

THE TOP 20

Cream-of-the-crop restaurants emphasize high quality

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FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

And with Mother's Day fast approaching (May 11) -- the second-most-popular holiday for dining out, according to the National Restaurant Association -- it's a perfect time to look at fine-dining options.

This list -- an abbreviated version of the Top 20 from the annual Dining Guide in September -- reflects changes in the Columbus-area restaurant scene.

For restaurateurs, continued economic pressures are taking a toll. The cost of supplies, including staples such as flour, keeps rising, but many owners aren't raising menu prices. Instead, some are resorting to other cost-cutting measures, including prohibitive increases in wine prices -- a burden not shared by all patrons.

Like any other restaurant ratings, this list is subjective. The primary criterion: quality of the food. Value, the surroundings and the level of service are also taken into consideration -- as are other factors, such as the willingness to take reservations, noise level, menu variety and attention to details (quality of the bread, olive oil and butter, for example).

The "Top 10" restaurants represent the best of the best. The second 10 -- called "The Next Tier" -- are also deserving of mention. Both lists are presented alphabetically.



The Top 10

Bar of Modern Art

583 E. Broad St., Downtown

614-233-3000

Reservations recommended

www.barofmodernart.com

BOMA features a variety of original artwork in the various dining rooms and seven bars. The newly redone American-eclectic menu has many striking offerings, including appetizers (tempura vegetables with a fabulous dipping sauce) and entrees (heirloom pork and roast ostrich).

For dessert, consider the vanilla cheesecake made with goat cheese. The overpriced wine list requires careful navigation.

Serving dinner Wednesday through Saturday; on-street, off-street and valet parking

Dragonfly Neo-V Cuisine

247 King Ave., Victorian Village

614-298-9986

Reservations recommended

www.dragonflyneov.com

This vegan menu features more interesting and delicious mushrooms and vegetables than any other. A recent offering, "shrooms Provençal," arranges a sauté of a half-dozen exotic types in an intensely colored and flavored vegetable reduction served on whole-grain amaranth (bread).

The "pizza of the day" touts a nutty-tasting sauce taking the place of cheese, and the fruity sorbets used on so many of the excellent desserts are noteworthy.

An interesting wine list favors organic and unsulfured wines.

Serving brunch on Saturday, dinner Tuesday through Saturday; on-street parking

Handke's Cuisine

520 S. Front St., Brewery District

614-621-2500

Reservations recommended

www.chefhandke.com

Award-winning owner-chef Hartmut Handke has been a pioneer in adding non-institutional sources of fresh ingredients to the tables of this restored brewery, where he serves both classic and updated European and American cooking of the highest order.

Look first for seasonal specials.

The wine list's selections have improved in the past few years.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; on-street and valet parking

Kihachi Japanese Restaurant

2667 Federated Blvd., Northwest Side

614-764-9040

Reservations recommended

Kihachi is no ordinary Japanese restaurant. Chef-owner Ryuji "Mike" Kimura is passionate about fresh ingredients of the highest quality, and that passion is reflected in the appetizers that change daily, depending on his discoveries in the markets he frequents.

Written entirely in Japanese, the menu is cheerfully translated by the two English-capable servers.

The wine list doesn't live up to the food standards.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; ample parking

L'Antibes

772 N. High St., Short North

614-291-1666

Reservations recommended

www.lantibes.com

Under new ownership, L'Antibes is still the quietest destination in town, with the least-glitzy classic French food.

Recent highlights include duck cooked almost to a "confit" stage, simply roasted pheasant and striped bass over an intense saffron sauce.

Dessert? One can't go wrong with a pear poached in Gewurztraminer and coated with lemon yogurt.

The wine list has expanded, but prices have been rising.

Serving dinner Tuesday through Saturday, brunch Sunday; off-street and, on weekends (sometimes), valet parking (call ahead)

'M'

2 Miranova Place, Miranova Corporate Tower, Downtown

614-629-0000

Reservations recommended

www.matmiranova.com

The menu features mostly updated American dishes and steaks, and commendably showcases heartland ingredients.

Standouts include elegantly sauteed Amish chicken served over Ohio-grown root vegetables, and veal

loin with a classic shiitake-flavored meat-stock reduction.

The wine list -- huge but not inexpensive -- and covers an immense range of the wine world.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; valet parking

The Refectory

1092 Bethel Rd., Northwest Side

614-451-9774

Reservations recommended

www.therefectoryrestaurant.com

Look for regional products (locally grown herbs and exotic mushrooms, lake walleye); European catches (true English sole pan-seared in butter in the classic style with capers and lemon); Americana (Maine scallops); classic French (Paul Bocuse's great truffle soup); and game such as roasted ostrich with lyonnaise sausage.

Desserts aren't neglected, either: Current standouts include the spectacularly presented warm pear tart and house-made sorbets with fresh fruit.

The world-class wine cellar deserves special mention.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; ample parking

Rigsby's Kitchen

698 N. High St., Short North

614-461-7888

Reservations recommended

www.rigsbyskitchen.com

Seafood has always been a strong suit of the updated Italian menu and can include escolar kissed with saffron and served with mixed mushrooms; perfectly roasted rack of lamb accompanied by true braised carrots; and lasagna with a true Bolognese sauce.

The new dessert list is almost entirely house-made and includes budino, a type of butterscotch creme

brulee that tastes as it sounds, without being too sweet.

Wines are well-selected to pair with the menu, although many prices have increased.

P.S.: Best bread and butter in town.

Serving lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday; on-street and valet parking

Rosendales

793 N. High St., Short North

614-298-1601

Reservations recommended

www.rosendales.com

The high-energy urban-chic setting is reflected in the upscale cuisine that can modernize Provencal cod with a saffron "tea" infusion and serve Pennsylvania lamb two ways (as a loin and in shepherd's pie).

Cutting-edge cooking techniques are applied everywhere, including the dessert list's dairy-free coconut ice "cream."

The large wine list is well-chosen and food-friendly; its only handicap is a too-aggressive markup.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; on-street and valet parking

The Worthington Inn

649 High St., Worthington

614-885-2600

Reservations recommended

www.worthingtoninn.com

This restaurant avoids the pitfalls of sugar, salt and fat as well as any other kitchen in town. Thus, lobster ravioli (made in-house) and lobster tail are served with a Provencal-inspired broth instead of cream -- and a risotto made with locally grown lobster mushrooms balances the flavors of stock, cheese and Ohio corn along with the mushrooms.

Of special note is the deconstructed strawberry shortcake with white-chocolate mousse and whipped cream worth eating.

The wine selections are extensive and often surprisingly well-priced.

Serving lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday, brunch Sunday; on-street and off-street parking

The Next Tier

Barcelona

263 E. Whittier St., German Village

614-443-3699

Reservations recommended

www.barcelonacolumbus.com

In the sometimes-loud, usually busy, restored Victorian space and its unsurpassed, smoke-free outdoor garden seating, a Spanish influence prevails on plates small and large.

Try seafood stews, gazpacho and more than one version of paella. American foods are done equally well (buffalo steak, expertly chargrilled with a chipotle-and-coffee sauce), and tiramisu gets a white-chocolate makeover for dessert.

To its credit, the wine lineup has a good Spanish influence, but the markups are quite high.

Serving lunch weekdays, dinner daily; off-street and valet parking

Barnum & Tibbetts Prime Kitchen & Wine Bar

496 Polaris Parkway, Westerville

614-899-9720

Reservations recommended

www.hdrestaurants.com

The foundation of the menu is good steaks and other Americana such as an ancho-smoky pork chop

with lightly spicy fresh-peach salsa; walleye with a light lobster sauce; and large, sauteed scallops that are amazingly complemented by house-made shrimp-and-ricotta ravioli.

Sweets include a caramelly, tart-shaped take on banana whipped-cream pie.

The wide-ranging, well-chosen wine list boasts markups often less aggressive than the norm.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; ample parking

Doc Henderson's Restaurant

318 E. 5th St., Marysville

937-642-6661

Reservations recommended

www.dochendersonsrestaurant.com

It's well worth the short drive to this beautifully restored Victorian-era home, which features several elegant dining rooms quiet enough for conversation.

The menu mixes traditional (shrimp and grits, grilled rib-eye) and eclectically modern Americana (seared ahi tuna on wasabi potato with classic beurre blanc, and subtly aromatic pork and wild rice).

Desserts are also house-made, and the wine list has been chosen with care and features some of the lower markups around.

Serving lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday, brunch Sunday; ample off-street parking

Tucci's Wood-Fired Bistro

35 N. High St., Dublin

614-792-3466

Reservations recommended

www.hdrestaurants.com

The revitalized kitchen can offer familiar foods (nut-crusted walleye) in modern presentations (over white and green asparagus, with a vanilla-corn sauce); or do ingenious fusions (lobster-laden paella cooked risotto-style).

The wine pricing is better than at many other establishments.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; on-street parking and valet service Tuesday through Saturday

Latitude 41

50 N. 3rd St. (in the Columbus Renaissance), Downtown

614-233-7541

Reservations recommended

www.latitude41restaurant.com

The elegantly modern decor houses equally modern versions of American cooking done to standards that belie its Downtown hotel setting.

The kitchen has a fresh seafood pipeline that complements the equally well-done meats, salads and deconstructed desserts, all exquisitely presented.

The redone wine list has dropped some good selections and suffers from higher pricing and insufficient stocking depth.

Serving breakfast, lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday; breakfast and dinner Sunday; on-street and valet parking

Lindey's

169 E. Beck St., German Village

614-228-4343

Reservations recommended

www.lindeys.com

The original destination restaurant in German Village seems better than ever. There's a sparkle on much of the food, from properly dressed salads to imaginative combinations (walleye served with fennel, watermelon and arugula; monkfish cooked *osso-buc o*-style) to classics (fruit-centric tarte Tatin).

Expect to pay high prices for the above-average lineup of food-friendly wines.

Serving lunch and dinner daily, brunch Saturday and Sunday; limited on-street and valet parking

Scali Ristorante

1903 Rt. 256 (at Livingston Avenue), Reynoldsburg

614-759-7764

Reservations recommended

www.scaliristorante.com

This Far East Side gem features traditional Italian-American on most of the printed menu and rustic regional Italian among the numerous off-menu specials (egg fettuccine with porcini mushrooms, pieces of real Parmesan and hunks of fresh sausage).

The wine list is more extensive and better-priced than most.

Serving lunch Thursday and Friday, dinner Tuesday through Saturday; ample parking

Spagio

1295 Grandview Ave., Grandview Heights

614-486-1114

Reservations recommended

www.spagio.com

Few restaurants offer such a wide array of dishes -- from comfort food (Mother Seifert's meatloaf) to the latest in trends (napoleon of sliced beets layered with whipped goat cheese) -- and do them so well, avoiding excess fat, sugar or salt.

The fairly large wine list includes a nice number of food-friendly selections (though not at friendly markups).

Serving lunch and dinner Tuesday through Sunday, brunch Saturday and Sunday; off-street and on-street parking

Thom's on Grandview

1470 Grandview Ave., Grandview Heights area

614-487-5719

reservations recommended

www.thomsongrandview.com

New American styles can feature a lean, succulent duck salad as well as updates of classics such as veal Oscar (using beef instead of veal, in a spicy bearnaise sauce).

The wine lineup is food-friendly as well as wallet-friendly, featuring many good selections.

Serving lunch weekdays, dinner Monday through Saturday; on-street and valet parking

Z Cucina di Spirito

1368 Grandview Ave., Grandview Heights area

614-486-9200

Reservations recommended

www.zcucina.com

Voile and other fabrics divide the high-ceiling space into comfortable dining rooms that aren't too noisy (though lively).

Traditional and modern American cuisine (duck legs braised in olive oil, sturgeon roasted with citrus-infused oil) is served with an unusual variety of accompaniments.

There are also original takes on classic desserts, such as an apple crostada, its crust thin, crisp and nutty.

The nice wine selection is marred only by high prices.

Serving dinner Monday through Saturday; on-street and valet parking

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