



Kates' Greats

Toronto's 10 Best New Restaurants



The city's first lady of food shares her picks for T.O.'s latest and greatest culinary landmarks

CAPLANSKY'S CHEF ZANE CAPLANSKY

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Schlepping up a beer hall's dingy back stairs to a dark room decorated with old sports paraphernalia, several TVs tuned to sports, and a Playboy Bunny pinball machine, does not conjure visions of great food. But Zane Caplansky's deli above the Monarch Tavern is driving a smoked meat renaissance. Until Zane, the corned beef here? Feh. Between it and sawdust, not so much difference you would taste. Most delis use corned beef that has been injected with chemicals. If there's smoke involved in the process and they're making smoked meat, which is kissin' cousin to corned beef, it's fake smoke, just like the chemical "flavours" they inject into the meat. But Caplansky is meshuggah for smoked meat. No fake smoke or chemical injections for this guy. He dry-cures briskets for two weeks with pepper and spices and then smokes them over hickory for 10 hours, producing an amalgam of traditional corned beef and southern barbecue — smokier than the former and more fatty and less sugary than the latter. And the fresh rye for the sandwiches, oy veh.

12 Clinton Street 416-500-3852

NYOOD CHEF ROGER MOOKING

9

Only occasionally do cool and delectable meet in one place, and when they do, it's no surprise to see the long arm of Hanif Harji (of Blowfish and the delectable Kultura) and his chef Roger Mooking. Their newest opus is Nyood (pronounced nude), which is understated, quietly luxe, fun. We love the double-height stainless steel and glass French doors at the front, and the huge chandelier made from thick black wires and utility lights – the kind the mechanic takes under the hood of your car. When the French doors open in late spring, and our plates are full of chef Mooking's complex little bijoux, anybody can be cool. They do tapas (Who doesn't?). Mooking's octopus is startling in its tenderness; he tosses it with blood orange, shaved crisped Jerusalem artichokes, fresh basil and olives. Chef cures thin-sliced, very fine steak with olives, which leaves it raw but builds a thin crust of olive piquance, and serves it over shaved citrus-marinated fennel with grilled young radicchio. He has a suite of five

fabulous garnished flatbreads built on tender house-made dough. Such is Nyood's collection of delights.
1096 Queen Street West 416-466-1888

8 MENGRAI THAI CHEF SASI MEECHAI-LIM

Asian fusion is the new mish-mash cuisine, with a little Japan, a soupcon of Korea, a dash of Vietnam and a touch of Thai. The result is gummy pad Thai, simplistic curries drowning in coconut milk, green mango salad innocent of pizzazz. Enter Sasi Meechai-Lim, chef/owner of Mengrai Thai, giving us the straight goods from northern Thailand. She deep fries morning glory vines in barely there tempura batter, to serve in a great crispy tangle alongside spicy fragrant pumpkin soup, with sweet/hot chili sauce. She sits one huge shrimp upright on a plate, bathed in pale green aromatic curry based on pureed avocado, Thai ginger and basil, coconut milk and lemon grass. For garnish she uses asparagus and cherry tomatoes. Typical Thai? Not so much. How many Thai cooks would put fresh peaches in lamb curry, taking care to avoid overcooking the peaches, but getting the lamb fork-tender and tamarind sweet/sour? Al dente sugar snap peas, the occasional alfalfa sprout, and other local veg pop up everywhere in Sasi's curries. Deep fried ungreasy snapper filets come in sweet/hot red curry with al dente broccoli, green beans and cauliflower, unsullied by the excess of coconut cream that usually makes this dish dull. Real fusion happens when a chef cooks the recipes of her home but uses local ingredients.
82 Ontario Street 416-840-2759

7 GRACE CHEF DUSTIN GALLAGHER

Lesle Gibson opened Grace in the renovated space where Xacutti flamed out. The walls are turquoise, the tables reclaimed Douglas fir, and the sweet little dining courtyard framed in warm wood is ablaze with yellow begonias. Chef Dustin Gallagher's six years under Susur Lee show in every bite: Some chefs love meat, some prefer fish; this guy makes gastronomical love to both. Even cheap cuts of meat are putty in Gallagher's hands. His barbecued short ribs recall the glory of Xacutti's pork ribs, thanks to big flavour and fall-off-the-bone texture. By serving the fabulous ribs with sweet potatoes and coleslaw, chef does classic Southern American cooking renovated with technical precision. His sweet potatoes are small roasted cubes, almost caramelized and jazzed with mint leaves. His coleslaw has citric bounce. Chef's work with fish is equally careful. He poaches halibut in oil and serves it with salad of fennel with citrus. He sears sea bream and puts it atop fat spring asparagus and a purée of sweet potatoes and chive butter. The retro theme continues with dessert. He reinvents Philly cheesecake by lightening it and topping it with house-made fruit preserves. His carrot cake is ultramoist and garnished with mascarpone ice cream and four little discs of rich orange honey butter. But it's the cookies 'n' milk collection that most exemplifies Grace's mission: Retro redone better. Soft, smooth peanut butter cookies, crispy chocolate chip cookies and not-Oreos: two thin chocolate wafers sandwiching good white icing (as opposed to the industrial white filling that launched a thousand high school romances). Grace by any standards.
503 College Street 416-944-8884

6 LOIRE CHEF JEAN-CHARLES DUPOIRE

Now is the time of the bistro, and Harbord Street is Toronto's new Restaurant Row. Some give that moniker to Ossington, but it is the new Clubland – more bar than bistro, whereas Harbord is for foodies. Loire is the quintessential French bistro, a tiny room presided over by Sylvain Brissonet, a charming Gallic gamin. The \$16 burger (lamb or beef) is juicy and tender, made divine by intense tomato jam and melted Quebec brie. The Loire kitchen, in the hands of chef Jean-Charles Dupoire, is loyal to French bistro classics but he jumps up the flavours with New World pizzazz. His mussels are perfectly cooked and the savour of the usual white wine sauce is leveraged with chorizo, saffron and red peppers. His cauliflower soup is deeply rich and creamy and comes with a golden pile of briefly deepfried ungreasy cauliflower florets. The frog legs are tender little darlings in house-made barbecue sauce that is hot, sweet and vinegary. Nineteen dollars buys carrot kale risotto, which is a model of small but mighty flavours and impeccable texture, with a chevre foam cloud as a moat around it. Bon Appetit!
119 Harbord Street 416-850-8330

BLACK HOOF **CHEF GRANT VAN GAMEREN**

5 Fulfills so many needs it would have been ridiculous if the place weren't the busiest new resto in town. It's inexpensive, hence recession-proof. Location, location, location: In the hippest part of town – downtown west. Informal and cool-looking. But most importantly, people crave the comfort of salt and fat especially when times are tough. They take no reservations, but if you show up they'll call you on our cell when a table is ready. Chef Grant Van Gameren (ex Lucien, Amuse-Bouche, Habitat) serves long wooden platters of the best charcuterie in town: Silken whipped duck pate, lean complex rabbit terrine, moist cured pork loin with a moat of jazzy salami around it, rich deep bresaola, perfect prosciutto, great spicy salamis and chorizos. From his tiny hot kitchen issues an almost erotic parade of mostly pork-based cured and smoked meats. Even the things that sound like you would never eat them are supernal: such as testina, which is pig's head transformed into the best grease I've eaten since puberty: Crisped to crackling on the outside with sweet pink pig meat inside, alongside it tiny French lentils perfectly cooked and artfully spiked with carrots and garlic. Can't stop eating it. Move over foie gras, testina is here.

928 Dundas Street West 416-551-8854. No credit cards.

HARBORD ROOM **CHEF CORY VITIELLO**

4 It channels a hip London wine bar. The restaurant is tiny and the servers warm and attentive. Seventies soft rock plays. Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and moist citrus-cured salmon with horseradish cream and fennel/radish salad? Have I died and gone to rock 'n' roll bistro heaven? Chef Cory Vitiello cut his teeth at Scaramouche before cooking at the Drake, and his first posting shows. Deep rich lentil soup with braised lamb shank and goat cheese cream is as flavourful a soup as possible. Calamari, clams and chorizo is what happened when a downtown hipster met Portuguese clams with pork: It's spicy, strong and ungreasy (unlike its Portuguese inspiration) with über-tender calamari and properly cooked fresh clams. Barely seared tuna sits pretty in a pool of high-flavoured saffron, chili and lime broth, and their Caesar salad is an impeccable underdressed delight topped with oven-dried Niagara prosciutto, which is a cross between ham and a French fry. Who would have imagined how much flavour could be packed into pumpkin risotto (thanks to pecorino, pine nuts and crisp sage leaves)? Roast chicken breast is moist and crisp-skinned, with a marvellous puree of Jerusalem artichokes (spiked with apple and vanilla) surrounded by a moat of deep brown foie gras sauce. The ultimate comfort food.

89 Harbord Street 416-962-8989

OMI **CHEF JOHN LEE**

3 Chef John Lee, long of Church Street omakase fame, is doing better than ever in his elegantly spare new digs. His sushi is superlative, creative but never over the top. Creamy edamame soup and sushi make a fun dinner, but give chef Lee \$65 and the omakase parade goes on and on. His signature is scallops barely kissed by a blowtorch and dressed with tobiko, scallions and wasabi. He sits these succulent babies on miniature sushi pizza. Inhale slowly. He smokes soy sauce by burning hickory wood and then pouring the soy over it and filtering it through a coffee filter to remove the sediment. The smoky soy on its own is unpalatable, but dip a little buttery big-eye tuna in it and the contrast of deeply sweet rich raw fish against smoky soy is like putting Johnny Depp against a Caribbean background. For dessert, say goodbye to green tea ice cream. Omi's signature is ice cream sandwich built of carp-shaped waffles (!) holding vanilla ice cream layered with sweet red bean paste. Creativity is John Lee's middle name.

243 Carlton Street 416-920-8991

NOTA BENE **CHEF DAVID LEE**

2 In Paris and New York star chefs open satellite operations where they mark down the great stuff in informal surroundings. Toronto has not seen much of this — until Nota Bene, which is to Splendido's chef David Lee what Atelier Robuchon is to Paris chef Joel Robuchon (at least, it was until David Lee and partner Yannick Bigourdan sold Splendido) — an informal room where mere mortals can afford the maestro's opus. Taking it down a notch is almost a joke: Duck salad is divinely crispy duck shreds atop crunchy green papaya slaw

jazzed with bitter sumac and sweet coriander, gentled with toasted cashews. The apps are all like that – relatively inexpensive ingredients for painless prices, packing big flavour punch. Gourmandizing thrill-seekers adore octopus salad: Fat tenderized chunks of octopus with lightly smoked green peppers, sweet, grated young fennel in contrast to bitter green rapini and piquant olives. Comfort food rendered elegantly continues with mains: Suckling pig and boudin noir tart (with the texture and mouthfeel of a great mousse) is what happened when a real chef took on pork.
180 Queen Street West 416-977-6400

MADELINE'S OWNER SUSUR LEE

1 When Susur Lee left Toronto for New York last fall, his farewell gift to Toronto was Madeline's, a luxe remake of a '50s Chinese restaurant, with tongue in cheek: Red and green brocade flocking, ornate wooden screens. And superlative food. Surprising that in such a Sinophilic town as Toronto, with Chinatowns in three corners of our compass, it took till now for us to get nouvelle Chinese. And who better than Susur to do it. His heart is Chinese, his mind French, his cooking a magical fusion. Not to be missed is crispy lobster beurre noisette, chili lime, egg, shallot, lemon balm in lettuce wrap. This is a big fat nugget of sweet perfect lobster in gossamer egg batter with a hint of brown butter, in a crisp lettuce nest. Crispy garlic Cornish hen with gorgonzola cheese sauce and sautéed apple is super-juicy hen with skin so crisp it's almost Peking duck, and caramelized apple with delicate gorgonzola sauce. They seduce with ruby red duck breast with perfectly balanced honey chili orange glaze. It doesn't get better than this. We find the reservation policy irritating: One can dine at 6:30 or 8:30 but not at 7 or 7:30. But the fabulous food and bistro pricing make Madeline's irresistible.
601 King Street West 416-603-2205

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