

2009 BEST NEW RESTAURANTS

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Photo by Richard Maack

Posh's blood orange and avocado salad with bitter chocolate and watercress

FROM TASTY TACOS DOWNTOWN TO SUCCULENT SUSHI IN SCOTTSDALE AND FABULOUS FRENCH FARE ON THE FAR WEST SIDE, WE'RE SERVING UP 23 OF THE BEST NEW ADDITIONS TO THE VALLEY'S DINING SCENE. HOPE YOU'VE COME HUNGRY...

Price Key:

Most entrées:

\$ = under \$10

\$\$ = \$11-\$15

\$\$\$ = \$16-\$25

\$\$\$\$ = \$26 and more

1. America's Taco Shop

2041 N. Seventh St., Phoenix
 602-682-5627, Americastacoshop.net

Cuisine: Mexican

Price: \$

Atmosphere: This unassuming, pocket-sized site is filled with character. The red and yellow building is a historic 1920s-era bungalow that sits among a burgeoning row of independent restaurants. Wooden chairs and hardwood floors make it homey, large windows let in natural light, and art and chalkboards add color.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Terry Bortin and America Corrales Bortin

Why we love it: The vibe, the beef, the prices and the backstory. The concept came up during Mexican food meals at America's place during the couple's courtship. She was a first-grade teacher who picked up cooking skills from her mom while growing up in Culiacán, a Mexican city two hours north of Mazatlán. He graduated from North High, which is right around the corner from the restaurant, and worked in the restaurant industry. The result is a simple yet brilliant version of Mexican food that emphasizes citrus-seared beef.

Must-try menu items: carne asada burrito (\$5.45); ceviche (\$5.95); flan (\$3.50)

Drink to die for: We like to wash down all that spicy meat with a Jamaica margarita, made with agave nectar, dried hibiscus flower and Three Amigos tequila from the West Valley (\$4.50). Or try the iced horchata coffee, which blends homemade rice horchata with locally roasted Matador Coffee (\$3.50 for 32 ounces).

Secret of the house: Everything is built around carne asada, which is choice grade, cut in-house and marinated to perfection for exactly 10 minutes.

Hours: 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday; 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sunday

Happy hour/specials: 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday (\$4 margaritas, \$2 Mexican beers)

akes reservations: No

2. Amuse Bouche

17058 W. Bell Road, Surprise
 623-322-8881,
amusebouche.biz

Cuisine: French/International



Photo by Richard Maack

Carne asada burrito



Photo by Richard Maack

Cabernet burger

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: It's exactly what you'd expect – and want – from a modern French bistro: casual, cute and cozy. Perfect for a lunch date, intimate dinner or simple Sunday breakfast, it's the kind of place you'll gladly make a habit of visiting.

Outdoor seating: Yes, but it's limited and you can't drink alcohol outside.

Key players: Husband and wife chef/owners Snir and Kierstin Mor, who met at culinary school in Paris and ditched their day jobs to follow their true passion: food.

Why we love it: What started out as strictly a catering and take-out business quickly blossomed into a full-on, three-meals-a-day menu for one simple reason: amazing food. From the rich eggs Benedict at breakfast to the light goat cheese salad at lunch and

the belly-warming meatloaf for dinner, the Mors know how to spruce up simple food with splendid flavors. We also love that they set up shop in Surprise; it's not exactly the culinary capital of Arizona, but they've quickly put it on the map with their superb dishes.

Must-try menu items: If we could spend an entire day eating at Amuse (and trust us, we could), we would start with a plate of fluffy beignets, New Orleans style (\$6), followed by the aforementioned eggs Benedict (\$12), which oozes with creamy, dreamy (but not too heavy) Hollandaise. For lunch we crave the cabernet burger, a half-pound patty infused with cabernet wine and topped with Swiss cheese, crispy bacon and caramelized onions (\$11.95). And if it's the soup du jour, we'll take a bowl of the French onion topped with creamy Gruyère and Emmentaler. Dinner begs for the beef tenderloin with creamy potato purée and carrot butter sauce (\$24); or the just-like-mom-makes-it meatloaf (\$15). Knowing that the Mor duo is Paris-trained, we of course can't skip dessert, so we'll splurge for the chocolate pot de crème, served with vanilla whipped cream (\$6) or that heavenly blueberry bread pudding topped with homemade caramel sauce (\$6).

Drink to die for: Amuse is one of a handful of BYOBs in Arizona, so pick your poison, bring your favorite stemware if you'd like, and drink up.

Secret of the house: Call for the special of the day; it's often the best thing on the menu. Oh, and nothing is ever frozen, except perhaps the ice cream, so everything on the menu is unflinchingly fresh.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. to 8 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday; 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Sunday

Happy hour/specials: Take-out orders and catering are available.

Takes Reservations: Yes, by phone and for dinner only

3. Avalon

7707 E. McDowell Road, Scottsdale
480-656-0010, avalon-scottsdale.com

Cuisine: Contemporary American

Price: \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Awash in tones of cornflower blue and chocolate brown, Avalon gives off a classy, cool vibe without feeling stuffy. Ornate touches like an ivory beaded table separator, twisty decorative branches and changing orbs of colored light on one wall give the place a funky '60s vibe without the kitsch. Dim lighting makes it the perfect intimate dining spot – if only you can ignore the lackluster hotel parking lot outside.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key Players: Executive Chef Travis Watson, General Manager Domenic Lombardo, managing partner Ryan S. Leslie, and Chef d'Cuisine Charles Stotts

Why we love it: Perhaps the most underrated restaurant in the Valley, Avalon defies its dowdy McDowell location with an impressive ambience and – here's the key – unbelievably tasty food. Throw in a champagne Sunday brunch, live music and monthly chef demonstrations, and we wonder what's taking everyone so long to fall in love with this place.

Must-try menu items: Some dishes will change as of October 1, but the fresh, seasonal ingredients with explosive flavors will still dominate the menu. We crave the organic fresh vegetable salad with baby spinach, English peas, corn and Blue Hills Farms goat cheese (\$9); the polenta-stuffed jumbo prawns (\$12); the pan-roasted Alaskan halibut with carrot ginger purée (\$26); and the butter-poached Maine lobster with ricotta gnocchi and tomato confit (\$29). Then there are the drool-inducing desserts (all \$8). Lombardo says the rich Chocolate Decadence is their No. 1 seller, but we'll put our money – and our mouths – on the roasted banana bread pudding, with walnut toffee, banana gelato and salty caramel, any time.

Drink to die for: Any one of the martinis, mojitos or specialty cocktails is enough to make our mouths pucker with pleasure, but Lombardo recommends the Viceroy (\$10) – his own concoction



Photo by David Moore

Avalon

of fresh muddled cucumber and rosemary, mixed with passion fruit vodka, lemon juice and soda.

Secret of the house: The only thing Avalon doesn't make in-house is the bread (even though it is made only for the restaurant, no one else) and the gelato. Otherwise, everything, down to that savory-sweet cranberry-herb butter that sometimes comes with the bread, is made by the chefs. Dietary restrictions? No worries – the chef will still whip up something divine.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Sunday; brunch 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Saturday and Sunday

Happy hour: 3 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily, featuring a small plate menu and discounts on drinks; live music Wednesdays and Sundays during brunch; demonstrations and pairing classes with the chef during the third week of every month; champagne brunch Sundays

Takes reservations: Yes, by phone or online



Photo by David Moore

Slow-braised chicken mole and vegetable arroz with calabacitas and pumpkin seeds

4. Blanco Tacos + Tequila

6166 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale (The Borgata)
480-305-6692, foxrc.com

Cuisine: California-Mexican

Price: \$\$

Atmosphere: Perfect for a post-work happy hour or weekend lunch with friends, Blanco brims with a casual spunk. A color palette of bright blue and coffee brown meets a minimalist décor of weathered wood floors, dark wood tabletops and a long, inviting centerpiece bar. When the weather's nice, stake out a spot on the spacious patio.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key Players: Executive Chef Christopher Cristiano was mainly responsible for the menu, Beverage Director Regan Jasper developed the wine list, and Sam Fox created the overall design. That's Fox, as in

Fox Restaurant Concepts, as in the man with the Midas touch for successful local restaurants such as Bloom, North, Sauce, Olive & Ivy, True Food, etc.

Why we love it: For the same reason we love all Fox restaurants: It's fun and casual, perfect for people watching, and the food is solidly delicious. It may not be the most authentic Mexican food in town, but what it does (tacos and tequila, duh) it does exceptionally well, and we could stuff our faces with that creamy guac all day long.

Must-try menu items: guacamole "Blanco Style," made with avocado, roasted chile, cotija cheese and sea salt (\$9); carne asada tacos with grilled steak, cotija cheese and lime (\$12); salmon a la parrilla with chayote squash, roasted corn, spinach and chile verde (\$18)

Drink to die for: We prefer the pomegranate-grapefruit margarita (\$9) or the cucumber-kumquat fresca made with El Tesoro Silver, triple sec and fresh mint (\$10). The Blanco sangria, made with white wine, peaches, pears and lychee, also hits the spot on a sweltering day (\$8/glass, \$20 bottle). But don't forget the restaurant's namesake: There are dozens of options for blanco, reposado, añejo, ultra and mezcal tequilas.

Secret of the house: Even though those cheesy enchiladas taste like they're laden with lard, the secret here is that Blanco has cut out the fat. "We don't use traditional lard or heavy cheeses in our cooking," Blanco spokeswoman Debbie Porter says. "Our menu features fresh, seasonal ingredients. The result is still flavorful and satisfying but not as heavy."

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Get half-off cheese crisps, starters, house margaritas, well drinks and draft beers from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday.

Takes reservations: Yes, by phone or online

5. BLT Steak at Camelback Inn

5402 E. Lincoln Drive, Scottsdale (Camelback Inn)
480-905-7979, bltscottsdale.com

Cuisine: Steakhouse/French bistro

Price: \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Don't expect the typical testosterone-inspired steakhouse. BLT (named after its founding chef, Laurent Tourondel) has adopted a lighter, more modern atmosphere as part of Camelback Inn's recent \$50 million-dollar renovation. Think white linens, cushy throw pillows, oversized lamps dangling overhead, amber-colored wooden tables, and quaint French doors leading out to the patio. And the best accessory, of course, is the unparalleled view of Camelback Mountain.

Outdoor seating: Yes, with a fire pit

Key Players: BLT is the brainchild of world-renowned, French-trained chef Laurent Tourondel, whom Bon Appétit magazine named the 2007



Photo by David Moore

Gruyère-studded popovers

Restaurateur of the Year. Tourondel launched his bistro concept in the Big Apple in 2004 to rave reviews. General Manager Kristin Addis and Executive Chef Marc Hennessy run the Scottsdale ship.

Why we love it: The look of BLT alone has us swooning, with special props going to the old-school blackboard sprawling across the length of one wall to advertise daily specials. But let's be real – we're here to devour some serious cuts of meat, like USDA Prime, Certified Black Angus, American Wagyu and Japanese Kobe beef. There's also top-notch lamb, chicken and seafood to seduce us, and the heaping helpings of buttery, cheesy, carb-laden sides, like the seven different preparations of potatoes. We also appreciate the freebie nibbles that could fill us up if we're not careful, especially those mammoth, mouth-watering Gruyère-studded popovers.

Must-try menu items: Steak lovers, tuck in to the BLT cut bone-in strip loin for two (\$82). Seafood lovers will fall for the sautéed Dover sole (\$50). And sweet teeth, beware the peanut butter chocolate mousse with banana ice cream (\$10).

Drink to die for: Along with its extensive wine list and four quality drought beers, including a special Four Peaks BLT Pale Ale, there's only one drink here that you may actually die for – or from: the Cowboy Killer, which mixes Maker's Mark, sweet vermouth, Grand Marnier-soaked cherries and Peychaud's bitters (\$12). We're also fans of the Thyme in the Desert – a fruity, fizzy blend of Ketel One Citroen, muddled raspberries, lemon thyme and soda (\$12).

Secret of the house: Taking the "farm-to-table" concept to heart, the restaurant picks many of its ingredients straight from its on-site organic garden. And if you find yourself licking every juicy drop of steak sauce from the plate, get a hold of yourself: You can take home a bottle of BLT steak or barbecue sauce (\$9 each).

Hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 5 p.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Look for seasonal bar menus and steak prix fixe menus throughout the year.

Takes reservations: Yes, by phone or online



Photo by David Moore

Pulled pork sandwich with potato salad

6. Bryan's Black Mountain BBQ

6130 E. Cave Creek Road,
Ste. 2, Cave Creek
480-575-7155, bryansbbq.com

Cuisine: Barbecue

Price: \$-\$\$

Atmosphere: The cowboy chic décor features a pipe rail around the dining area, with old Western movies flickering across the overhead TV screens. Blues tunes wash over the room in the background. Resist the urge to kick yer feet up.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Chef/owners Donna and Bryan Dooley

Why we love it: Low-key delivery of well-priced, lip-smacking barbecue. Dry-spiced pork spare ribs (\$13.95 for half-slab, \$17.95 for full-slab) and a

totally tender beef brisket (\$11.95) win this food showdown. All of the barbecue is available for takeout by the pound, and every piece is lovingly cooked by Bryan Dooley himself. He has also amassed a nice selection of bottled craft brews – such as Oregon's Deschutes Brewery and Delaware's Dogfish Head – and hosts occasional tasting events to highlight them. The heated barbecue sauce dispensers also are a nice touch.

Must-try menu items: rib and meat combo (\$12.95); vegetarian "pulled" squash sandwich (\$6.50); olive coleslaw (\$1.50); chocolate-chip ice cream cookie (\$3.50)

Drink to die for: Sioux City sarsaparilla float (\$3.50)

Secrets of the house: While most barbecue houses focus on the sauce, Dooley says he focuses on quality meats and his secret rubs (a combination that he calls the "keys to the kingdom"). Also, Dooley's friends contributed hand-painted signs inside the restaurant as well as the large rack of antlers hanging on the far wall.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: No

Takes reservations: No

7. Chakra 4 Café and Apothecary

4773 N. 20th St., Phoenix
(Town & Country Shopping Center)
602-283-1210, chakra4herbs.com

Cuisine: Vegetarian/Vegan

Price: \$-\$\$

Atmosphere: Some say hippy, we say happy. The servers at this laidback café seem eternally pleasant and eager to please. Soothing music melts away stress, and with hundreds of herbs, teas and medicinal blends lining the shelves of the adjoining shop, there's plenty to pique your interest here. Dainty wooden tables with bright colors make you feel as if you're picnicking in a meadow

full of marigolds.

Outdoor seating: No, but outside tables are available throughout the Town & Country shopping center.

Key Players: Herbalist Kita Centella owns the café and the adjoining apothecary, while Chef John Heckel runs the kitchen. Heckel baked for AJ's Fine Foods and ran his own vegetarian catering company, but this is his first solo restaurant gig.

Why we love it: What's not to love about this holistic hole in the wall? Centella says 98 percent of their ingredients are organic and as local as possible, and it shows. Every salad, soup, sandwich and dessert tastes so fresh, clean and flavorful you can practically feel yourself getting healthier with every bite. Cookies and biscottis are locally made; only organic extra-virgin, unfiltered, cold-pressed olive oil goes into the food; Simply Bread supplies the warm, chewy slices that accompany most plates; all items can be made vegan; and we could study the extensive tea list for hours.

Must-try menu items: Centella's fave is the Mediterranean Rhapsody, a lively mix of massaged kale, tomato, olives, feta, red onion and raw cashew "cream cheese" all wrapped up in a sun-dried tomato tortilla (\$13). We'll second that recommendation, but we also can't get enough of the kale on its own, whether it's in the Kaleidoscope or Massage salad (\$14, \$11), two flavor-packed renditions of the leafy green super food. Also, don't miss the belly-warming Moroccan Nomad Stew (\$11), and for dessert, nibble on an addictive truffle (\$2.50 each), locally produced by Calio Confections. Our favorite flavor combos include ginger-lemongrass, basil-lime, blueberry-lavender and cardamom-mint.

Drink to die for: You can't go wrong with Chakra's wide variety of green, red, black and herbal teas, as well as several cleansing elixirs and tonics, but we'd die for their chai blends, which are made with a base of cinnamon, fennel, cardamom, coriander, ginger, orange peel, clove, star anise and white pepper. The blend gets simmered for five minutes and mixed with milk (dairy or non-dairy) and sweetener (honey or agave syrup). Centella recommends the Chocomaya Chai, which is made with dark bitter cocoa powder, cacao nibs and a hint of chipotle pepper.

Secret of the house: When Centella says they put heart into everything on the menu, she's not kidding. Even the water tank for Chakra's reverse osmosis system is emblazoned with uplifting words like "blessed water" and the symbol of the heart chakra.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., daily

Happy hour/specials: No, but watch for educational seminars at the café and shop throughout the month.

Takes reservations: Yes, by phone



Photo by Andrea Smith

A trio of dips, clockwise from top: golden hummus, black bean hummus and nutty "rawvocado," served with chipotle lavash and veggies



Photo by David Moore

Hangover breakfast sandwich

8. Daily Dose
4020 N. Scottsdale Road,
Scottsdale
480-994-3673

Cuisine: American

Price: \$\$

Atmosphere: Hip and modern, this cozy streetside eatery offers simple tables and elevated booths in the cool interior while setting aside a few outdoor tables along a busy Old Town sidewalk. Exposed rafters and the long bar make the place seem cavernous, and the bright orange color scheme helps stimulate our hunger (no, really, it's restaurant science).

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Matt and JenLyn Long

Why we love it: The Longs have a long tradition of taking traditional dishes and adding surprising (and tasty) twists to them. Take the eggs Benedict, for example, which gets punched up with chorizo crumbles under the Hollandaise sauce and a side of "DD hash" that sports roasted acorn squash and mushrooms. Servers don't hassle diners to leave - in fact, they can be downright open about encouraging you to stay. We also love the staff's willingness to accommodate tired and hot passersby with off-menu requests: On one visit, we craved a good milkshake and found none on the menu, so staff offered to whip up something with coconut ice cream. Oh, and breakfast is served until 2 p.m.

Must-try menu items: eggs Benedict (\$8.95); prime rib and crimini omelet (\$10.95); Daily Dose burger (\$10.95); the Hangover breakfast sandwich (\$9.95); banana split pancakes (\$9.95)

Drink to die for: You won't need a second opinion about this: Order the Second Opinion, made with orange vodka, chai tea and peach nectar (\$7.50, \$5.50 during happy hour)
Secret of the house: There is no microwave in the kitchen.

Hours: 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Wednesday; 7 a.m. to midnight, Thursday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., daily

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of eight or more for breakfast or lunch



Photo by Jake Johnson

Roast beef sandwich with mushroom soup

9. The Deli

18914 E. San Tan Blvd., Queen Creek
480-279-3546
thedeliqc.com

Cuisine: American

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Casual and cheery. The Mastyk family, which owns and operates The Deli, wisely included comfort settings with the restaurant's quality comfort food. Abundant sunshine flows in from numerous windows, lighting up the upscale-country interior. Knotty pine tables are covered with butcher paper, and the rustic wine shelves lining the dining area are made of the same material. Chalkboards feature specials and the latest batch of homemade ice cream. "We're an East Coast deli with a West Coast feel," Nicole Mastyk says.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Blake and Nicole Mastyk (chef/owners); Barry and Brenda Mastyk (co-owners); Barry Mastyk Jr. (co-owner and soup chef)

Why we love it: Because we love Napa and Sonoma, and what's not to love about having a piece of that here in the Valley? The food is tasty, simple and all natural, thanks to the Mastyks' emphasis on using locally grown produce for nearly all of the restaurant's needs and using no more than five ingredients in any ice cream recipe. Plus, it's family owned, so there's no formulaic franchise menu here. The items change monthly, offering simple food in complicated times.

Must try menu items: tomato and French onion soup (\$4 cup, \$5.50 bowl); prosciutto-wrapped mozzarella balls (\$4.50); roast beef sandwich (\$9); turkey sandwich with homemade sauerkraut (\$8.50); orange roughy with herb butter sauce (\$18); homemade ice cream (any kind, \$2 per scoop)

Drink to die for: house sangria (white or red), \$6 per glass and \$17 per carafe; Grey Goose vodka with ginger ale, cucumber and lime (\$7)

Secret of the House: The Mastyks make as much stuff from scratch as possible, and that includes the artwork and menus. To wit: They etched the restaurant logo into the wooden menu holders themselves, and Nicole tirelessly clipped photos of good-looking grub from various magazines to create the collages on the walls.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: 4 p.m. to 5 p.m. daily, every drink is half off; two weekly dinner specials, \$16 to \$20; third Wednesday of every month features three-course dinner with wine pairings, \$29.50 to \$39.50

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of six or more

10. District American Kitchen and Wine Bar

320 N. Third St., PHOENIX (Sheraton Phoenix Downtown Hotel)
602-817-5400
districtrestaurant.com

Cuisine: New American

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Sleek but not cheeky, the spacious environs of this hip new restaurant include tiger eye-striped marble table tops in the bar area and earth-toned color schemes throughout. Floor-to-ceiling windows look out on the corner of Third and Van Buren streets; in the cooler months, these become high-tops for better people-watching opportunities. The setting is perfect for a date, breakfast with the parents or post-game libations.



Photo by David Moore

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Chefs Nate Crouser and Frank Belosic; General Manager Heinrich Stasiuk

Why we love it: District touches all the bases. It offers weekly live music in the lounge, craft brews on tap and mouth-watering entrées for under \$25. It also proudly supports the local produce scene by incorporating it into tasty versions of American classics. In fact, it's all American. Try to order a Grey Goose vodka tonic here and you'll be steered toward niche American labels (although the hotel staff are happy to oblige special requests). These traits make

District more like a standalone restaurant, not some stale fixture inside a 1,000-room hotel. Its new menu comes out in October and will feature more sustainable and organic ingredients.

Must-try menu items: If they still grace the menu come fall, don't miss the eggs Benedict (\$16); Oak Creek Nut Brown Ale short ribs (\$23); blackened gulf halibut steak with blue crab fondue and hush puppies (\$21); and the whoopie pies paired with a bourbon malt shake (\$8).

Drink to die for: Down a District 320, made with Rogue gin, sparkling wine and lemon juice (\$12).

Secret of the house: Chefs set aside produce scraps for composting uses at a local produce farm in Scottsdale, which then uses the compost to grow produce for the restaurant. The farmer also helped them plant a garden on the hotel's fourth floor.

Hours: breakfast, lunch and dinner daily

Happy hour/specials: Monday through Saturday, 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.; half-priced wine on Sundays; more ridiculous specials if you follow Chef Crouser on Twitter

Takes reservations: Yes



Photo by David Moore

Heirloom chefs sketch future menu options

11. Heirloom
20775 N. Pima Road,
Scottsdale
(Market Street at DC Ranch)
480-515-2575
mculinary.com/heirloom

Cuisine: American

Price: \$\$\$

Atmosphere: Your friendly neighborhood bistro: burgundy- and butter-colored walls, wine racks galore, gorgeous stonework and breadstick bouquets. The jeans-clad waitstaff and hip soundtrack de-emphasize the white tablecloth aesthetic.

Outdoor Seating: No

Key Players: Chef/owner Michael DeMaria of Michael's at the Citadel and M Catering; Chef de Cuisine Taylor Domet

Why we love it: DeMaria and Domet breathe life into American cuisine, creating imaginative dishes that intrigue without seeming contrived. They've forged relationships with local farmers to serve up fresh, seasonal fare, and the menu changes monthly, highlighting the current harvest and even giving a sneak preview of the following month's crop to whet our appetites. The fish is sustainable, the beef is Arizonan or Nebraskan, and all the items (with the exception of a few international wines) are American. But all that would mean nothing if the food weren't so fabulous.

Must-try menu items: Start with the swoonworthy handmade cavatelli with calamari and white bean-tomato-shrimp ragu (\$14). The butterfish is a must – crisp on the outside, buttery inside and drizzled with a pitch-perfect tarragon pistou (\$18). Diver scallops (\$22) are wrapped in a wisp of bacon and served on a crab bolognaise that jets you to the Jersey shore with its sea-meets-Sopranos flavors (the recipe comes courtesy of DeMaria's New Jersey Italian Uncle Ray). Plump, juicy grilled prawns share a plate with a silky zucchini-eggplant-red pepper terrine stuffed with lashings of Parmesan. In the playful "Pork and Beans," (\$19) melt-in-your-mouth, no-knife-necessary Kurobuta pork cheek replaces the humble hot dog. And if the mark of a great dessert is its addictiveness, we defy you to take "just a bite" of the compulsively yummy custard-filled donuts on sublime lemon chiffon (\$7).

Drink to die for: Their by-the-glass selection includes Silver Oak, recently named the country's most popular cabernet by Wine & Spirits magazine and typically sold only by the bottle.

Secret of the house: Reserve the intimate chef's table for a view of the kitchen; seatings are at 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. in winter, anytime in summer.

Hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: No

Takes reservations: Yes

12. J&G Steakhouse
6000 E. Camelback Road,
Scottsdale (the phoenician)
480-214-8000,
jgsteakhousescottsdale.com

Cuisine: Steak/Seafood

Price: \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Back in the day, this spot was occupied by the venerable Mary Elaine's. The décor has changed, but the views are still stellar. A color scheme that includes purple, charcoal gray and sand meets materials like glass, wood and leather. The lighting is subtle and ornate, but the linens have given way to butcher paper. In other words, it's perfect for that



romantic date without some of the pretentiousness formerly delivered by Mary Elaine's.

Photo by David Moore

Rib-eye steak

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Owner/corporate chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten; Executive Chef Jacques Qualin; General Manager Michael Shapiro

Why we love it: It's a meat lover's delight with prime, top-shelf cuts of filet mignon and rib eye. The smoky chile dipping sauce is excellent, as is the caramelized and rare yellowfin tuna and the deliciously creamy potato gratin. On the drinks side, we love J&G's comprehensive wine list and its lineup of after-dinner concoctions. They feature obscure and tasty ingredients such as black walnut liqueur and two kinds of armagnac (brandy from southwest France) and calvados (apple brandy from northwest France).

Must-try menu items: chilled lobster (\$19); foie gras (\$18); Caesar salad (\$10); heirloom tomato salad (\$12); filet mignon (\$28 and \$36); rib eye (\$48 and \$80); J&G burger (\$16); short ribs (\$24)

Drink to die for: The Amelia (Russian vodka, St. Germain elderflower liqueur, blackberry purée, fresh lemon juice and a mint leaf, \$11)
Secret of the house: Even though it's a steakhouse, J&G flies fresh Dover sole in three times a week from the English Channel.

Hours: lounge opens at 4 p.m. daily; 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 5 p.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: There's no happy hour to speak of, but there is a three-course, \$35 prix fixe menu that can't be missed.

Takes reservations: Yes



Photo by Richard Maack

Metro Brasserie

13. Metro Brasserie

7114 E. Stetson Drive, Scottsdale
480-994-3663
metrosouthbridge.com

Cuisine: Country French/American South

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: A long hallway patterned with colorful floor tiles separates a row of street-view tables from the kitchen. Wood-paneled walls are adorned with unique streetscape photos that are seemingly etched in brushed steel, which hang below exposed rafters. The outside patio looks out on a small courtyard, with Waterfront condos rising nearby. The tables feature simple wicker chairs and white-linen tablecloths covered with butcher paper.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Bill DeGroot (idea), Fred and Jennifer

Unger (owners), Matthew Taylor (executive chef)

Why we love it: This Old Town restaurant gives diners a taste of French cuisine while remaining unpretentious. The décor is slick, and all of the seating offers great people-watching opportunities. Executive Chef Matthew Taylor was previously an understudy to James Beard Award-winning chef John Bech of Louisiana, so he has the right stuff.

Must-try menu items: oysters on the half shell (6 for \$12), fried oysters (\$12), onion tart (\$8), endive salad (\$9), moules frites (\$15), tagliatelle (\$17), cassoulet for two, pork cheeks for two (\$42); any dessert (\$7)

Drink to die for: It may sound simple, but the gin and juice here is anything but boring. It's made with watermelon Hendrick's gin, Campari and mint (\$10).

Secret of the house: The kitchen actually likes cooking for vegans and vegetarians despite a menu that favors meat, so just ask. Vegans take note: Everything fried is dipped in egg whites first.

Hours: 7 a.m. to midnight, Monday through Wednesday; 7 a.m. to 2 a.m., Thursday through Sunday

Happy hour/specials: No happy hour; try the late-night burger plus an imported beer for \$10.

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of six or more

14. The Mission

3815 N. Brown Ave., Scottsdale
480-636-5005
themissionaz.com

Cuisine: Latin

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Who needs designer pantalonies at this fiesta? Come in jeans and a bedazzled T and feast your eyes on the eye candy around you. Softly glowing chandeliers, candles and salt rocks ooze comfort from the ceiling and wall. Servers mix guacamole tableside. If El Guapo and his

banditos had this kind of treatment, they would have left the good people of Santo Poco alone.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key players: Brian Raab (partner/GM), Terry Ellsor (partner/CFO), Matt Carter (chef)

Why we love it: Chef Matt Carter offers a spicy spin on Latin dishes. Starters such as tableside guacamole and smoky flavored salsa warm up the belly; entrées feature spicy, hard-to-get peppers from Peru. The kitchen can still deliver with traditional items like chilaquiles while doing amazing things with succulent, spiced up pork. The sangria is some of the best in town. The Mission's one-year anniversary is coming up (October 15), so check for specials (such as four-course, off-the-menu meals with a tasting of three tequilas plus a cocktail for \$65).



Photo by David Moore

The Mission

Must-try menu items: short ribs (\$25), pork shoulder (\$32), scallops (\$28), tableside guacamole (\$12), roasted five-chile pepper soup (\$9), pork shoulder tacos (\$10), fried bananas (\$7)

Drink to die for: Primarita (fresh lime juice, splash of agave nectar, Partida tequila, splash of water – watch for the mojito version soon, \$13)

Secret of the house: Peruvian peppers come in through customs daily and require two months lead time. Chefs actually confit pork in duck fat.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., daily (kitchen hours)

Happy hour/specials: No daily happy hour, but bottles of wine, mimosas, Bloody Marys and Tecate beers are half off all day on Sunday.

Takes reservations: Yes



Photo by David Moore

Funghi (mushroom) pizza topped with truffle oil and goat cheese

15. The Parlor

1916 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
602-248-2480
theparlor.us

Cuisine: Pizza/Italian

Price: \$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Airy, bustling and always abuzz, The Parlor is better for friends and family than first dates. Blond wood tables, scored cement floors, chalkboard menus, an open kitchen and full windows shaded by star-shaped cement blocks add up to a casual-chic vibe befitting its CenPho setting. The space was previously the Salon de Venus beauty parlor (hence the name) and retains a few touches like retro paintings of coiffed women and a salon chair with blow dryer. In fact, much of Parlor is reclaimed or recycled: The table wood is from the roof, the wine rack is a repurposed sprinkler system, and some of the building materials came from nearby houses. (In addition to

the eco-deco, the water is heated by solar power, and the bar reduces its glass waste by not serving bottled beers.)

Outdoor Seating: Yes, in a shaded, plant-filled patio complete with fireplace.

Key Players: Aric Mei, whose parents own Nello's Pizza in Ahwatukee

Why we love it: Numerous elements go into making a pizza restaurant, but let's face it, only one thing matters: the crust. At Parlor, it's perfect – crispy, bubbly and slightly blackened on the outside, chewy-soft within, and not soggy in the center. We also appreciate the make-your-own pizza menu, where you can choose everything from the cheese to the sprinkling of herbs (we're partial to homemade mozzarella, olives, fresh arugula and dried oregano). Even the "set" menu is hardly that: Salads, pastas and pizzas all can be ordered in different sizes – perfect for mixing and matching courses.

Must-try menu items: Though the menu has a fairly extensive selection of pastas, salads and sandwiches, it's really about pizza. The Yukon Gold potato pizza (\$10/\$14) is the dark horse here: exquisitely flavored, with not too much starch despite the potatoes, and a subtle mélange of Gorgonzola, pancetta and leeks. Ask them to put an egg on top and you'll be in breakfast-meets-dinner bliss. Mushroom lovers will go wild over the funghi pizza (\$10/\$14), topped with earthy truffle oil and tart goat cheese.

Drink to die for: Start with a Garden Mojito (\$9), which gets Italianized with basil and cucumber. And nothing pairs better with your pizza than a glass of the Cannonball cabernet (\$8).

Secret of the house: Sit at the pizza bar and you might be served some complimentary pizza-related appetizers.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to midnight, Friday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Monday through Saturday, 3 p.m. to

6 p.m., all beers \$3; wines \$2 off.

Takes reservations: No

16. PastaBar

705 N. First St., Ste. 110, Phoenix
602-687-8704
pastabaraz.com

Cuisine: Italian

Price: \$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: After holding court at multimillion-dollar Tuscan villa-slash-restaurant Sassi, Wade Moises and Nick Gentry wanted this Downtown venture to have an approachable, urban feel – like a hip Milanese enoteca. The skinny red-and-white space is lit by bare lights and dosed with deviance in the form of a portrait lineup of controversial characters including Jim Jones, Rasputin and David Koresh. (Gentry insists they're not trying to make a statement; it's just some art their painter friend Luigi Venditti had lying around the house.)



Photo by Eric Casse: models provided by the Leighton Agency; hair and makeup by Elise Welsh; clothing provided by Joy Li Studio

PastaBar

Outdoor Seating: No

Key Players: Chefs Wade Moises and Nick Gentry, formerly of Sassi

Why we love it: Two words: handmade pasta. Once you've tasted these eggy, velvety noodles, you'll never look at dried the same way again. This is the type of food that makes eating out worthwhile – because seriously, do you really want to source Italian flour and local, farm-fresh eggs, form it into a dough, roll it out over a classic Italian chitarra pasta-maker or form it into pillowy gnocchi and stamp it with a wooden pasta comb, then combine it with the most exquisite of Italian and local ingredients like homemade sausage, farmers' market produce and Italian butter, when you can get it here for reasonable prices? We didn't think so.

Must-try menu items: This is Italian Italian food, not American Italian, so you may see a few unfamiliar ingredients, but the tastes are pure comfort. Everybody's favorites are orecchiette con saliccia (\$15), ear-shaped pasta rich with homemade sausage, greens and Pecorino; and feather-light ricotta gnocchi alla lupa (\$15) in sweet and spicy fennel sausage ragu. Bavette al cedro (\$11), with lemon, Italian butter and Parmigiano Reggiano, is an ode to simplicity. And fettuccini e finocchio (\$12) will send vegetarians to pasta nirvana.

Drink to die for: Jack Goes to Mulberry Street (\$12) is a mix of bright, deep, sweet and sour: Gentleman Jack whiskey journeys to Manhattan's Little Italy with the flavors of Carpano sweet vermouth, blood orange bitters and Amarena cherries.

Secret of the house: There are no secrets when it comes to the menu, Gentry says. Ask for the recipes and they'll give them to you. A bigger mystery is the \$100,000 bottle of Scotch above the bar, which Gentry inherited after it was found in the basement of an Arkansas mansion.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 12 a.m., Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 2 a.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Reverse happy hour 10 p.m. to close daily: \$10 for a pasta and appetizer, \$5 martinis.

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of six or more



Photo by Richard Maack

Chicken breast stuffed with homemade mozzarella, spinach and spices, served with sautéed vegetables

17. Pastis Delicatessen & EuroGrille

1935 S. Val Vista Drive, Mesa
480-926-3354
pastisaz.com

Cuisine: European

Price: \$\$

Atmosphere: Tucked away in a nondescript strip mall in east Mesa, Pastis is a welcoming little lunch and dinner spot for those craving something other than chain food. Pretty and personable, the café also houses a mini market full of European delicacies like hard-to-find cookies, coffees, jams, olive oils, pastas and smoked meats.

Outdoor seating: Yes

Key Players: Luka Muslin runs Pastis with partners (and longtime soccer buddies) Slaven Grubisha (the chef) and Steve Djekic, whose brother-in-law and sister own Va Bene in Chandler. With roots in Serbia

and France, Muslin wanted to bring a European sensibility to the east side of the Valley. "There's nothing like this on this side of town," he says. "We would have been just one of many had we opened in Scottsdale."

Why we love it: Pastis refers to the anise-flavored liqueur favored by the French as an aperitif or as a sociable drink shared with friends at the end of the day. It's an apropos name for a place with an affable vibe, which, coupled with Muslin's 'come one, come all' charm, we can't get enough of. Well, those sweet French crêpes, savory stuffed meats, gourmet salads and hearty sandwiches have something to do with it, too. It never hurts to inject Mesa with a dose of someone else's culture, and Muslin has delivered with his authentic modern European bistro.

Must-try menu items: Muslin praises the chicken Cordon Bleu – a lightly breaded breast of chicken stuffed with homemade mozzarella, ham and spices (\$14.75) – as both his favorite and most popular dish on the menu. In fact, there's plenty of stick-to-your-ribs stuffed meat to marvel at here, so go hungry. We also love the Chevapi – juicy Slavic ground sirloin links served with lepinja bread, chopped onions and homemade hummus (\$9.75) – and the stuffed Pastis burger (\$9.75), a plump patty packed with homemade mozzarella and served with fries and hot peppers (heart burn, be damned). On the sweeter side, you can't go wrong with the crêpes, which come with toppings like Nutella, bananas, strawberries, coconut, apricots and walnuts, among others.

Drink to die for: Pastis is the obvious choice, and if you've never savored the licorice-laden beverage, it's worth a sip. But don't ignore the unique beer selection, which boasts rare brews from Poland, Slovakia and Russia. Muslin also recommends a strong Serbian plum brandy for those who like a little kick with their meal.

Secret of the house: Muslin says he spends a great deal of time on each recipe, picking premium cuts of meat, seasoning them with special "European seasonings," and testing each dish until it's worthy of gracing the menu.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Friday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday through Sunday

Happy hour/specials: discounts on drinks and appetizers every day from 3 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.; live music Friday and Saturday nights; martini Wednesdays, \$3 house wine and discounts on bottles of wine each Thursday; Monday night football specials to come

Takes reservations: Yes, by phone

18. Posh

7167 E. Rancho Vista Drive, Ste. 111, Scottsdale
(Optima Camelview Village)
480-663-7674
poshscottsdale.com

Cuisine: Modern American

Price: Four courses \$45, eight-plus courses \$105

Atmosphere: Chef/owner Joshua Hebert modeled Posh after his favorite bars and restaurants in Tokyo. Think a bustling version of the movie *Lost in Translation* – sleek steel, grays, blacks and wraparound glass. Sit at the exhibition kitchen to watch the gastronomic theater or at the petite black tables looking out on the foliage-fringed modern architecture of the Optima Camelview Village condos.

Outdoor Seating: No

Key Players: Chef/owner Joshua Hebert, formerly of Dual in Gilbert

Why we love it: Posh is the blind date of the restaurant world: an adventurous exercise in trust. This is "improvisational cuisine," so there's no menu; you just tell the chef what you like and don't like, and he conjures up dishes so inventive they should be patented. "It's great to be surprised," Hebert says. "There's a mystique about it, and people have fun." We love the spontaneity, and the mystery doesn't feel risky because the results are so reliably sensational. However, Hebert cautions people not to fall in love with any of the dishes, because they probably won't see them again.

Must-try menu items: With no set menu it's anybody's guess, but here's a sampling from a recent visit: uni panna cotta – a sublimely creamy incarnation of sea urchin; pheasant pseudo-lasagna with homemade pasta and favas – reminiscent of a swanky, Italian chicken noodle soup; kangaroo with meaty mushrooms and glazed broccoli stems; and the "Posh Twinkie," a charming lemon cake filled with green tea mousse paired with a nest of spun sugar.

Drink to die for: With cuisine this innovative it's no wonder the cocktails are eye-openers. The Manhattan Transplant (\$12) starts off sweet and bourbon-y from Maker's Mark and vermouth, but what's that subtle sting at the finish? Chili pepper syrup. Feeling bold? Up the ante with a love-it-or-hate-it red curry mint julep (\$8).

Secret of the house: If you splurge on the eight-course dinner with wine pairings (\$165), you'll be rewarded with samples of 14 or 15 different wines. "It's a three-and-a-half-hour experience," Hebert says, "and we pour some pretty ridiculous wines."

Hours: 5 p.m. to close, Tuesday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Every night from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m., four courses go for \$35 (regularly \$45).

Takes reservations: Yes

19. Prado

4949 E. Lincoln Drive,
Paradise Valley (InterContinental Montelucia Resort & Spa)



Photo by Richard Maack

Foie gras torchon "brûlée" with huckleberry sauce and poached pear compote



Photo by David Moore

Prado

480-627-3004
pradolife.com

Cuisine: Spanish-inspired

Price: \$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: From the maroon- and mahogany-colored couches and sexy paintings in the Moroccan-inspired Mbar to the graceful Spanish arches and open fireplace in the main dining room to the colorful tiles and flowers in the fountainside patio, Prado's sumptuous Mediterranean décor wows. Luxurious yet comfortable enough to linger in, this resort restaurant is a destination in and of itself.

Outdoor Seating: Yes, with stunning views of the Alhambra-inspired pool area and Camelback Mountain

Key Players: Chef Claudio Urciuoli, formerly of Different Pointe of View

Why we love it: While most hotel restaurants wade in the culinary shallow end, at Prado we can't pronounce the menu items. And we love to be challenged, especially by easy-on-the-taste-buds selections like an antipasto of La Quercia culaccia, manchego, Castelvetrano and Empeltre olives, doce de tomate and Valenciano crackers. (Take that, spellchecker.) Where else in the Valley can you order black squid ink fideua (spaghetti-esque noodles cooked like a paella) with red snapper, I'toi onions and corona beans? Even a safe bet like lamb T-bone gets gussied up by merguez (spicy north African sausage), Taggiasche olives and nepitella (a Tuscan mint).

Must-try menu items: The menu says the paella feeds two, but we assume they mean two sumo wrestlers. It's cooked in the traditional flat skillet, studded with a daily changing smorgasbord of meats such as chicken, scallops, prawns, bacon or possibly all of the above. The Caprese "salad" (\$15) is reinvented as a stack of olive oil-drenched bread, creamy burrata cheese, slow-roasted tomatoes and, seasonally, sautéed radicchio. For dessert, feel like a Madrileño as you dunk cinnamon churros into pudding-like chocolate (\$8). Another tip: The daily specials are often the stars of the show.

Drink to die for: The Spanish Mojito (\$12) redefines the ubiquitous Cuban drink with the flavors of Spain and Morocco. Bartenders simmer figs, fennel seeds, star anise and sugar into a syrup, then muddle it with fresh mint and lime juices, anoint the mixture with Flor de Cana rum, and garnish it with star anise and a mint sprig.

Secret of the house: Ferdinand's Wine Cellar is available for private dining and features more than 300 reserve wines and 17th century doors from the medieval town of Sos del Rey Catolico, birthplace of King Ferdinand of Aragon.

Hours: Breakfast 7 to 11 a.m., daily; lunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., daily; dinner 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday at Mbar; \$5 house wines, house cocktails, beers and tapas

Takes reservations: Yes



Photo by David Moore

Sushi Roku

20. Sushi Roku
 7277 E. Camelback Road, Scottsdale
 (W Scottsdale Hotel & Residences)
 480-970-2121
sushiroku.com

Cuisine: Sushi/Japanese

Price: \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Much like its counterparts in Las Vegas, Hollywood, Pasadena and Santa Monica, Scottsdale's Sushi Roku is downright sexy. That one word pretty much sums up this hot spot, located just off the main entrance to the equally hip W Scottsdale Hotel. Black slate flooring, a leather-tiled bar, an oversized chandelier and a winding steel staircase suspended over an infinity-edge bed of water are just some of the flashy elements you'll find yourself surrounded by. It's the perfect setting for an intimate third date or a bachelor/bachelorette shindig.

Outdoor seating: Follow that winding staircase to a cozy rooftop patio adjacent to the W's sparkling pool.

Key Players: Executive Chef Tim Fields and General Manager Seth Glassman keep things flavorful, flirty and fun.

Why we love it: When we're in the mood to see, be seen and sip, Roku is our go-to spot. Throw in a bevy of kinky cocktails, an endless crowd of cougars, sex kittens and would-be swingers, and you've got the recipe for a great night out. This might be enough on its own, but the menu also happens to deliver some seriously tasty sushi and authentic Japanese hot plates.

Must-try menu items: Ignite the taste buds with a starter of Japanese yellowtail sashimi with chiles (\$15), fresh salmon daikon with caviar (\$22), or spicy hanabi tuna on tiny crispy rice cakes (\$12). We also love the homemade tofu steak with sautéed mushrooms (\$11), and we can't stop

popping those creamy bites of popcorn rock shrimp tempura into our mouths (\$14). In the mood to splurge? Try the premium Japanese Wagyu beef with grilled shiitake mushrooms and tomato maki (\$46). And, of course, there's an extensive list of sashimi, rolls and maki to make one fabulous sushi spread out of.

Drink to die for: Nothing pairs better with our sushi than the ginger lychee mojito, made with Bacardi rum, fresh mint, lychee fruit, ginger, vanilla and fresh lime (\$13). There's also a tempting selection of cold sakes and a few Japanese beer options to whet our whistles. If you're feeling extra saucy, order the Passion and Spice – a fruity, fiery mix of passion fruit vodka, essence of orange Curaçao, crushed jalapeños, orange slices and lemon juice (\$12).

Secret of the house: The best seat in the house is at the sushi bar, where brave diners are rewarded when they give themselves over to omakase (chef's choice). You won't be disappointed.

Hours: 6:30 a.m. to noon, Saturday and Sunday; 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through Friday; 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 5 p.m. to midnight, Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. daily, featuring \$5 drink specials, \$5 appetizers and a lengthier half-price menu of signature dishes

Takes reservations: Yes, by phone or online

21. Takeda Thai

10271 N. Scottsdale Road,
Scottsdale
480-483-5006
takedathai.com

Cuisine: Thai

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: A sexy metal exterior, marble tiles, granite tables, cherry wood accents and a wave-shaped banquette lend the small restaurant a modern feel, despite the antique-looking art. And the alternative rock/jazz soundtrack is a refreshing change from the somnambulant Muzak that permeates many Asian restaurants.



Photo by Richard Maack

Beef Salad

Outdoor Seating: Yes

Key Players: First-time restaurant owners Moulay and Sara Takeda

Why we love it: Takeda doesn't reinvent Thai food, but did it need to be? If you're looking for a pretty, modern restaurant serving fresh, authentic fare that strikes the right balance between spicy and sweet, this is the place. Some Thai restaurants intimidate with stern service and a litany of incomprehensible entrées. Takeda's friendly staff will help you navigate the already approachable one-page menu, which pares down the choices to a handful of favorites, plus some intriguing alternatives. And at \$7.95 for entrée, soup and egg roll, the lunch specials are a deal.

Must-try menu items: Start with the popular tom kha gai soup (\$8.95), a piquant broth of lime juice, galangal and lemongrass mellowed by coconut milk and studded with chicken and mushrooms. If you like the buffalo version, try the "angel wings," boneless wings stuffed with veggies and glass noodles zapped with a sweet chili dipping sauce. You can't go wrong with the beautifully presented red or green curry – not too spicy but oh so coconutty (\$13.95). And we love the pad kee mao (\$13.95), short and wide (read: user-friendly) noodles tossed with charred tomatoes and mixed veggies in a delicate spicy-smoky sauce.

Drink to die for: Thai drinks are calibrated to counteract spiciness. Go for a sweet Thai iced tea or Thaitini (Thai tea with vodka) or an easy-drinking Singha or Chang lager.

Secret of the house: It took Sara Takeda six months to develop the recipe for her coconut ice cream, and it'll take you about 60 seconds to devour it. We don't know what her secret is, but it's the freshest, most luscious version of this creamy treat we've ever had. And the sweet, sticky rice underneath will titillate your taste buds.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday;
11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday;
12 p.m. to 10 p.m., Saturday

Happy hour/specials: No

Takes reservations: Yes

22. True Food Kitchen

2502 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
(Biltmore Fashion Park)
602-774-3488,
foxrc.com/true_food_kitchen.html

Cuisine: International

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: True Food oozes warmth, comfort and minimalism all at once. Springtime colors of lemon and grassy green complement light wood tones, and the open-view kitchen adds some spectacle to an otherwise prim place.
Outdoor seating: Yes



Photo by Richard Maack

True Food Kitchen

Key Players: We have another winner from Sam Fox Restaurant Concepts (FRC). For this venture Fox recruited Executive Chef Michael Stebner, who created the healthy menu in conjunction with world-renowned health guru Dr. Andrew Weil. FRC Beverage Director Regan Jasper designed the all-natural drink list.

Why we love it: Even if Fox shies away from the term "health food," the nutritious menu is exactly what keeps us coming back. "True Food Kitchen is not a health food restaurant," he says. "But it does serve great-tasting food that also happens to be good for you." True. It's also evident that great care goes into each dish, emphasizing simple but bold flavors and local and regional ingredients. We also love that it's one of the greenest restaurants in town, and one of only a few restaurants that offers gluten-free dishes for our celiac comrades. We could go on and on, so here are just a few more reasons we want TF to be our BF: pizza crusts and pita breads made in-house with organic flour, spelt and flax seed; 13 vegetarian and five vegan dishes; plum tomatoes from Tuscany

on the pizzas; and takeout for diners on the go.

Must-try menu items: Everything is bite-worthy, but we especially love the wild smoked salmon with shaved radishes, lemon cream and wasabi peas (\$11); the fresh tomato and pasilla chile pizza with manchego (\$11); and the sashimi tuna salad with avocado, cucumber, tomato, edamame and ginger (\$14).

Drink to die for: You can't go wrong with a bottle of wine here since each one is chosen based on the wineries' commitment to organic, biodynamic and sustainable harvesting. We also love the house-made natural juice drinks, like the Cucumber Refresher made with cucumbers and honey lemonade, and the fizzy sodas, like the Mexican Buddha, a sweet concoction of hibiscus tea, yuzu juice and soda water.

Secret of the house: True Food claims to be the only restaurant in the nation to provide Olivello Juice, an extract from sea buckthorn berries that packs a powerful punch of natural antioxidants and other protective phytonutrients. This super ingredient shows up in some of the menu's elixirs, such as the Medicine Man.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: No, but look for educational courses on health and wellness hosted at the restaurant throughout the year.

Takes reservations: No, but a private dining room can be reserved for 10 or less.

23. Tuck Shop

2245 N. 12th St., Phoenix
602-354-2980
tuckinphx.com

Cuisine: Contemporary American

Price: \$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Most converted-house restaurants consist of a warren of tiny rooms, but open the chile-colored door of this pistachio-painted home and you'll enter a single, airy space. The effect is immediately soothing, enhanced by mellow music and the sight of the couch in the "reading room" nook in the corner. From that cozy perch, you can sip a glass of wine and admire how the subtle modern art blends seamlessly with the retro décor and the vaguely Swedish wood paneling that climbs up two walls and across the ceiling. Add a sleek, minimalist bar, and you have your new neighborhood hangout (even if this isn't your neighborhood).

Outdoor seating: No

Key Players: Architect-turned-restaurateur DJ Fernandes

Why we love it: Almost everyone who enters Tuck Shop wants to move in. One woman was apparently upset that she had only seen the place after renovating her loft, because she would have carbon-copied the design. The low decibels and high cozy-hip factor make it ideal for catching up with friends, and the inventive, shareable food further enhances conversation. We were skeptical of the menu concept – international comfort food tapas and larger "sharing plates" with a Southern bent, sort of. But we were happily won over by the clever execution and the surprisingly deft use of spices.

Must-try menu items: The Medjool dates stuffed with local Schreiner's chorizo and melted Gruyère (\$9) are calorie bombs, but are they worth it? Oh, yes. The spiciness of the sausage perfectly cuts through the dates' sweetness, and the stellar arugula salad underneath is a memorable garnish. Panko walnut-crusting Fontina cheese sticks (\$6) – a far cry from the stringy, boring mozzarella usual – pose a tasty dilemma: Which dipping sauce is better, cinnamon pear or smoky red pepper? Ultra-creamy New York Times mac and cheese (\$9) gets sophisticated with prosciutto and herbed breadcrumbs. And the crostini duo (\$9) features a delicious, imaginative pairing: tarragon-and-pink-peppercorn-flecked cucumber ribbons atop rye slices smeared with fennel cream cheese; and rosemary-balsamic roasted grapes on brie and multigrain bread.



Photo by Richard Maack

Citrus-brined fried chicken with white cheddar waffles and braised greens

Drink to die for: The unique gin and tonic owes its ginger color and pleasant bitterness to the bark-based quinine in the house-made tonic. The lemonade, ginger ale and sours are also homemade.

Secret of the house: Owner DJ Fernandes called his restaurant Tuck Shop (the term for a mom-and-pop convenience store in England, Australia and South Africa) because it was the name of his New England boarding school cafeteria. Once a month, the owner hosts a four-course prix fixe Sunday supper (\$35 plus \$14 for wine pairings); reservations only.

Hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: All day Tuesday through Thursday a select wine is \$5 a glass or \$20 a bottle.

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of six or more