

THE TOP 25 Restaurants

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 Zod 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, 37, worth following. His ego may be supersized, but so are his energy and creativity. His response to perceived Zodosaurushood 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, cafeapanachenj.com

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- *Agricola
- Blu
- Cafe Panache
- Cucharamama
- Culinariane
- Daryl
- Elements
- Eno Terra
- Fascino
- The Frog and the Peach
- Fuji
- Lorena's
- Luke Palladino
- Maritime Parc
- Nicholas
- Ninety Acres
- * Peacock Inn
- Pluckemin Inn
- * Red Store
- Restaurant Latour
- * Ryland Inn
- Thirty Acres
- Ursino
- Verjus
- Zeppoli
- * NEW TO THE LIST

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 & Jim Salant.

PHOTO BY DAVID MICHAEL HAWORTH



CAKEWALK: Executive chef Josh Thomsen helps Agricola diners beat the heat with a lump crab cake crowned with farm-fresh heirloom carrots, breakfast radishes and sugar snap peas circled by a swirl of carrot purée and dots of curry vinaigrette.