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50 Best Restaurants 2010

You can't dine out four times a week without developing an opinion or two. And when it comes to local restaurant recommendations, guidebooks and concierges have nothing on our well-fed staff. High-end or casual, veteran or upstart, these 50 kitchens have earned a spot on our shortlist of great eats.

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By Donna Garlough, Alexandra Hall, Andrew Putz, and Amy Traverso

Over the year, we've heard plenty of opinions on the top places to dine. We've scrutinized "hot lists," read the daily food blogs, endured tireless pitches from overcaffeinated publicists, and polled hotshot chefs on where they like to go on their nights off. We've even aggregated the ratings from all the professional critics in town, as well as the amateurs Yelping their way to free meals. But in our quest to create this year's definitive list of great restaurants, one thing became clear: No one knows Boston's food scene better than us, because no one dines out more than we do.

And so we set out to explore the region's premier gustatory offerings on our own terms, looking for the spots that deliver elevated cuisine, consistent execution, and terrific atmosphere. We sniffed out new eateries and retested venerable institutions in search of the crème de la crème fraîche. Hundreds of dinners (and in the case of one staffer, $5,000) later, we present you with this: the 50 places every Boston food lover must eat at least once. Our waistlines are our sacrifice; great meals are your reward. Go forth and dine well.

Abe & Louie's
Big, loud, beefy fun

This place has everything a testosterone-filled steakhouse should: gargantuan portions, boisterous clientele, and oversize leather banquettes. Eschewing the trend toward gamy, grass-fed, free-range beef, Abe & Louie's opts instead for the proven pleasure of corn-fed, midwestern USDA Prime. The result? The kind of pure gluttony that's kept customers coming back for 12 years.

Beacon Hill Bistro
A classic bistro with an in-season spin

When we heard that longtime chef Jason Bond would be departing the restaurant this fall, we crossed our fingers and hoped his brand of French bistro cooking with a seasonal take would survive him. Thankfully, Matthew Molloy (formerly of Lumière) has made the transition seamless, and the bistro continues to offer exceptional fare — roasted-chestnut-and-sage pappardelle; tea-cured duck breast with sorrel — in a casually elegant, light-filled dining room.

Bin 26 Enoteca
Tasty small plates and fantastic pours

Every neighborhood should have a wine bar like this one. Run by brother-sister team Babak Bina and Azita Bina-Seibel, Bin 26 certainly has an ample list, with nearly 100 by-the-glass wines, ports, sherries, and dessert wines, all available in pours of several sizes. Don't be intimidated, though; the well-trained staff will guide you through. You can make a whole meal of the starters, from the crisp, ungreasy saffron risotto balls to the bruschetta with mushrooms, garlic, and fontina. The perfect way to end your dinner? More wine, of course.

Bistro 5
Italy by way of the 'burbs

It's the pride of West Medford, for good reason: Vittorio Ettore's modern Italian menu is absolutely worth the trek, with hands down the best homemade gnocchi around (and we've tried them all); addictively spicy Wellfleet clams with pancetta; and a sea-scallop risotto accented with grapefruit. The mood is as relaxed and unpretentious as the food is serious, and the prices (all entrées are under $30) make this a bargain compared with in-town restaurants of similar quality.

The downstairs bar at Bistro du Midi. Photo by by Keller + Keller.

Bistro du Midi
Light, polished Provençal cuisine

For years the restaurant space in the posh Heritage on the Garden building was regarded as cursed—Biba didn't last, and two incarnations of Excelsior faltered. But then restaurateurs Ken Himmel (Grill 23, Harvest) and Marlon Abela (New York's A Voce) teamed up on a new southern French concept, which they placed in the capable hands of chef Robert Sisca. It's been a smash hit, and the spot now hums nightly with happy diners supping on bouillabaisse, ratatouille, and some of the finest fish dishes in town.

Blue Ginger
Wellesley's Asian-fusion mainstay

More than 12 years after Ming Tsai first came on the scene with his nuanced take on Asian-French fusion, it's nice to see that the sole restaurant in the multimedia Tsai empire still earns raves. The now-classic dishes, such as garlic–black pepper lobster and miso-and-sake-marinated butterfish, stand the test of time, and the excellent service is proof of how smoothly a dining room can operate when it's run by seasoned pros.

The Butcher Shop
A star chef's ode to all things meat

If you're not squeamish about big hunks of tenderloin and rib roast, start your visit to Barbara Lynch's butchery/wine bar/ bistro by perusing the display cases of meat in the back—in their raw way, they're beautiful. Then sit down and dig into those same cuts, prepared with Lynch's signature French/Italian sensibility: fresh burrata-cheese peperonata; house-made pâtés and terrines; rib-eye in beurre rouge (a madeira sauce). The by-the-glass wine list alone is worth a visit.

Clio
Whimsically upscale Back Bay fare

Boston's not much for experimental cuisine, and what we do have is fairly mild-mannered. But when we want our dinner to surprise and amuse, we head to Clio. Chef Ken Oringer's menu utilizes molecular-gastronomy techniques (foams, gelées, and "dusts" of all kinds) to highlight seasonal ingredients in palate-provoking ways. Spring for the tasting menu, if you can.

Coppa
The hot spot for pizza, pasta, and pork

Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette are one of this town's great culinary pairings, like lobster and butter, or peanut butter and Fluff. Together, they have produced some of the hottest dining spots in Boston—places where the food is excellent, but no one forgets to have fun. At this cozy (some would say too cozy, given the long waits) enoteca, they serve superlative wood-fired pizzas, big tubes of paccheri pasta in rich lamb ragu, and house-cured terrines and charcuterie that'll make any carnivore swoon.

Craigie on Main
The king of farm-to-table fare

Nearly every area restaurant is name-checking its food producers these days, but chef Tony Maws paved the way for sustainable dining in this city. He not only showcases the finest of area farms, he's also obsessive about using ingredients others overlook—cod cheeks, sweetbreads, cockscombs—and refuses to serve tomatoes out of season. (Finicky eaters, don't fret; he also grills up a mean burger.) The reward for his obsessiveness? Meals you won't get anywhere else.

Dante
Modern Italian meets killer views

Conventional wisdom holds that hotel restaurants are subpar. Ditto spots with skyline vistas. Armed with an urbane Italian menu that's consistently sublime, Dante de Magistris continues to defy both rules at his eponymous eatery in Cambridge's Royal Sonesta hotel. He riffs on chicken Marsala by studding it with chante-relles and black trumpets; serves ricotta-and-brisket-filled ravioli with one of the brightest-flavored Genovese sauces this side of Liguria; and coaxes a sweetness from lemon sole with fennel that just may haunt your dreams.

Eastern Standard
Mater of all trades

When someone asks us where to eat, nine times out of ten our response includes Eastern Standard. What other restaurant could fold in a pregame Sox crowd, the business set, and cocktailing twentysomethings with such finesse? Eastern Standard is one of the city's great something-for-everyone haunts. Since executive chef Jeremy Sewall signed on last year, he has livened up the brasserie menu, particularly the seafood offerings (seared salmon with Marcona almond pesto; day-boat scallops with tasso ham and spicy corn).

Erbaluce
Italian sensibilities, locavore tendencies

Night after night you'll find chef Charles Draghi in the kitchen, and his partner, Joan Johnson, at the hostess stand. Draghi's calligraphed menu changes every day based on whatever gems he's nabbed from the farmers' market and his local purveyors, and draws heavily from his family's Piemontese roots. He visits every table and yammers exuberantly about his daily favorites—one night it's razor clams with garlic scapes; another time it's heirloom spotted pig or handmade ravioli. If every plate seems like a labor of love, that's because it is.

51 Lincoln
Newton Highlands' neighborhood gem

Eclectic. Funky. Creative. These ain't words one usually associates with the 'burbs, but they're impossible not to employ in describing chef Jeff Fournier's 51 Lincoln. From the décor to the desserts, this is not your father's suburban restaurant. The best dishes come with a twist (watermelon steak), while the service comes with a sense of professionalism that'll make you forget you're a stone's throw from the Chestnut Hill Mall.

Grill 23
The sophisticate's steakhouse

Shrimp cocktail? Check. Dry-aged rib-eye? Check. Potatoes mashed, hashed, and fried? Of course. Grill 23 has all the basic steakhouse fixings covered well. But what takes it to the next level is chef Jay Murray's interest in pushing diners beyond typical bar-and-grill fare. Branch out with his beef-cheek gyros, any sashimi or tartare on the menu, or less-conventional sides like gingery beets. Your companions ordering steak and spinach will no doubt leave happy; you, on the other hand, will be on cloud nine.

Hamersley's
So much more than the chicken

Sure, it's legendary. Sure, its ultramoist meat and crackly-crisp skin are breathtakingly good. But limit yourself to chef Gordon Hamersley's signature roast chicken and you're missing out. At his long-standing South End restaurant, Hamersley produces some of Boston's most reliable bistro fare—intriguing but not-too-out-there dishes like wild-mushroom, ricotta, spinach, and soft-egg lasagna with white truffle, or rabbit and bacon braised in red wine. Coupled with a prime location on strollable Tremont Street, it's a no-fail recipe for date night or dinner with visiting friends.

Harvest
Boston's mothership for seasonal cuisine

Before there was Craigie, L'Espalier, Lineage, or anyone else now waving the locavore flag, there was Harvest. From 1975 on, the Harvard Square restaurant has been a training ground for great chefs, breeding in all who passed through an appreciation for in-season fare. Now under the helm of Mary Dumont, Harvest continues to deliver a refined take on classic dishes, such as whole roasted lobster with fingerlings and watercress, or bavette steak with corn-and-cranberry-bean succotash. In winter, nab a toasty table by the fireplace; come spring, the hot seats are on the patio.

Hungry Mother
Southern hospitality and good, strong drink

Eight types of bourbon and six types of rye. Shrimp and grits. Cornmeal-crusted catfish. Stomach growling yet? Don't worry, there's plenty to go around. The team behind this southern-themed Kendall Square eatery has done everything in its power to create a homey place that scoops you up, showers you with love, and feeds you till your belly pops. Start slow with the boiled Virginia peanuts, ease into dinner with a No. 99 cocktail—bartender's choice—and save room for the plum pie. There you go, sugar. Isn't that nice?

Il Capriccio
Waltham's tasty little secret

If hip, urban, and trendy is what you're looking for, Il Capriccio isn't going to be your thing. If flawless northern Italian fare made with seasonal ingredients (complemented by one of the area's most exacting wine lists) is, then this Waltham restaurant just might become your favorite spot. Don't miss the rich, savory porcini soufflé; when the food's this good, who cares about the scene?

Il Casale
Even better than Nonna used to make

We could fawn ad nauseam over the unctuous burrata or the sweet-tart swordfish with eggplant caponata. But overwrought praise just seems out of place at a family-run Italian spot far more about unfussy comfort than grandiose statements. That the family in question happens to be the de Magistrises (Dante, brothers Damian and Filippo, and dad Leon) explains how, for all its hominess, Il Casale's simplicity still comes with a side of style.

L'Andana
Steaks and chops with an Italian twist

Who says you have to live downtown to eat well? Chef-owner Jamie Mammano found that by heading out to the 'burbs and far from city zoning restrictions, he could build the wood-fired grill of his dreams. This means that the rib-eye with roasted garlic has a flawless char, and the grilled swordfish with olives and cured tomato is perfectly smoky. The service has urban polish, and the polenta pound cake is worth saving room for.

L'Espalier
The high roller's playground

For the longest time, we didn't want to like L'Espalier. Compared with its previous incarnation in an old-fashioned brownstone, the reopened restaurant in the Mandarin Oriental seemed needlessly sterile and pretentious. Where's the charm? we wondered. Well, we've found it—on the plate. Chef Frank McClelland continues to take diners on a gustatory ride via fresh ingredients from his own farm, prepared with impeccable technique. (The sauces? To die for. And don't get us started on the ultramodern desserts.) Now that diners can focus on the food instead of the frilly surroundings, every bite is a revelation. Yes, dinner will set you back a bundle. But it's as worthy as ever of its price tag.

Lineage
A paean to New England–grown food

Over the years, despite a parallel stint at Eastern Standard (as well as the new Island Creek Oyster Bar), chef Jeremy Sewall has kept his welcoming restaurant running with nary a hitch. Alongside his wife and pastry chef, Lisa Sewall, he's churned out some of the city's loveliest dishes. As always, he's a maestro with area produce and local seafood: The Dijon-crusted haddock, flanked by lobster caught by his cousin Mark, deserves its own cult.

LumiÈre
A French take on local ingredients

At many restaurants, eating sustainably feels like an exercise in virtue. Eating that way at Lumière feels like an indulgence. Chef Michael Leviton is as fanatical as anyone about where his ingredients—humanely raised lamb and pork, New England shellfish—come from. But his approach is pleasant, not preachy, and his French preparations are classic, not trendy. At $65, his five-course tasting menu is a value, and his $35 three-course prix fixe is a steal.

Market's Berkshire pork chop with pistachio pesto and roasted cauliflower. Photo by Keller + Keller

Market by Jean-Georges
Creative fusion from a globe-trotting chef

Our local outpost of Jean-Georges Vongerichten's global empire is the rare restaurant that manages to sound way more boring than it actually is. With its sleek design and glitzy W hotel locale, Market is the perfect special-occasion dining spot for when you don't actually have a special occasion. The menu is accessible but refined—it emphasizes local produce and seafood, naturally—and truly excels when evoking Vongerichten's Asian influences, as with the striped bass in a sweet-and-sour broth, and the crispy clams with basil salt and sweet chili dipping sauce.

Menton
The next level of fine dining

When chef Barbara Lynch announced the opening of Menton, she called it a "special occasion" spot. Seven months after its debut, we're calling bull. Sure, the four- and seven-course menus, at $95 and $145, are a splurge. But it's far more than a gussied-up place you need a birthday to justify paying for. Menton delivers serious cuisine, with solemn dining room décor that doesn't dare detract from the plate. Every dish is presented with extreme restraint: Nova Scotia lobster with grapefruit and white sturgeon caviar; roast lamb with eggplant agrodolce and cardamom. In other words, this is not a meal to drown in champagne and noise—it's one to savor and think about for days.

The tiger's tears salad at Meyers + Chang. Photo by Keller + Keller.

Myers + Chang
Shareable pan-Asian plates

The dim-sum-meets-city-diner vibe has made Myers + Chang—a place that's invariably described as "trendy" even if it no longer is—one of Boston's best spots for a first date. Between all those awkward pauses and furtive glances, though, couples should sample the restaurant's playful versions of classic Asian dishes; the braised pork-belly buns, dan dan noodles, Tiger's Tears salad, and dumplings are all sure things—even if the next date isn't.

No. 9 Park
The restaurant that launched an empire

With last spring's opening of Barbara Lynch's ultra-fine-dining outpost, Menton, one could be forgiven for wondering whether her former flagship might lose its edge. Wonder no more. No. 9 Park, the stately restaurant in the shadow of the State House, presses ahead, nearly as perfect as ever. The tasting menu (which includes the iconic prune-filled gnocchi) remains high on the list of must-do Boston dining experiences, and the service is a flawless ballet of expert advice and inconspicuous attentiveness.

The neptuneburger comes laden with fried oysters and cheddar. Photo by Keller + Keller.

Neptune Oyster
Bivalves and lobster rolls galore

As the capital of New England seafood, you'd think our fair city would be crawling with great seafood joints. Not so. Plenty of restaurants have a good oyster lineup, and yes, Legal dishes out more chowder than anyone. But no one displays such a vehement adoration for seafood in all its forms as Neptune does. The raw selection changes daily; the lobster roll comes either hot and buttered or cold with mayo. But more important, Neptune hits just the right note between the upscale (crudos, tartares, and fish-friendly wines) and the low-key (first-come, first-served seating; a burger topped with fried oysters).

O Ya
A sushi lover's mecca

What hasn't already been said about O Ya? It's taken home several Best of Boston awards and earned national accolades; it's one of the hardest-to-get (and priciest) tables in town. Three years after opening, though, O Ya continues to wow us with creativity. Each bite, prepared with surgeonlike precision by Tim Cushman's team of sushi chefs, is a symphony of texture and flavor. Anything with chu toro (tuna belly) or sea urchin is a must-try, as is the entire "truffles and eggs" menu.

Oishii
The cool kids' spot for haute Japanese

You can't splurge on O Ya every night. Thank heaven there's Oishii, an underground South End gem hidden behind a barely marked door. Spacious, modern, and high-end but not obscenely so, it's a favorite with late-night scenesters who come for the inventive sashimi and maki combinations—Kobe-beef-and-pear maki, a torched toro roll with ginger and jalapeño.

Parsons Table
Simple fare made superior

These days, you can't swing a roast chicken without hitting a comfort-food restaurant. Then Chris Parsons came along and reminded us why the trend took off in the first place. Relaunching Winchester's Catch with a new concept, he took the ubiquitous—macaroni and cheese, an egg-topped frisée salad, a fancified burger—and made it more flavorful than should be legal. Combined with the always genial staff and barn-chic décor, Parsons Table is better than comfortable—it's a place you're excited to eat at, every evening you can.

Pigalle
Where romance is alive and well

With our city's dining scene shifting toward noisy taverns and open kitchens, quiet, candlelit escapes are a dying breed. Lucky for every chap toting an engagement ring, we still have Pigalle. Dimly lit and perfectly intimate, it offers terrific date-night ambiance and gorgeously presented plates, like a layered terrine of beet and horseradish cream, or a crispy half duck served atop turnip succotash and sweet-and-sour oranges.

Prezza
Exemplary Italian in the North End

In a neighborhood where a decent fried calamari and a lusty round of "O Sole Mio" are enough to keep the lines stretching out the door, Anthony Caturano brings true, ambitious Italian cooking to Boston's Little Italy: fresh, seasonal ingredients; handmade pasta; even an upscale take on Italian-American Sunday gravy, elevated with fluffy meatballs, homemade sausage, pork ribs, and creamy polenta. The full dessert menu—rare in the

sausage, pork roast, and creamy polenta. The tiramisu dessert menu—rare in the North End—is an added bonus.

Radius
The steadfast downtown standard

When the all-star partner ship of chef Michael Schlow and restaurateurs Christopher Myers and Esti Parsons split up a couple of years ago, we feared the worst for Radius. And maybe the place doesn't have quite the gravitational pull it once had. But there's no denying the talent of Schlow and chef de cuisine Matthew Audette, whose polished, technique-driven food, from the slow-roasted rib-eye to the "Vegetables 5 Ways," will delight your taste buds and your imagination.

Rendezvous
All heart in Central Square

This Cambridge gem is one of those restaurants that just makes you feel good. It's partly the ethics of chef-owner Steve Johnson—the local farms highlighted on the menu, the rooftop herb garden, the organic and biodynamic wine list. It's partly the neighborhood vibe. But that wouldn't mean anything if the grilled lamb with harissa weren't so richly spiced, the roast chicken with chanterelles weren't so succulent, and the lemon-buttermilk pudding weren't so comforting.

Rialto
Italian inspiration, served up fresh

From her annual bike tours around Italy to her latest market discovery, chef- owner Jody Adams's unflagging passion for her subject drives her work and informs a menu stocked with classics, such as roast duck with olives, and new discoveries, like the rotating regional menus from Lombardy, Sicily, and the like. And the beautiful dining room overlooking the Harvard scene is a prime spot for rubbing elbows with the literati.

Rocca
A South End spot on its second wind

A year ago, Rocca was barely on our radar, save as a place to dine al fresco and not pay attention to the food. Now that chef Tiffani Faison is onboard, though, it's a destination once more. She's freshened up the coastal Italian menu with handmade pastas (the Taleggio envelopes are a treat); daily fish selections; and some of the best salads in town. For dessert, anything made with gelato is a must.

Salts
Unassuming and totally underrated

Just down the street from the acclaimed Craigie on Main, little Salts is often overlooked. That's a shame: Gabriel Bremer delivers cuisine every bit as smart and current as the city's most buzzed-about chefs, and takes care to create gorgeous plates, too. A summer escabeche of local fluke is dressed with spicy radish and tangy preserved lemon, then garnished with tiny blossoms from the chef's own organic farm; the whole boneless duck for two sells out nightly. By the end of your meal, you might be asking: "Craigie who?"

Scampo
Around the world in a single meal

Only Lydia Shire can come up with a menu featuring lobster pizza, roti, naan, a mozzarella bar, and miso salmon with tot soi leaves...and somehow make everything work together. What unifies it is Shire's personality and her aesthete's approach to food, not to mention the skill of her team. And the setting, in the hopping Liberty Hotel, makes Scampo an in-crowd magnet.

Sensing
A hotel restaurant with Parisian panache

Nearly two years after opening, Sensing has hit its stride. While the dining room pales, literally, against the bold aesthetic of its sister restaurant in Paris, it's where you'll find Boston's best translation of modern Parisian cuisine (in American-size portions, naturally). Signature dishes like steamed cod with coconut are reliably tasty, but experiment with chef Gérard Barbin's more playful plates, such as a side of savory French toast, and you'll be rewarded.

Sorellina
Big-flavored, big-ticket Italian

It's an Italian restaurant with a trendy-steakhouse spirit, flush as it is with expense-account types. But Sorellina has as much substance as it has style, as evidenced by the selection of artisan salumi and cheese, house-made pastas, and creative appetizers like cider-braised pork belly with Honeycrisp apple confit. It's also a fine place to take less- adventurous eaters; while you tuck into grilled octopus and veal carpaccio, they can savor the caesar, the 16-ounce rib-eye, and the tiramisu.

Sportello's ultra-modern space in Fort Point Channel. Photo by Keller + Keller.

Sportello
The lunch counter goes upscale

Complain as you may about the diner-style counter service (we'll admit it's not ideal for groups), there's no beating the dynamic duo of Barbara Lynch and Colin Lynch (no relation) for crafting artful, refined Italian comfort food. Start with a salad—any salad—to taste the sweetest, most tender produce in season. And do not miss the pastas: the gnocchi with porcini, peas, and cream; the trenette with rabbit ragu; or the mortadella-filled agnolotti in a romesco sauce.

T. W. Food
Playful fare in intimate surroundings

Where else could you expect to see scrapple on the menu, or try tobacco-flavored ice cream? While Tim Wiechmann has tempered his mad-hatter chef tendencies a bit since opening T. W. Food in 2007, he's still having fun in the kitchen, and diners reap the rewards: white-carrot soup with vanilla-fennel cream; corn-flour linguine with heirloom squash. Show up on Wednesdays for "Kitchen Improv," five courses of chef's-whim creations for a mere $39.

Ten Tables Cambridge
A homey hideaway

Maybe it's the tucked-away location near Harvard, but a trip to this spot feels like dining at a dear friend's house—only your friend is chef David Punch, and boy, can he cook. Like the original Ten Tables, this one is dedicated to farm-fresh fare. But Punch's affinity for spices and Spanish flavors infuses the menu—think crispy Rhode Island squid with chili-citrus salt, or pan-roasted haddock with toasted hazelnuts and salsa fresca—and it seems like a whole other restaurant.

Toro
Cava, tapas, and a killer late-night scene

If we didn't come for the grilled corn with aioli and lime, we'd be there for the steak a la plancha with Cabrales butter. Though five years old, this joint venture by Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette is still packed every night. The tapas menu balances authenticity and creativity, and the bar, led by Jamie's wife, Courtney, produces some of the town's top tipples.

Troquet
A wine lover's paradise

As critic Corby Kummer rediscovers this month [page 176], Troquet is the Theater District's undersung hero. It's not just chef Scott Hebert's cuisine that puts it on our list, but also the exceptional wine service that keeps aficionados coming back for more.

Uni
Superlative sushi in a shoebox-size space

There are a lot of upscale sushi joints floating around Boston, but few reach the heights of this tiny sashimi bar. Here, Ken Oringer's talent for combining flavors in transcendent ways takes center stage, and chef Chris Gould deftly executes that vision. Don't miss the uni (sea urchin) with quail egg and osetra, or the foie gras and eel with green apple and kabayaki glaze.

Via Matta
Practically foolproof northern Italian

Over the years, chef Michael Schlow's Italian eatery hasn't exactly maintained "It" status. But that doesn't stop Via Matta from delivering a top-notch experience. Start with the crunchy eggplant with basil-marinated tomatoes, then move on to cavatelli with crumbled pork sausage, or the legendary pollo al mattone. The essential dessert? "Mascarporeos," delicious little cookies served with mascarpone cream.

Plus: The Restaurants I Miss *by Corby Kummer*

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