


## Restaurants

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# 25 Best Restaurants 2010

For the best Jersey chefs, fresh, local, sustainable, and farm-to-table are not just buzzwords but delicious keys to creativity, style, and value.

Posted July 12, 2010

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Ninety Acres' halibut with Manila clams, braised Berkshire pork, and Swiss chard.  
Photo by Christopher Villano.

The 25 Best Restaurants were chosen by our panel of food critics and reporters, headed by senior editor Eric Levin. The panel: Warren M. Bobrow, Jill P. Capuzzo, Adam Erace, Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, Sam Kadko, Karen Tina Harrison, Stan Parish, Rosalie Saferstein, and Pat Tanner.

### AVENUE

Long Branch

An ocean of sky towering over the actual ocean, visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows, sets the tone at executive chef Dominique Filoni's Avenue. You'll forgive him if the ocean he has in mind is the Mediterranean. He is, after all, a native of San Tropez. At Avenue, Filoni, 41, draws from the cooking of Provence and the Riviera but adds his own grace notes, like a welcome (if untraditional) dollop of goat cheese on the traditional pissaladiere onion-and-anchovy tart of Nice. "It makes a good finish," he says. Then there's salt-crusted bronzino, wild halibut with cockles and favas, fluke crudo. Meals at Avenue are terrific start to finish. 23 Ocean Ave, 732-759-2900, [leclubavenue.com](http://leclubavenue.com)

### BLACKBIRD

Collingswood

"The nice thing about Blackbird," says chef/owner Alex Capasso, "is that it doesn't have to be one thing or another. It's rooted in classical French and Italian, but there's Asian and Middle Eastern influences as well." All that technique and influence allows Capasso, 36, to put the pedal to the metal of his creativity and lust for flavor. Out comes pan-seared foie gras with peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich and red wine syrup, or coriander-and-rice-crusting tilapia with avocado salad and sweet-and-sour sauce. It's all yummy, but if that sounds too out there, try his house-made linguine with wild mushrooms and porcini sauce. A classic. 619 Collings Ave, 856-854-3444, [blackbirdnj.com](http://blackbirdnj.com); BYO

### BLU

Montclair

"Cutting-edge food is over," declares chef/owner Zod Arifai. "People want to eat inexpensive food that

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tastes good.” Arifai’s food is certainly inexpensive (top entrée, \$25), and to say it tastes good is like saying Scarlett Johansson looks good. But only a self-taught iconoclast like Arifai, 47, could think his food isn’t a little bit state-of-the-art. What he means is that he eschews the whole passé molecular-gastronomy game in favor of ingenious flavor combinations (like raw oysters with rice vinegar and lemon broth, diced Granny Smith apples and crispy Kalamata olives, or his incomparable duck breast with red wine and fig purée). Maybe we should call his food “state of the art,” because it satisfies like crazy. 554 Bloomfield Ave, 973-509-2202, [restaurantblu.com](http://restaurantblu.com); BYO

### **CAFE PANACHE**

Ramsey

For the last two decades, long before farm-to-table became fashionable, chef/owner Kevin Kohler has been picking his own vegetables mornings at the nearby, family-owned Abmas Farm in Mahwah. “It’s my therapy,” he says. It’s also the source of much of his menu’s exciting seasonality. “My food changes a lot throughout the year,” he says. “In summer, I become more Italian. In the fall, I get more French, and by the time winter hits, I’m more Asian in tone, and it’s all because of the different products available.” Still, there are some classics that even after 25 years in business he can’t take off the menu, like his mustard-crusted calf’s liver in port wine-raisin sauce with green peppercorns. Beautifully renovated a couple of years ago, Kohler’s restaurant lives up to its name in ambience, service, and food. 130 E. Main St, 201-934-0030, [cafepanachenj.com](http://cafepanachenj.com)

### **CHEZ CATHERINE**

Westfield

The stock market may go up and down, but the stocks that Didier Jouvenet invests in every day never fluctuate. They are always blue chip, always the gold standard of their culinary kind. Veal stock, beef stock, fish stock, vegetable stock—“These are the mother sauces of French cuisine,” says the owner, “and if you don’t have these sauces, the food will not be classic.” Chez Catherine’s is, though, modernized in its restrained use of cream and butter. Thank Jouvenet, 61, a native of Lyon, France; his wife, Edith, whose decorating touch speaks of her native Provence; their consummate chef, C.J. Reycraft Jr.; and waiters who pride themselves on knowing what the customer wants before the customer can raise a finger to ask for it. 431 North Ave W, 908-654-4011, [chezcatherine.com](http://chezcatherine.com)

### **COPELAND**

Morristown

In Europe, hotels often house great restaurants, but in America executive chef Thomas Ciszak, who grew up near Dusseldorf, has had “to fight against the perception that hotel restaurants are second rate. It just makes you work harder.” Ciszak opened Copeland in the Westin Governor Morris Hotel in 2005, and since then the restaurant, with its large kitchen staff, has proven itself a thoroughbred. Although he resists labels, Ciszak says, “You could call my food New American, but European-based. It’s a little bit intense, but I use simple words to describe it on the menu, so it’s not intimidating.” If you can relate to a lobster bake with duck sausage, clams, mussels, and corn; or a twelve-hour cold-smoked prime rib of beef sliced and grilled; or house-made prosciutto from the tasty Mangalitsa pig raised in New Jersey, you’ve come to the right place. 2 Whippany Rd, 973-451-2619, [copelandrestaurant.com](http://copelandrestaurant.com)

### **CUCHARAMAMA**

Hoboken

There’s nothing else quite like Maricel Presilla’s Cucharamama, the ebullient chef/scholar’s region-by-region celebration of the food and drink of Latin America (unless it’s her Cuban-focused Hoboken restaurant, Zafra). But Presilla never takes a siesta. This summer Cucharamama will introduce two new varieties of Venezuelan tamales, new empanadas, and an olive bread of her own invention made with Peruvian black olives and Andean panca pepper that gives the dough a brick-red color and a mellow heat. She is also starting a dessert tasting of South American varietal chocolates to be served like a cheese course with coffee, fortified wines, or smooth Guatemalan zapaca rum. “I’ve always wanted to do that,” she says. It’s not easy to keep up with her, but it sure is fun. 233 Clinton St, 201-420-1700, [cucharamama.com](http://cucharamama.com)

### **CULINARIANE**

Montclair

Good news! Tiny CulinAriane has expanded into the storefront next door, increasing one’s chances of getting a reservation. This New American gem now seats 48 instead of 30. Chef Ariane Duarte and her husband Michael, the manager and pastry chef, could have squeezed in more seats, but they wanted to increase the space between tables, making CulinAriane more comfortable. They also added a chef’s table, seating four, in the kitchen. It doesn’t operate in the summer when the kitchen is hot, but otherwise it offers ten to twelve courses (or more) for \$125 a person and an exciting ride through Ariane’s greatest hits (cornmeal-crusted oysters with horseradish cream) and latest inspirations. 33 Walnut St, 973-744-0533, [culinariane.com](http://culinariane.com); BYO

### **DAVID BURKE FROMAGERIE**

Rumson

Wide of smile and girth, David Burke does everything in a big way, though with the closing of David Burke Las Vegas five months ago he is down to an empire of just six restaurants in New York, Connecticut, Chicago, and Rumson. The Fromagerie, where he got his start at age 17 and which he bought and revamped in 2006, remains close to his heart. It’s a beautiful place to experience his big flavors and high concepts, like his famous, finger-licking Angry Lobster or his best-in-class, pretzel-crusted crabcake. With the menu changing every six-to-eight weeks, Burke and his on-site staff, including chef Frank Whittaker, keep finding new ways to put a smile on diners’ faces. 26 Ridge Rd, 732-842-8088, [fromagerierestaurant.com](http://fromagerierestaurant.com)

### **DUE MARI**

New Brunswick

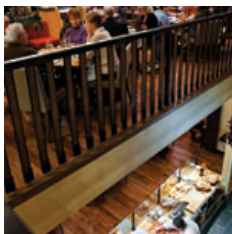
For us it’s always neck-and-neck between Due Mari (“two seas”) and its sibling in Bernardsville, Due Terre (“two lands”): same scrupulous owner (Francois Rousseau), same superb kitchen team (executive chef/partner Michael White, executive chef Bill Dorrier, pastry chef Denise Cinque), same excellent service, overlapping menus (killer pastas at due Dues, flawless fish and meat at both). But we do prefer the atmosphere at Due Mari, which is bigger, comfier, and a lot quieter. Its downtown New Brunswick location is accessible to many more people. And it offers one blandishment Due Terre does not—excellent,

individual, thin-crust pizzas. 78 Albany St, 732-296-1600, [duemarinj.com](http://duemarinj.com)

## ELEMENTS

Princeton

It's August, the height of the growing season, and executive chef Scott Anderson estimates that the number of varieties of vegetables, herbs, greens, and fruits in the walk-in cooler has reached 100, much of it local. The abundance is such that he and his large kitchen staff tend to compose dishes starting with the produce rather than the protein. "It's more challenging that way, but more creative," he says. "We're always pushing each other to move forward, so the menu is never static. I have a cook who's been off two days, and he could walk in with ten ideas. Guests always have something new to look forward to weekly, even daily." Whatever comes out of the kitchen at Elements is likely to be adventurous, intriguing, and fun to eat. 163 Bayard Lane, 609-924-0078, [elementsprinceton.com](http://elementsprinceton.com)



### Eno Terra

Kingston

Stuffed with three cheeses, a delicate zucchini blossom—harvested that morning—oozes its creamy contents onto fresh haricots verts, artichoke hearts, and house-made spinach pappardelle. This array of local bounty is just one manifestation of how Eno Terra in Kingston scales the twin peaks of sustainability and seasonality. And thanks to efforts not readily apparent to most diners, like eliminating the use of Styrofoam and installing energy-saving light sensors, it is one of only six restaurants in the state certified by the Green Restaurant Association for ecofriendly practices.

Owners Carlo and Raoul Momo found the ideal chef to champion their restaurant's Italianate sensibility in Christopher Albrecht, 38. Trained at the CIA, he had more than ten years experience with the formidable Tom Colicchio—first as saucier and pastry chef at Gramercy Tavern and then as chef de cuisine and executive chef at Craftsteak in Las Vegas and New York. For his part, the East Brunswick native says he was "looking for a homecoming, in a sense," and found it at Eno Terra. Albrecht sources as much as he can from the Momos' nearby one-acre Canal Farm and from purveyors within a 50-mile radius. This season, Albrecht expects to use about 60 types of tomatoes, half from Canal Farm. He includes jars of his strawberry jam, made from berries from Muth Farm in Williamstown, in the picnic basket takeouts he creates for those who want to lunch al fresco in the scenic environs of the D & R Canal surrounding the restaurant.

Inspired as a youth by the cooking of his Hungarian grandmother and the baking of his German grandmother, Albrecht fashions his own desserts. Embellished with floral and herbal notes of the season, like lavender and rose, these, too, are a paean to the local landscape. "Dessert is the final food that the guest is going to experience," he says. "I want consistency throughout the meal. I don't want to chance an off experience."

## FASCINO

Montclair

Now that the DePersio family has opened a second restaurant, the casual Bar Cara in Bloomfield, executive chef Ryan DePersio has two kitchens to supervise, but as Fascino's loyal clientele can tell you, there's been no letup at the flagship. It's still an exemplary modern Italian restaurant, creative and highly responsive to what's best in the market any given day. Pastas are a joy. What's new? Jersey fluke with a crust made from raw risotto rice powdered in a grinder. What will never change? The famous mascarpone polenta fries with gorgonzola fonduta (fondue-like sauce), for which we can all be grateful. 331 Bloomfield Ave, 973-233-0350, [fascinorestaurant.com](http://fascinorestaurant.com). BYO

## THE FROG AND THE PEACH

New Brunswick

Chef Bruce Lefebvre calls his approach to cooking "culinary common sense." We call it assertive yet elegant, balanced and flavorful. But let him explain it: "It starts with inspiration, wherever that comes from. It could be beautiful local broccoli or a machine that makes perfect cavatelli. Then it's combining it with ingredients that make sense for the season and that bring out the best in each other." An example is his crispy skin duck breast glazed with soy molasses, served with local bok choy, sticky rice, and a ginger blueberry sauce made from local berries. Add top-notch service and memorable decor (especially the sun-splashed garden room) and you have a dining experience that—in the F&P's 27th year—remains fresh and enticing. 29 Dennis St, 732-846-3216, [frogandpeach.com](http://frogandpeach.com)

## FUJI

Haddonfield

Chef Matt Ito is particularly known for his Japanese cooked dishes, a world relatively unexplored by Americans compared to sushi, at which Fuji also excels. In a serene space of natural materials and a magnificent hewn and polished wood sushi bar, you can put all of Ito's skills to the test by ordering either of his memorable tasting menus—omakase (5 courses, \$50) or kaiseki (8 courses, \$80 and up). 116 East King's Highway, Rt 41, 856-354-8200, [fujirestaurant.com](http://fujirestaurant.com). BYO

## GIRASOLE

Atlantic City

A dish of porcini and shiitake risotto at Girasole is a lesson not only in the woodsy richness of funghi misti but also in the sublime luxury of perfectly cooked rice, not commonly experienced. Girasole is like that—all its dishes are prepared, and served, by the Iovino family with such loving attention that they take even a basic tomato sauce to another level, to say nothing of pastas, veal chops, and marinated raw fish crudos. At the head of the dining room, replete with blue and gold Versace fabrics, stands a classic igloo-shaped oven, from which emerge crispy pizzas and (a Milanese treat but a rarity in New Jersey) warm carpaccios. Girasole is a sunny experience, as befits its name, which means sunflower in Italian. 3108 Pacific Ave, 609-345-5554, [girasoleac.com](http://girasoleac.com)

## LORENA'S

Maplewood

"Just when I can't imagine we can get busier, we get busier," says chef and co-owner Humberto Campos

Jr. "We're running about 30 percent ahead of last year." That's no mean feat in this economy, even for a jewel box with only 30 seats. Campos and his wife, Lorena, the co-owner, are clearly doing something right. They keep freshening the romantic, French country look of the dining room (new chairs are due this month), and Campos keeps tweaking the menu, which uses French technique to reach into many culinary corners. These days everybody does beef short ribs, but Campos's are about the most sumptuously tender and flavorful you'll find anywhere. 168 Maplewood Ave, 973-763-4460, [restaurantlorena.com](http://restaurantlorena.com)

## NICHOLAS

Red Bank

Many restaurateurs consider it the kiss of death to be thought of as a special occasion restaurant. But when you're a regular special occasion restaurant, you're a rare breed. "We have a lot of customers who come six times a year," says executive chef and co-owner Nicholas Harary. "They'll come for everyone's birthday, and anniversary, and Valentine's Day, and a couple other occasions as well. And we get a couple marriage proposals every week." Now ten years old, Restaurant Nicholas stays fresh by constantly tweaking things (like its signature suckling pig, recently given a more Cuban treatment). Its kitchen is a kind of advanced graduate school, where fourteen cooks learn on a steep curve and head out into the world after two years, some to return later in a higher position, such as current chef de cuisine Nicholas Wilkins. "I tell my people, 'If you're not getting better every week, then you're wasting your time,'" Harary says. "Making the restaurant better each year—I really do feel that's my goal." 160 Route 35 South, 732-345-9977, [restaurantnicholas.com](http://restaurantnicholas.com)



## Ninety Acres

Peapack-Gladstone

Ensclosed in Somerset County's Natirar Park, a 491-acre estate that once belonged to the King of Morocco, Ninety Acres derives its name from the approximate size of the luxury resort and private club being developed within the park by Bob Wojtowicz with Sir Richard Branson. That parcel includes a 19-acre farm that lured executive chef David C. Felton away from the Pluckemin Inn, where he'd been sharpening his focus on farm-to-table dining. "Having a farm five miles down the street is nice," he says. "Having a farm 20 feet out of your restaurant is even nicer. I like picking my own vegetables."

Shooting for a 150-mile radius when sourcing his ingredients, even in winter, Felton honors them with preparations that delight in lively flavor combinations like bacon-wrapped quail with cocoa, Seckle pear, beets, and sherry, or a subtle soup of cauliflower and salsify sparked with curried shrimp, capers, and raisins. It's comfort food, gratifying and casual but raised to a high level, on display in a multicourse tasting menu (known as Bring Me Food) that changes daily and an à la carte menu that includes a daily Farmer's Plate (chicken pot pie, lobster rolls) as well as purse-friendly barside selections of small plates and wood-fired pizzas. The Fanwood resident plans to eventually offer poolside dining, barbecues, and picnics on the grounds. "There are so many opportunities for a chef to hit every creative nerve here," he says.

Felton was born in England and settled in the Garden State with his parents when he was 8. Childhood meals eschewed stereotypical English grub, for Mum had gone to the Cordon Bleu in London. "If you missed dinner at my house, you were a fool," he recalls. Felton studied culinary arts at Johnson & Wales. His first employer, a hotel chain, sent him on four- to eight-week stints around the country, covering for chefs on vacation or maternity leave. The chef, who's seen 46 of our 50 states, recalls being teased in Dallas because he "had no idea what chile con queso was." He took the ribbing in stride and learned, he says, "to adapt, to deal with personalities, and about regionality in American cooking."



## Pluckemin Inn

Bedminster

Ask executive chef Juan José Cuevas about his career, and he doesn't brag about his 2009 Chef of the Future award from the International Academy of Gastronomy, or his association with Michelin-starred properties across the Atlantic (Akelare in San Sebastián, Spain) and across the Hudson (Alain Ducasse at the Essex House and Blue Hill, both in Manhattan). But he does chat at length about how "extremely happy" he is with the Pluckemin's long-standing connection to nearby Three Meadows Farm, which lets him transplant seedlings from the farm's greenhouse to his own garden at the restaurant and to forage on-site for purslane chickweed and other greens. Every afternoon at

4:30, he drives five minutes from the restaurant to the farm to select greens for that evening's salad. "I like to cut it myself," he says. "I cut, I taste, I smell; I do my own mix. Every day the mix is different."

Indeed, that ability "to control what produce I use," he says, is precisely what enticed the 37-year-old Clifton resident to leave Manhattan for Somerset County. Born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where he studied accounting, Cuevas caught the cooking bug via a marketing-class project to create a restaurant. He graduated with honors from the Culinary Institute of America in 1995. Cuevas's dishes are as distinctive and satisfying as they are thoughtfully composed. His sauces are vegetable-based; there is no cream in his kitchen. "It masks the flavor of the food," he says. "You just don't need it. A good ingredient speaks for itself. My approach is simple. Not simple in the way of home-basic, but simple in that I don't use molecular gastronomy. Human beings should eat more naturally."

## RESTAURANT LATOUR

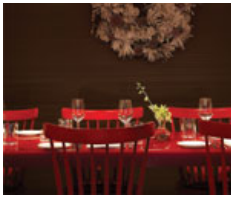
Hardyston

With a floor-to-ceiling view of the sun setting over Kittatinny Ridge, Restaurant Latour, atop the Crystal Springs Resort, is hard to beat for ambiance. But even better is the variety and finesse of executive chef Michael Weisshaupt's French-American food, especially his tasting menu, which he recently expanded from seven to eight courses to add a pre-dessert (in late June, a cone-shaped tuile filled with blueberry coulis, fresh blueberries, and blueberry ice cream). Then there's the bounty of resort owner Gene Mulvihill's subterranean wine catacombs—room after stone-walled room of rarities, great vintages and, yes, bargains for the sharp-eyed. Put it all together and you have one of the most exquisite dining experiences anywhere. 1 Wild Turkey Way, 973-827-0548, [crystalgolfresort.com](http://crystalgolfresort.com)



## UPROOT

Warren



Relatively limited” is the understated way Anthony Bucco, executive chef of Uproot, a sleek, 9-month-old Somerset County restaurant, describes his menu. Okay, so only one special appetizer and entrée supplement the ten appetizer and ten entrée listings. But the modest number of options belies the boundless flavor of his dining-room and bar dishes. Moreover, Bucco estimates that 80 percent of his menu changes monthly, with weekly updates to reflect product availability.

Bucco sources as much as he can within 200 miles of his Wood Stone oven.

“To pull off food at a high level, sometimes I have to go outside that radius,” he says. Garden State fruits and vegetables, however, usually lie at the base of his creations, such as his recent sweet-and-savory marriage of puréed local strawberries, first grilled to tease out their sugars, and New Jersey fluke.

A native of Matawan and graduate of the New York Restaurant School, Bucco, 34, began molding his culinary identity with locavore trailblazers Patrick Verré at Jasna Polana in Princeton and Michel Nischan at the W Hotel’s Heartbeat in Manhattan. Then he led the kitchen at well-regarded Stage Left for six years and opened its sister restaurant, Catherine Lombardi, both in New Brunswick. Unlike his previous endeavors, Uproot has allowed Bucco the opportunity to design a restaurant “from the kitchen out.”

Jonathan Ross, the restaurant’s GM and sommelier, who worked with Bucco at Stage Left, likes to highlight vintners from near and far who are “making wine the same way Anthony cooks: wholesome, honest, vibrant, articulated,” he says. And, he might have added, with no limits.

## VARKA

Ramsey

The quality of hospitality at Varka can be inferred by the three-tiered display of complimentary cookies at the cash register. We are a long way from toothpicks and mints, gang. All three cookies are so good you’ll want to snatch some on the way in. But don’t spoil your appetite because chef George Georgiades’s Greek seafood is spanking fresh and delicious, especially the whole, charcoal-grilled, cooked-to-order fish, and his traditional Greek dishes are the real deal. 30 N. Spruce St, 201-995-9333, [varkarestaurant.com](http://varkarestaurant.com)

## VERJUS

Maplewood

Chef/co-owner Charles Tutino’s biggest influence was the great New York-based French chef Jean-Jacques Rachou of La Côte Basque, for whom Tutino went to work when he decided in 1980 that he no longer wanted to be an economist. “But even before that,” Tutino says, “I was very influenced by [the great cookbook author] Elizabeth David and her idea that cooking is the pursuit of happiness.” With French techniques and a modern sensibility, Tutino delivers oodles of that very happiness with every plate, while his wife and co-owner, Jane Witkin, spreads happiness in the dining room. 1790 Springfield Ave, 973-378-8990,

[verjusrestaurant.com](http://verjusrestaurant.com)

## WASHINGTON INN

Cape May

Complacency will kill a successful restaurant in no time, but for 32 years the Craig family and their longtime executive chef, Mimi Wood, have kept the Washington Inn fresh and progressive, a bastion of timeless hospitality and gratifying, contemporary food. The garden room, with its proscenium overflowing with lush plants, is an appealing space in which to enjoy such Wood specialties as crespelle, an Italian-style crepe filled with caramelized onion and lavished with a truffled Italian fondue; steaks and chops smoky from the new wood-burning oven; or crispy-skinned salmon with caramelized fennel, fingerling potatoes, and roasted pepper-saffron beurre blanc. 801 Washington St, 609-884-5697,

[washingtoninn.com](http://washingtoninn.com)

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### COMMENTS

#### You missed two of the best...

Where are Restaurant Serenade & Stage Left. I think both should be in your list. Maybe you have to expand your list to the to 30 or 40...

Posted by: Ken Robinson, Hillsborough | Jul 26, 2010 17:43:03 PM |

#### The Orange Squirrel

No Orange Squirrel restaurant (Bloomfield)!!!! One of the very best. How can it not be on the list. Also no Serenade!!

Posted by: David Bravo, Maplewood | Jul 27, 2010 01:27:08 AM |

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