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100 Best Restaurants 2008

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Openings by celebrity chefs! A bistro renaissance! Twenty new restaurants! There's plenty of excitement on this year's list of very best restaurants, ranked from 1 to 100. We're counting down the top 25.



At Citronelle, a candy apple goes elegant: tart apple sorbet, translucent, crunchy slices of apple, and a rich caramel sauce.

For a while, it looked as if the French restaurant were dead. Not French food—which will never go out of fashion—but the French restaurant, that proud and sometimes stuffy establishment that didn't so much serve a meal as uphold the exacting standards of Cuisine.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, dining out in Washington more often than not meant dining French. Even ten years ago, *The Washingtonian's* 100 Best list was rife with French names — La Colline, La Miche, Jean-Michel, Le Gaulois, La Ferme, Provence, La Bergerie, La Chaumière. Today most of those places are gone or have been eclipsed—casualties of a dining culture that has gone from formal to casual, from set menus to weekly and even daily compositions, from chamber music to iPod rotations.

But French cooking in this area has never been more alive, even if its most passionate practitioners have bent, twisted, and sublimated its principles. At Washington's best restaurant, Citronelle, the food is subject to so many other influences that you might not recognize its Gallic underpinnings.

Palena is widely thought of as an Italian restaurant—its name refers to a city in Abruzzo—but the precision and intricacy of Frank Ruta's cooking are indisputably French. CityZen is not nominally a French restaurant, but the cooking will sooner transport you to Paris than will a day trip to one of the region's French country inns. Power players flock to BLT Steak for the monumental cuts of beef, but the best things about Laurent Tourondel's New York import are two French touches: an oversize Gruyère popover and a small jar of astonishingly rich pâté.

Restaurant Eve is one of the area's most ambitious and creative restaurants, with a tasting room that pulls in influences from around the globe, but it's not for nothing that it calls its main dining room a bistro. In an era when our ardor for going out to restaurants seems to be surpassed only by a disdain for frills and formalities, what could be more appealing than a bistro, with its implicit promise of rootedness and simplicity?

Bistros popped up with such frequency this year that it looked as though a takeover were under way. Michel Richard opened Central, and Robert Wiedmaier opened Brasserie Beck —cheaper alternatives to their fine-dining restaurants, Citronelle and Marcel's. The Willard brought back Antoine Westermann and his three Michelin stars and opened Café du Parc. Eric Ripert—awarded three Michelin stars for his Manhattan seafood palace, Le Bernardin —opened Westend Bistro.

Dupont Circle's Montsouris, the steak-*frites* sister of Montmartre in DC's Eastern Market neighborhood, finally found its groove. So did the quietly ambitious Bastille in Old Town Alexandria. The exorbitant Gerard's Place closed and reopened as a bistro, hoping to ride along on the trend. (So far, not so good.)

But you don't have to eat in a bistro to appreciate the bistroization of the area's dining scene—menus now are replete with oysters on the half shell, frisée salads, tartares, hanger steaks, pâtés and terrines, cheese plates, and Rhône reds. Charcuterie is as common as Caesar salad, and some restaurants, such as Proof, have gone so far as to install a meat-slicing station near the wine cellar, with some chefs seizing upon the trend as a way of demonstrating their machismo. Most, however, are giddy at showing their mastery of form. Vermilion chef Anthony Chittum is known for his pastas, but his charcuterie board—evinced an old-fashioned love for the earthy arts of curing and casing—will persuade you he's a Frenchman at heart.

Like all trends, this one undoubtedly has a shelf life. For now, we'll raise a glass of Rhône red, enjoy a cold oyster, spear a slice of garlicky sausage, and say: *Vive le bistro!*

13 Oval Room ★★★

800 Connecticut Ave., NW | 202-463-8700

Cuisine: With its puréed fruits and vegetables, herb-infused oils, and delicately applied microgreens, chef Tony Conte's brightly flavored food tastes straight out of revered chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's handbook. Which makes sense: Conte spent three years as executive sous chef of Vongerichten's Manhattan flagship, Jean Georges.

Mood: By day, this airy dining room, with its colorful abstract canvases, is a favorite lunch spot for boldface names such as Condi Rice and George Stephanopoulos. By night, it feels more like a serious restaurant than a place to schmooze.

Best for: Power lunchers and anyone tired of cream- and butter-laden restaurant dishes.

Best dishes: Beet salad, a Conte signature of roasted beets with passion-fruit gelée and a mignonette made with ice wine; creamy burrata cheese with dried papaya, basil, and salt; an artful tuna tartare made with ribbons of raw fish, avocado, and crisped tapioca; burrata-filled ravioli with corn; New Zealand pink snapper accented with licorice and anise; seared venison with a quenelle of chopped dates and hazelnuts; butter-poached lobster with wasabi, peaches, and young coconut; PB&J *vacherin*, a layering of Concord-grape sorbet and peanut-butter ice cream with salted peanuts; apple-confit tart with a shot glass of mulled cider.

Insider tips: Ignore the Cobb salads and turkey club sandwiches. Here you can feel comfortable ordering adventurously.

Service: ●●

14 The Source ●●●

575 Pennsylvania Ave., NW | 202-637-6100

Cuisine: High-concept Asian fusion devised by Wolfgang Puck and executed by Scott Drewno, resulting in a synthesis of Western proteins and portion sizes with Pacific Rim accents, sauces, and preparations.

Mood: Want to see Wolfgang? Get a doggy bag—the sepia-toned picture of the Austrian celebrity chef on it is as close as you'll come. But the place still conveys a sense of excitement thanks to the elegant dining room, with its elevated perch looking onto Pennsylvania Avenue, and the swiveling heads of patrons on the lookout for the rich and famous.

Best for: Taking out-of-towners skeptical of DC's star power.

Best dishes: Delicately fashioned crab-and-shrimp *shu mai*; a small terrine of roast suckling pig with plum-fig chutney; prawns in a mustard-yogurt curry full of fresh curry leaves; crispy sea bass, carved tableside, in a subtle Thai chili sauce; Indian-spiced short ribs with *dal* and *raita*; Szechuan steak au poivre; Cherry Blossom, a dessert of cheese dumplings drenched with sour cherries that's as light as it is rich.

Insider tips: The price of Puck's star power is evident from the start. Glasses of wine are priced like appetizers, many appetizers are priced like entrées, and some entrées edge toward the \$40 mark. The downstairs lounge is slightly less prohibitive.

Service: ●½

15 Westend Bistro ★★★

1190 22nd St., NW | 202-974-4900

Cuisine: The long-awaited Washington outpost of Eric Ripert's growing culinary empire is no note-for-note re-creation of his revered Le Bernardin in New York. Ripert has dispensed with the formal elegance of his flagship, along with its purely piscatory focus, opting for a roster of classics—fish stews, braised veal cheeks, pasta Bolognese, even a hamburger—all rendered with the touch of a four-star chef.

Mood: The generic upscale design does little to create a specific sense of place in the glass-walled ground floor of downtown DC's Ritz-Carlton—you could be in any hotel in any city in the world. But there is buzz: In the early weeks, young, well-heeled diners flocked to the place, dishing knowingly about the pouty-lipped chef between sighs over the food.

Best for: People looking for the elegance and finesse of dining out at the highest level without the formality and the fuss—or the exorbitant prices.

Best dishes: Creamy West Coast oysters; mini fish burgers topped with shaved fennel; rich and zesty tagliatelle Bolognese; veal cheeks in a buttery pillow of potato purée; Chesapeake seafood stew abundant with shellfish, its broth intense and light; poached skate wing and braised endive in a lush brown-butter sauce; chocolate-caramel cream topped with sea salt.

Insider tips: If you've never eaten at Le Bernardin and wonder what the fuss is about, zero in on two dishes: The salmon *rillettes* is the same recipe as the one served in Manhattan, and the Chesapeake seafood stew, though shy of four-star elegance, hews to the parent kitchen's philosophy of seeking out the freshest fish and treating it with reverence. You won't find mini fish burgers at Le Bernardin, but don't miss them here: The two-biters—served three to an order on the bar menu—are even more satisfying than the regular-size fish burger. They're also easier to share and a lot cheaper.

Service: ●½

16 Obelisk ★★★

2029 P St., NW | 202-872-1180

Cuisine: Slightly modern takes on regional Italian as delicious as if you were eating them in Emilia-Romagna. The handwritten menu, \$65 for five courses, changes daily.

Mood: A sparsely appointed townhouse with the feel of a low-key dinner party. This is not the place to discuss family or state secrets.

Best for: Diners as passionate about things Italian and artisanal—the burrata is shipped in daily from Puglia—as chef/owner Peter Pastan, who travels to Italy yearly in search of the new and wonderful, and anyone weary of impersonal restaurant experiences.

Best dishes: Antipasti such as squid stewed with chard; airy fried rice balls with mozzarella; burrata drizzled with olive oil and seasoned with cracked pepper and *fleur de sel*; plump house-made pork sausages with pickled onions. Rustic plates such as roasted

quail with spinach; a luscious chocolate pudding with fresh whipped cream; Sicilian breakfast, a layered parfait of grape granita and yogurt cream with a miniature turban of brioche.

Insider tips: The antipasti and cheese courses are the highlights of this generous meal, and desserts are full of whimsy. By comparison, main courses can seem uninspired, so load up early and save room for the finish.

Service: ●●●

17 Corduroy ●●●

1201 K St., NW | 202-589-0699

Cuisine: Down-to-earth roasts, masterful salads, elegant soups, and terrifically fresh seafood from culinary craftsman Tom Power, who quietly wows from the kitchen but eschews the spotlight.

Mood: It's a testament to the chef's skill that Corduroy's many fans have been filling this blandly functional setting—the corduroy-covered menus are the restaurant's most striking design touch—for so long. In March, Power will move out of the Sheraton Four Points hotel and into a more fitting setting: a 19th-century townhouse a few blocks away with intimate dining rooms and an open kitchen.

Best for: Dining by yourself—or spending happy hour—at the bar presided over by smart, friendly bartenders.

Best dishes: A warm mushroom-and-frisée salad with a lightly poached duck egg; red-snapper bisque; goat cheese wrapped in frizzled potatoes; seared bigeye tuna over sushi rice; meaty sea scallops over garlic mashed potatoes; braised pork belly with Savoy cabbage; classic roasted chicken with a deliciously crisped skin; a perfect crème brûlée; chocolate tart with bananas; house-made chocolate and vanilla ice creams.

Insider tips: Don't skip dessert: Power learned pastry during his long tenure with Michel Richard, and while his desserts—save for a faithful rendition of Richard's famous “Kit Kat” bar—are simpler than his mentor's, they're almost always perfect.

Service: ●●●

18 2941 Restaurant ●●●

2941 Fairview Park Dr., Falls Church | 703-270-1500

Cuisine: Founding chef Jonathan Krinn has left, but the high-minded, high-priced menu—which calls itself contemporary American but is grounded in classical French technique and flaunts its Asian accents—remains much the same. Scott Bryan, most recently of Veritas in New York, has been minding the kitchen until a new chef, Bertrand Chemel (formerly of Café Boulud in New York), arrives in January.

Mood: Intended as a wooded retreat from the stress of the city and the Beltway, this suburban fantasia bespeaks new money, from the manmade lake outside to the soaring interior with angled mirrors, glass walls, and sumptuous oil paintings.

Best for: A big date, an important business dinner, a special occasion.

Best dishes: Supremely smooth celery-root velouté with black truffles; chilled lobster salad, its sweet, lightly poached claw meat set off by a fava-bean purée and white asparagus; well-seared foie gras with a vanilla-scented pineapple confit; crisp-skinned filet of snapper in a green curry of elegant lightness; slowly braised short ribs with a creamy potato purée and a rich Bordelaise sauce; warm apple turnovers with butterscotch ice cream.

Insider tips: Krinn's father has left, too, but his terrific bread recipes remain. So does the signature parting gift—a fluffy bowl of cotton candy, which follows an ample selection of petits fours. Unless you're famished, it's best to go light at the start and finish. And give attention to the wine list, which includes, among the big-name estates from France and California, reasonably priced selections from up and down the East Coast.

Service: ●●●

19 Marcel's ●●●

2401 Pennsylvania Ave., NW | 202-296-1166

Cuisine: Chef Robert Wiedmaier's labor-intensive Franco-Belgian fare doesn't stint on butter and cream, and his reductions and sauces—dark, rich, and complex—are reminiscent of an earlier age.

Mood: Silver domes and attentive, black-suited waiters make this expansive dining room with art-nouveau accents one of the most pampering palaces in town.

Best for: High-maintenance Francophiles and the Kennedy Center-bound who come for the great preheater deal: \$48 for three courses and a chauffeured Caddy or Mercedes to the performance.

Best dishes: An earthy roasted-chestnut soup with disks of house-made venison sausage; boudin blanc with celery-root purée and an intense Cabernet reduction; roasted pheasant with a terrine of pheasant confit; roasted figs with thyme *mille feuille* and honey goat cheese; blood-orange sorbet; chocolate-chip-mint ice cream.

Insider tips: Book the preheater ride with your dinner reservation. Appetizers and desserts usually show more savoir-faire than entrées do. You can also sup in the swanky bar, where a jazz pianist plays Tuesday through Saturday.

Service: ●●●●

20 Ristorante Tosca ●●●

1112 F St., NW | 202-367-1990

Cuisine: Rich, luxurious northern Italian—house-made pastas, intensely flavored game—with lofty aspirations and prices. You'll wish you had a fatter wallet along with a bigger belt.

Mood: Clubby, with affable Italian-accented waiters in cream-colored jackets assuring diners they've chosen the best dish. With many of the city's top law firms nearby,

someone's surely treating a client to dinner and billing him for the pleasure.

Best for: Power lunches and dinners, dinner before a show at the Warner or National, a special dinner out.

Best dishes: Silken carrot pappardelle in a rabbit ragu; kabocha-squash tortelli floating in a truffled Parmesan sauce; roasted veal tenderloin with porcini mushrooms and farro; rack of venison with beet tartare and currant sauce; a fascinating Gorgonzola ice cream served three ways, including with a delicious slaw of celery, fennel, and pear.

Insider tips: Chef Massimo Fabbri's menu offers so much variety that it can spark arguments among couples intending to share. Don't ignore the tasting menus—each item can be ordered à la carte. Pastas can be ordered by the half portion, which is advisable for a second course—or if you want to try more than one. Early diners can take advantage of the \$35 three-course preheater menu. Groups of four to eight can make an evening of dinner by reserving the chef's table in the kitchen, where Fabbri cooks a seven-to-nine-course meal for \$105 a person—a relative bargain.

Service: ••½

No. 21: Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar ***

2917 M St., NW | 202-333-2912

Cuisine: Lobster with oxtail broth? Spiced beer jelly? Expect the unexpected at this cozy Georgetown bistro/wine bar, where executive chef Barry Koslow turns out inspired terrines, pastas, and fish with lots of little surprises.

Mood: A crowd of urbane families and polished thirtysomethings settles into this narrow dining room—California cool with blond wood, flagstone, and blue-sky murals.

Best for: Casual romantic dinners, hanging out at the sophisticated bar, winetasting and cheese-nibbling.

Best dishes: Oysters roasted with garlicky *gremolata*, chopped chard, and bacon; duck pâté dotted with pistachios; open-faced ravioli with chanterelle mushrooms and sheep's-milk ricotta; braised suckling pig with shavings of *grana padano* cheese and soft gnocchi; quail with pheasant-sausage stuffing; black bass with hazelnut-coriander crust and blood-orange sauce; apple-stuffed beignets with cinnamon ice cream.

Insider tips: Not in the mood for a big dinner? You can graze wonderfully here on artisanal cheeses—cloth-aged Vermont cheddar, pungent Hudson Valley Camembert—and house-made terrines and pâtés. By-the-glass selections on the mostly West Coast wine list come in usually generous half pours.

Service: ••

No. 22: Farrah Olivia ***

600 Franklin St., Alexandria | 703-778-2233

Cuisine: Ivory Coast-born Morou Ouattara's freewheeling style draws on influences from Africa, Asia, and France and revels in foams, jellies, and powders. Its juxtapositions are

meant to baffle, surprise, and provoke conversation. Often they do—all in the same delicious dish.

Mood: On a side street in Old Town, the serene dining room—even the '80s-leaning soundtrack, with forays into heavy metal and Prince, is kept low—gives no hint of the madcap explorations going on in the kitchen. Only a wall stencil that evokes the African bush and dangling coconut shells suggest the chef's source of inspiration.

Best for: Culinary adventurers for whom a “deconstruction” is a delight.

Best dishes: Eggplant gazpacho, refreshing and intense; “shocked escolar,” thin slices of flash-blanching fish to be swabbed in Merlot powder, speared with pickled quince, and topped off with wasabi tapioca pearls; a perfectly undercooked halibut with a sweet-onion purée; panko-crusting cured quail sauced with a kind of savory crème brûlée and drizzled with chorizo oil.

Insider tips: Soups are a point of pride for Morou, who is disinclined to rely on cream for richness; instead he cooks his vegetables until they break down, the natural purée fortifying the flavor of his broths. Having grown up in a culture where meat was a luxury, he's capable of assembling a vegetarian menu of imagination and depth.

Service: ●●

No. 23 Passage to India ●●●

4931 Cordell Ave., Bethesda | 301-656-3373

Cuisine: Elegant Indian that goes beyond the usual—chef/owner Sudhir Seth's menu spans the subcontinent with regional entrées that remind us that Indian cuisine is as varied and complex as any.

Mood: The formal servers and the dining room decorated with portraits of rajahs and viceroys and carvings of Hindu gods conjure the Raj as portrayed in the film *A Passage to India*.

Best for: Adventurous groups willing to explore—and share—exotic flavors.

Best dishes: *Sev-mumura chaat*, a bizarrely delicious salad of puffed rice and vermicelli with cilantro, dates, and tamarind; lentil “pebbles” flavored with ginger and dates; lamb curry with apricots and straw potatoes; succulent tandoori chicken; *kulcha*, bread stuffed with lightly spiced onions; and a pickle platter to cut the heat and weight of the curries.

Insider tips: You can travel the subcontinent two ways here—by jumping around the menu choosing something from each region or with a more methodical exploration—say, of the Parsi specialties of western India. Don't see your favorite dish? Just ask.

Service: ●●

No. 24 Taberna del Alabardero ●●●

1776 I St., NW (entrance on 18th St.) | 202-429-2200

Cuisine: A tour of Spain's regional cuisines, with rustic, crowd-pleasing tapas and

magnificent paellas commanding most of the attention.

Mood: The oxblood-red walls, formal fixtures, and portraits of dons put you in mind of a classic hotel in Madrid. Those suavely accented suits at the next table are likely to be financiers from the nearby World Bank or International Monetary Fund.

Best for: Noshing at the tapas bar weekdays from 3 to 7, when tapas are half price, and special-occasion dining.

Best dishes: From the tapas bar, *salpicón de marisco*, a ceviche of octopus, scallops, mussels, and shrimp with peppers and onions; chorizo; Serrano-ham croquettes; quail cured in sherry vinegar. From the menu, paella (traditional seafood or with chorizo and chicken); veal sweetbreads with spinach, capers, and potatoes; rabbit with carrots. An all-seafood menu in November featured humble grouper gratinéed to a new level and a pristine sea bream baked in rock salt.

Insider tips: While the happy hour makes the tapas bar one of the city's best dining deals, seats are few, so arrive early or be prepared to stand. Spain is producing exciting wines, and Taberna remains the best place in town to explore them. The list ranges in style from classic Riojas and sherries to the trendy wines of Priorat, and in price from prestige wines to an impressive array under \$50.

Service: ●●●

No. 25: Cynthia's ●●●

552-I Governor Ritchie Hwy., Severna Park | 410-315-8088

Cuisine: Generously portioned Modern American cooking from a husband-and-wife team (Brian Bennington handles savories, Cindy Bennington sweets) that sometimes bends toward the straightforward and comforting (a steak dinner) but is almost always served with flair and wit—a pork chop, the menu notes, is napped with “yummy sauce.” The many thoughtful touches—from Guggenheim rolls at the start to simple but sublime desserts and fresh-baked muffins the staff sends you home with—linger in memory long after you've left.

Mood: Neither the exterior—a strip mall in Severna Park—nor the open, off-white interior has much to recommend it, but the dining room at night has a buzz, animated as it is by smiling, toasting, laughing Baltimoreans and suburban Washingtonians who know they've turned up a gem in the unlikeliest of settings.

Best for: Diners who prize value and comfort over trendiness, foodies tired of going into DC for an adventurous meal.

Best dishes: A luscious slab of foie gras atop a ripe, caramelized peach; a fan of rosy-hued duck breast with baked root-vegetable terrine and caramelized apple; a rectangular filet of salmon painted with Cabernet sauce to resemble a barbecue spare rib, with bacon-fortified purée of potatoes and leeks; a pearlescent halibut with fried coins of potato in a sweet, creamy corn sauce; “breakfast” at Cynthia's, its Prosecco sabayon drenched hollandaise-style over a fresh sponge cake topped with peaches; lemon “cannoli” with sour-cream ice cream and fresh fruit.

Insider tips: The Benningtons don't practice portion control—appetizers are the size of

entrées, and entrées are almost certain to yield leftovers. Consider splitting a first course and saving some calories for the end of the meal: It's at dessert that the restaurant really soars—every one of Cindy Bennington's desserts hits the mark. And look to the weekly wine special, a bottle priced much lower than the usual restaurant markup of three times the retail cost.

Service: ••