas (like Bing cherry and yuzu), compound juices (like the ingeniously balanced blood orange, prune and passion fruit), and organic coffees (Guatemalan, Sumatran and Ethiopian) that keeps coming until you beg for mercy.

Fine, you say. But can the guy do creamy-soft scrambled eggs (with, by the way, sorrel and Scottish salmon)?

Folks, get out your hankies.

Lorena's, Maplewood **168 Maplewood Ave., 973-763-4460**

For nine years, chef Humberto Campos Jr. has been bringing forth luscious food from a small kitchen. The BYO, named for his wife and co-owner, [Lorena](#), is French in technique, but American in spirit.

"We're always tweaking, always trying to make ourselves a little better," Campos says.

The kitchen staff has been expanded and some spiffy new equipment added—like a sous-vide machine and a Pacojet, the Ferrari of food processors. "It will allow us to do more elaborate preparations," Campos says. That will include what some chefs call a pre-dessert, a complimentary amuse-bouche that bridges the gap between the savory meal just ended and the sweets to come.

Whatever new recipes the new crew and equipment make possible, some things at Lorena's will never change: the warmth of Lorena, the hostess; the hugely popular salmon tartare; the beet salad with goat-cheese quenelles and pistachio purée; the butter-poached lobster crepe with fava beans and mushroom butter.

For dessert, Campos says, speaking of what's popular, "the carrot cake has really taken over. It's light, incorporates some pineapple brunoise in the batter, has cream-cheese icing, of course, but also cream-cheese ice cream." Two kinds of cream cheese? That's living large.

Luke Palladino, Linwood **199 New Road, 609-926-3030**

In this BYO's original location, in a strip mall in Northfield, people used to wait outside to get one of the 30 cramped yet coveted seats. Since the restaurant moved up the road to a more village-y looking mall last October, there are now 70 seats and the kitchen is 20 percent larger. All of which means Palladino, 45, can please more people with a larger menu and a wider variety of regional Italian dishes.

In winter, Palladino finds his muse in the cooking of northern regions like Emilia-Romagna and Friuli. In the warmer months, he looks to the South—Calabria and Sicily. Yet Friulian Venice, overflowing with seafood and its own soupy style of risotto, is a year-round favorite of his. This spring, Palladino made a deeply flavorful puréed soup from artichokes and a hint of spring onions that could not have been creamier if it had cream in it, which it did not. Black spaghetti, colored with squid ink, is no longer novel, but Palladino prefers to make his from the much more flavorful ink of the cuttlefish (seppia). His spaghetti nero di seppia with garlic, oil, ramps, shaved bottarga (cured mullet roe) and crunchy little breadcrumbs is one of the little miracles Italian cooking is famous for—complexity from simplicity.

Maritime Parc Jersey City **84 Audrey Zapp Drive, 201-413-0050**

The name and location, on a marina facing Lower Manhattan, strongly suggest that [Maritime Parc](#), as chef/owner Chris Siverson admits, "will be all about seafood." Indeed, you can count on great seafood, from grilled oysters with cream, leeks and bacon to pan-roasted mussels in Thai curry-coconut and ginger broth to pasta with scallops, crabmeat and shrimp in a lemon-thyme reduction.

But don't let the waterside location deceive you. Siverson's kitchen is just as adept with the bounty of land and sky. A superb dish of braised rabbit with black-garlic spätzle, green olives, ramps and peas in a grain-mustard broth upsets the apple cart of expectations. Which also topples the moment you taste his herb-marinated lamb loin with bits of crispy lamb breast, anchovies, roasted grapes and young spinach in sauce vierge, an herbal French sauce usually served with shellfish.

Pastry chef John Sauchelli makes it difficult to raise anchor after the entrées. It's hard to say which was better on a recent night—his cherry pain perdu (the original French toast) with rhubarb compote and white chocolate-and-lemon cremeux, or his dark-chocolate fudge cake with cardamom-vanilla parfait and passion fruit caramel. When the plates were cleared, there wasn't a crumb or a smear of sauce left on either.

Mistral princeton

66 Witherspoon St., 609-688-8808

Executive chef Ben Nerenhausen turns out beautiful, seasonal dishes multinational in concept and conversation stopping in deliciousness.

Nerenhausen, 31, is adept at juxtaposing flavors, colors and textures: a salad of cured beef carpaccio with marinated leeks and marrow; a fluke sashimi with tofu, asparagus and mint-like shiso leaves; roasted cauliflower on spicy house-made harissa dotted with house-made, sumac-flavored yogurt; and a unique, sweet buttermilk panna cotta with English peas, lemon curd and crumbled sablé (a French shortbread), all brightened by a pea-shell granita.

"We got whole pigs in, and we had some ears hanging around," Nerenhausen relates. "So we did a crispy pig-ear salad with marinated tomatillos. We braise the ears, cut them in strips, toss them in Wondra flour and fry them. They get crispy outside and tender inside. I think they're great, and it plays off Mexican flavors, so it makes sense in the whole spectrum of things."

It went on the menu as a Crispy Pig Ear Salad, but the name must have been off-putting. When he changed it to Marinated Tomatillo Salad and, under the title, listed the components as jalapeños, crema and crispy pork, it took off. "We've had nothing but clean plates coming back to the kitchen," Nerenhausen says. "When people ask what kind of pork, the servers are encouraged to describe it exactly. I would never hide things, but even though we're in an area that wants new and different foods, you have to present things in a way people will accept."

[Mistral](#) is the second culinary success of partners Stephen Distler and the talented chef Scott Anderson. Their more elegant (and equally delicious) Elements, about three-quarters of a mile away, will reopen in early 2015 in the same building as Mistral, enabling both to share the Elements liquor license.

Nicholas, Red Bank

160 Route 35 S, 732-345-9977

To most restaurateurs, the label "special occasion restaurant" means one thing: Next stop, extinction. Nicholas and Melissa Harary, however, embrace the term—and why not? It's kept them on top for 14 years.

"The truth is, we create memories," says [Nicholas](#), 40, the executive chef. "It seems to me the younger generation of restaurateurs are into great food and farm-to-table, but I'm not totally sure that hospitality and attention to detail is their top priority. To us, it always has been. Weddings, anniversaries, birthdays—we owe it to those people to make it special." With chef de cuisine Nicholas Wilkins in the kitchen, you can rely on sophisticated food that delights both eye and palate and never feels contrived. With the Hararys keeping a close watch on every aspect of the guest's experience, you can count on service that eschews showiness and formality—and formality's evil twin, presumptuous, icky informality. "People have gotten used to going to a chef-driven restaurant where the chef is not there," Nicholas says. "That's weird. Last week I worked 80 hours. I'll happily do that until someday I'm not here anymore."

Osteria, Moorestown

400 Route 38, 856-316-4427

Better known in South Jersey than North, Philadelphia's Marc Vetri is one of America's most acclaimed chefs and successful restaurateurs. Author of two books on Italian cooking and co-founder of the Vetri Foundation for Children, Vetri, 47, is also CEO of his restaurant company, which he calls Vetri Family.

That name makes you roll your eyes at first. But as South Jerseyans are discovering with the debut of [Osteria Moorestown](#) (Vetri's sixth restaurant overall and first outside Philadelphia), the idea behind it is not spin or wishful thinking.

"The group offers a lot of knowledge and experience, if you're willing to go the extra mile," says Mike Deganis, 30, who worked at the original Osteria in Philadelphia and was executive chef of Vetri's Alla Spina before becoming executive chef of Osteria Moorestown. "We all have the same camaraderie, we bounce ideas off each other and everyone is very creative. We make our own sausages, salumi, gelato, breads and pastas every day. It's all very hands on, and for the cooks who work for us, it's a great learning experience."

It's a great experience for those who eat the food, too. From the wood-burning oven come terrific thin-crust pizzas and puffy-crust Neapolitan pies, including novel combinations like the thin-crust Polpo (octopus, tomato, red chili flakes and smoked mozzarella) and the Neapolitan Mortadella (Sicilian pistachio pesto, mozzarella and mortadella). Let the pastas lead you into unexplored territory—tagliatelle with rabbit Bolognese and taggiasca olives, or robiola francobolli, floppy

“postage-stamp ravioli” with royal trumpet mushrooms and thyme.

You could leave it at that, but the secondi—main courses—are excellent, too. So is the Italian wine list, which the sommelier can lead you through expertly. Desserts are worth the calories, and the space itself is comfortable, handsome and unusual in that it includes a row of seats facing the open kitchen—like a sushi bar except for Italian food.

The Pass, Rosemont

88 Kingwood Stockton Road, 609-961-1887

Matthew Ridgway makes bacon, paté and sausages even in his dreams—that is, when he has time to sleep. Called to the phone at his sparkler of a place in a quiet village up the hill from Stockton (and six miles north of Lambertville), this charcutier-cum-restaurateur was in the midst of brining rabbit. [The Pass](#), in a former general store, is small and rustic. So is the menu. The hours are few (Wednesday through Saturday nights, and a Sunday supper of oysters and charcuterie). And there is just one option: a \$49, three-course, prix fixe menu.

But within those limits, Ridgway achieves maximum creativity: rabbit porchetta with stone-ground grits and an achar (an Indian style of pickle) made with shishito peppers; cured sockeye salmon with horseradish, peas and an escarole-fennel salad; roasted and boned Alaska halibut with snow peas, the spicy Hong Kong sauce called XO and dashi broth; hazelnut brioche soaked in ginger syrup, baked with hazelnut cream and drizzled with a syrup of strawberries, sugar and reduced red wine.

Ridgway recently switched from paper napkins to French cloth ones. He lets himself change the menu every two weeks rather than every week, as he did at first. He has improved his serving staff. But, he says, “we always want to do more.”

Peacock Inn, Princeton

20 Bayard Lane, 609-924-1707

The cuisine of Manuel Perez and his wife, Cyndi Perez, matches the bird for which this restaurant and boutique hotel are named: exotic and extravagant, yet familiar. Think foie gras terrine with cured strawberries, rhubarb-ginger foam, reduced balsamic vinegar and pistachio shortbread; organic Scottish salmon with a white asparagus purée, pickled red onions and red wine reduction; roasted Maine lobster over pappardelle, chanterelles, zucchini and asparagus, sauced with truffled, sous-vide egg yolks; and warm sticky-toffee date cake with toffee sauce and vanilla-bean ice cream.

The two—he is executive chef, she is pastry chef—live and breathe food. When they’re not cooking at the [Peacock](#), they are reading food magazines or food books. Or they’re taking culinary expeditions to Philadelphia and New York, exploring ethnic enclaves. More often than not, the trip home is productive. Recently they drove to Brooklyn, ate at four spots, and by the time they returned home, they had conceived a new dish inspired by the pillowy gnudi and the charcuterie they had shared.

“We’ve been working together four years now,” Manuel says. “She’s gotten very acclimated to my style. I can trust her completely; she knows my palate. Of course there’s some dissension—not every single detail works—but we have each other’s backs. We can be critical of a dish without it affecting us as a couple. It’s very good. It’s better than very good. If you could choose an ideal situation as a chef, and you’ve got your vision out there, and you’re cooking the food you want to cook and your personal life coincides, it’s as close to perfect as you can get.”

Pluckemin Inn, Bedminster

359 Route 206 S, 908-658-9292

Gloria La Grassa puts her mouth where her money is. She eats almost every day at the inn she and her late husband, Carl, founded nine years ago. The Pluckemin Inn is the kind of place where anyone could happily eat almost every day. The menu changes often, and the food is as joyous to behold as it is to dig into.

Executive chef Andrew Lattanzio, 34, beautifully balances flavors, textures and colors, whether in a sautéed skate on potato-leek purée with a fricassee of fava beans and French mushrooms, or a luscious vegetable gazpacho, done as a purée with an island of smoked-salmon tartare, a radish salad and preserved lemon. Add the award-winning wine list, nifty cocktails and servers who make every guest feel important, and the [Pluckemin](#) lands on this list by pluck, not luck.

Red Store, Cape May Point

500 Cape Ave., 609-884-5757

The fun Lucas Manteca is having in his converted village store made him a semifinalist for this year’s James Beard Award for best chef, Mid-Atlantic. Manteca, 37, an Argentine who has worked with David Bouley, Dan Barber and Alain Ducasse, finds unexpected affinities of flavor and texture, as in a tuna crudo transformed into a refreshing salad with sliced

strawberries, pickled cukes, Granny Smith apples, shaved fennel and his own house-made take on green goddess dressing.

“We always try to stay on top of what’s going on around the world with techniques and flavors,” he says. [Red Store](#), a BYO, now works with a nearby 10-acre farm, Fincas del Mar, to grow fruit and produce for its kitchen. Manteca vacuum packs Griggstown poussin with lemon zest, herbs and garlic, cooks it sous vide, pan roasts it with butter, herbs and lemon and serves it over butternut squash with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms roasted until crisp. That’s a lot going on in one dish, but it harmonizes on the palate like a tango.

Ryland Inn, Whitehouse Station

115 Old Hwy 28, 908-534-4011

Replacing Craig Shelton as chef of the [Ryland Inn](#) is a little like replacing Vince Lombardi as coach of the Green Bay Packers. The predecessor casts a long shadow. After nearly two years as executive chef of the renovated and reimagined Ryland under new owners Frank and Jeanne Cretella, Anthony Bucco says, “We don’t own its history. That will always be Craig’s. But we feel we are redefining its present and future.”

Actually, Bucco, 38, and his equally talented and driven chef de cuisine, Craig Polignano, 33, burst from the starting gate with food as stirring as it was polished. Mixologist Christopher James has become a star. In the renovation, the one-time stagecoach station retained a sense of history, but became more comfortable and contemporary. The wine list and the service have improved under sommelier Adam Conovey, restaurant manager Chris McKee and director of operations John Williams.

“We have virtually the same kitchen staff we opened with,” Bucco says, “so that helps us elevate what we’re doing.” A good test of a kitchen is what it can do with chicken, the protein customers know best. Bucco cooks the breast sous vide for succulence and crisps the skin in a pan. He serves it with an heirloom black barley with local strawberries he smokes over applewood and white unripe strawberries he pickles. Stirring chicken stock into the barley turns it into a New World risotto. The bird is graced with nutty, smoky, sweet and tart flavors as well as textures ranging from plush to crisp.

Another new dish, squid, is Polignano’s creation. (Bucco jestingly calls it “the anti-calamari.”) The squid is grilled whole, tentacles and all, dressed with tamarind brown butter and served with a papaya-and-peanut salad with Thai basil.

“I wasn’t sure we could sell it,” Bucco says. “We replaced our best-selling octopus with it, and people are loving it. I think we’re beginning to fire on all cylinders.”

Saddle River Inn, Saddle River

2 Barnstable Court, 201-825-4016

A year and a half after buying the venerable (and slightly saddle sore) [Saddle River Inn](#) from its beloved founder, Hans Egg, chef/owner Jamie Knott has spruced up the charming 1790 barn and made the kitchen run like a thoroughbred. Service is crisp and accommodating, and the food is vivid, nuanced and deeply pleasurable.

Knott, 33, who grew up in Nutley, was executive chef of Terrance Brennan’s Artisanal in New York before buying the BYO inn with partner David Madison. His steak tartare, made from ultra-rich wagyu ribeye (ground twice for satiny texture), is seasoned with shallots, mustard and capers and topped with a raw quail egg, which you stir in for even more richness. As we say in Joizy, it’s the ne plus ultra.

Knott’s crabmeat and napa cabbage salad looks like it has no dressing. But in every bite, the flavor is eye-opening. One reason is that he seasons the napa and the crab separately and differently, combining them at the last moment.

Knott’s swordfish, moist and tender, comes with a white bean purée enriched with white wine, herbs and the lush sweetness of caramelized garlic. The bean purée mates uncannily well with the meaty fish.

Pastry chef Heather Lattig is a rising star. Try her chocolate panna cotta with port-steeped cherries and pink peppercorn ice cream, or that rarity, a peanut butter dessert (a chocolate-covered mousse) that is deeply peanutty first and sweet second.

“This kitchen is sort of a think tank,” says Knott, “because everybody contributes and feels a part of it. It makes for a very dynamic situation.”

Scala Del Nonna, Montclair

32 Church St., 973-744-3300

Michael Cetrulo opened his first restaurant, Il Mondo Vecchio in Madison, when he was 23. His latest, [Scala del Nonna](#), is his fifth. All are successful, well run and focused on pleasing the guest. But Scala, a BYO, just may be the most charming and irresistible. The name (“in grandmother’s footsteps”) is the 46-year-old’s tribute to the cooking he learned growing up in Wayne. At Scala, he imbues tradition with veteran know-how and youthful brio, as in scallops in a seductive prosecco-orange-saffron sauce or pappardelle with a hearty osso buco ragù. Scala’s food isn’t sassy or grandstanding; it’s sumptuous and gratifying. Not least of Scala’s pleasures is the interior. Once drab, it is now bright and elegant, with vaulted ceilings and generous space between tables. You feel like a padrone the moment you sit down.

Thirty Acres, Jersey City

500 Jersey Ave., 201-435-3100

Everyone is used to plate as a verb. But it takes a Kevin Pemoulie to turn it into an adjective—and a pejorative one at that. “If things get a little too intricate or platey,” the chef says, “I try to get back to what we do, which is putting flavors together. Nothing fancy, but really sharp flavors.” A recent exhibit A was smoked Arctic char with quark and trout roe. Simple and superb. Another was zucchini cooked with salt, sugar and sherry vinegar, cooled, plated with a sauce made from fermented orange peel and red chili and garnished with fresh mint and candied cashews. That does sound a mite platey, but also very [Thirty Acres](#) in the thought that went into it.

The menu, like the kitchen, is tiny —rarely more than 12 to 15 items at dinner. The small work space also accounts for the dearth of desserts. If after two years you’re finally wearying of Kevin’s Mom’s terrific lemon bars, Pemoulie and his wife and co-owner, Alex (whose first child was born in June), now offer a cheese plate. Wait, it gets better. Having fine-tuned the kitchen staff, they’ve been working up ice cream and sorbet recipes. “I don’t know what direction we’re going,” Pemoulie says, “but I feel extremely well equipped for whatever it is.”

Ursino, Union

1075 Morris Ave., 908-249-4099

Executive chef Peter Turso has an upstairs-downstairs thing going at this [bi-level restaurant](#) with its two-story glass wall facing a fountain and garden on the campus of Kean University. You enter upstairs, with its curving bar, cocktail tables, lounge menu and elevated view of the sun setting behind the greenery. Descend the spiral staircase, and you enter a realm of rare culinary creativity.

Upstairs and downstairs are both Turso. “Just because it’s simple doesn’t mean it can’t be refined,” the 34-year-old says of the lounge menu, with its wood-fired pizzas, smoked swordfish with shaved fennel, and beef empanadas with avocado emulsion. Downstairs, a velvety cauliflower soup drizzled with curry oil is so good you want to pass it around the table. Duck with sweet carrot mole sauce, masa crisps and a margarita gastrique makes a mind-blowing mashup. Up or down, you can’t go wrong.

Verjus, Maplewood

1790 Springfield Ave., 973-378-8990

Charles Tutino long ago quit his job tracking millions at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to work for pennies in the kitchen of Jean Jacques Rachou’s fabulous La Côte Basque. Along the way he mastered the art of making dishes you thought you knew—from boeuf Bourguignon to roast chicken with tarragon—taste better than you thought possible.

At [Verjus](#), Tutino and his wife, the charming hostess Jane Witkin, have been exceeding expectations for 13 years. Tutino regularly branches out from the haute and narrow with theme nights, including French Bistro, Jersey Shore, German and Italian. Even the regular menu offers irresistible excursions, like St. Louis baby-back ribs with pomegranate bergamot glaze. The wine and cocktail lists are small but discerning. And then there is Verjus’s \$25 prix-fixe, two-course Sunday brunch, with choices including lovely French omelets, a lush smoked-herring salad and a terrific caramelized-apple pancake. You don’t have to be an economist to rally around the kind of stimulus Verjus issues every day.

The Top 25 Restaurants and Critics’ Picks were chosen by our panel of food critics and reporters, led by senior editor Eric Levin, who wrote the 25 briefs. The panel: Elizabeth Anderton, Jill P. Capuzzo, Adam Erace, Karen Tina Harrison, Melody Kettle, Terry Krongold, Tammy La Gorce, Suzanne Zimmer Lowery, Chris Malloy, Tara Nurin, Rosie Saferstein, Robin Damstra & Jim Salant and Pat Tanner.

Check back next week for the results of our 31st Annual Jersey Choice Restaurant Poll.