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## NY - Rising to the Top

### My 12 favorite New York restaurants capture the city's spirit today

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You could spend a lifetime exploring the vast terrain of New York City restaurants and never taste it all. But the hunt for the next great meal is exhilarating in itself, and just as satisfying is sharing your discoveries with other adventurous diners.

I've been engaged with New York's restaurants since 1982, first as a bartender and wine buyer, later as a reporter and critic, and always as an enthusiastic customer. I remember when Lutèce was the crème de la crème, Tom Colicchio was cooking at Mondrian, Jean-Georges Vongerichten was at Lafayette, and Montrachet had the city's most exciting wine list. All have since closed, but their influence lives on.

These chefs and restaurants, among others, helped shape what I consider to be the three most deeply rooted and exciting culinary traditions in New York: French cuisine, New American cuisine and restaurants that are passionate about wine. This story will sketch the contours of these categories and profile four of my favorite restaurants in each.

These are not the newest stars; I prefer restaurants when they have developed some character. It's a bit like drinking a fine wine: I enjoy tasting it in its youth but don't feel that it gives its best, or can be fully understood, until it has matured.

These restaurants focus on cuisines derived from Western Europe and adapted to the United States. Their dishes harmonize with wine, and their exciting wine lists are in most cases based on deep cellars managed by skilled sommeliers, making these places natural destinations for wine lovers.

Most of these restaurants are also expensive. You can generally expect to pay at least \$150 per person for dinner—more if you take full advantage of their wine lists. That may seem exorbitant, especially in a time of economic uncertainty, but people come to New York to find the best, whether it's music, theater or food. I do include a less-expensive choice in each of the three categories. And of course there are wonderful places in the city where you can eat for less.

To me, the restaurants I have chosen represent the best New York has to offer. If you love fine food and wine and enjoy experiencing an ambitious restaurant at the top of its game, you will find pleasure and perhaps even something like enlightenment at their tables.

French cuisine has a long and glorious history in New York. When Lutèce was at its peak, under chef-owner André Soltner in the 1960s and '70s, it led a brigade of restaurants that traced their lineage to the French pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair. Fortunately, one survivor from that era is still flourishing, as glamorous as ever: **LA GRENOUILLE**.

The restaurant opened in 1962, still occupies a former stable on 52nd Street off Fifth Avenue, and remains in the founding family, with the charming and discreet Charles Masson Jr. now at the helm. The menu is startling in its conservatism, but that's its appeal. Quenelles de brochet, an airy mousseline of pike, cream and butter, has been a specialty of Lyon for generations; La Grenouille serves it with a classic shellfish cream sauce, plain white rice and a garnish of American caviar. The dish is a beautiful match for a mature white Burgundy. Grilled Dover sole, sautéed frogs' legs and veal kidneys with mustard flambéed with Cognac are other burnished standards.

A fundamental harmony with wine is one of the virtues of classic French cuisine. La Grenouille's wine list is modest, with 150 mostly French selections. It sticks to familiar names, and prices tend to be high, but there is plenty to drink. Jean-Luc Colombo's Crozes-Hermitage Les Féés Brunes 2006 (\$75) is a fine match for those veal kidneys, or you can splurge on a Philippe Colin Chevalier-Montrachet 2004 (\$380).

The food and wine gain immeasurably from the beauty of the setting. The dining room is plush and intimate, set off by some of the most extravagant floral arrangements in the city. A solicitous staff of veteran waiters cossets a stylish, if generally older, clientele. If you want to be transported to a lost world of refined flavors and polished elegance, La Grenouille is the last, best show in town.

In the 1980s and '90s, a new generation of French chefs modernized and broadened haute cuisine. Jean-Georges

Vongerichten was among the leaders, at Restaurant Lafayette, with his intense yet light vegetable-based sauces and his daring use of Asian spices. He is still delivering delicious, distinctive food at his flagship, Jean Georges.

**LE BERNARDIN** has been the most daring in its evolution. Chef Gilbert Le Coze and his sister Maguy left behind their two Michelin stars in Paris to open the restaurant in New York in 1986, and their light, expressive touch with seafood won them an immediate following. When Gilbert died in 1994, his sous-chef, Eric Ripert, took over the kitchen. Ripert has become a star in his own right with his modern, seafood-based menu.

A four-course dinner begins with an "almost raw" selection; I chose slices of hamachi rolled around mint leaves and sea beans, served in a light sauce that had tart and savory notes. Next comes "barely touched," such as a small brick of escolar, the fish poached in olive oil and enlivened by a bold, red-wine béarnaise sauce. The main course is "lightly cooked," and while most of the offerings are fish, Ripert proves his versatility with rosy roast squab breast on truffled polenta with Armagnac jus. Dessert is a multicourse affair, finishing with exquisite mignardises.

The food is focused in concept, complex in flavor and skillfully executed. It builds in intensity while remaining graceful and always wine-friendly. Wine director Aldo Sohmi manages the list of 715 selections, and he and his team are experts at matching the dishes with wines of equal personality and diversity. Or you could simply sink into a great white Burgundy for the duration; among the nearly two dozen *grands crus* from the Montrachet family is the glorious 1989 Sauzet Bâtard-Montrachet (\$1,900).

The formal dining room and traditional service intensify the impact of the unconventional food. It's this juxtaposition of tradition and innovation that makes Le Bernardin right at home in New York.

Many restaurants in New York attempt to recreate the feeling of dining in France. Among the most appealing are the stylish Bar Boulud, the romantic Fleur de Sel, and the comfortable, time-worn Capsouto Frères. **L'ABSINTHE** brings Paris to the Upper East Side.

Chef-owner Jean-Michel Bergognoux, who worked at Troisgros in France and Lutèce in New York, opened this brasserie in 1995. His menu offers an extensive raw bar, sturdy French classics such as coq au vin and sole meunière, and a well-selected charcuterie plate. Most of the main courses cost less than \$30, and more than half the bottles on the 285-selection wine list are less than \$100.

L'Absinthe hews faithfully but not too literally to its traditions. With an art nouveau decor, abundant flowers and warm light, it is a lively and comfortable place to eat simply and enjoy the parade of life around you.

There are many talented French chefs working in New York. In my experience, the one who has most successfully integrated personal creativity with classic haute cuisine is Daniel Boulud. I first tasted Boulud's food when he was cooking at Le Cirque in the late 1980s, helping to make it the era's hottest restaurant. Now he oversees half a dozen restaurants in New York, Las Vegas and Florida. Fittingly, his flagship restaurant, **DANIEL**, has taken over the Park Avenue space once home to Le Cirque.

Boulud's dishes change frequently, but all share major virtues: excellent ingredients, creative juxtapositions, complex flavors and impeccable executions. Each bite leaves you happy and curious for the next taste. Take frogs' legs, an iconic dish in France. Boulud's version is a study in paired contrasts: the meat, potatoes, watercress and garlic are all prepared two ways. The dish is complex enough to make you think, and harmonious enough to make you smile. It is also beautifully wine-friendly.

And of course there's much more: tender agnolotti with Fontina cheese and aromatic white truffles; the latest version of Boulud's signature black sea bass with red-wine sauce; gamy wild hare from Scotland with a blood-infused civet sauce; local venison bright with juniper and a daikon choucroute.

The 1,800-selection wine list earned a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award in 2002. It concentrates on France, with great depth at the high end. A 15-vintage vertical of Château Latour, direct from the château's cellar, includes the 1961 (\$7,800) and the 1959 (\$5,680). But there are also savvy selections from around the world, including a Lioco Chardonnay Sonoma County 2006 (\$50) that made a fine match with those frogs' legs. Wine director Daniel Johnnes leads a team of expert sommeliers.

Restaurant Daniel delivers both edification and delight. If you can wrench your attention away from the plate to gaze around

the room, you'll see a whole community of diners united in the happy culture of haute cuisine.

While New York's French restaurants deliver variations on a consistent theme, another group of chefs has embraced an extraordinary diversity of culinary influences to create a mosaic that has coalesced into what is known as New American cuisine.

The genre's modern origins date to the Four Seasons, opened in 1959 with the guidance of James Beard to showcase seasonal and regional flavors. Tom Colicchio, who provided my first taste of basil ice cream at Mondrian in 1982, has spread the gospel of fine ingredients simply prepared through his empire of Craft restaurants around the country. Thomas Keller, who left New York in the 1980s, returned in triumph in 2004 with Per Se, perhaps the highest expression of the genre so far.

The latest twist is the "locavore" ethos: menus focused largely on local and seasonal foods hand-selected at New York's wonderful farmers' markets or sourced from nearby farms. I live in Brooklyn, home to many of these taste crusaders, including Saul in Boerum Hill, the Grocery in Carroll Gardens, and Applewood and Rose Water in Park Slope.

The most influential in this vanguard has been **BLUE HILL**, opened by chef Dan Barber in a Greenwich Village townhouse in 2000. Barber also presides over Blue Hill Farm in Massachusetts, which supplies many of his vegetables, and the restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns, part of a former Rockefeller estate in the Hudson River Valley that also serves as a model farm. While Barber has become an articulate spokesman for the movement's political wing, his Manhattan restaurant remains a lovely refuge of warm hospitality and homey food.

The menu, which changes frequently, lists about half a dozen appetizers and main courses, and often their provenance. Vegetables are main players, not afterthoughts; sauces are complex and deep. "Rabbi Bob's Hudson Valley veal" showcases local carrots and shiitake mushrooms, while the meaty veal bathes in a reduction sauce redolent of baking spices.

The flavors are assertive, with many tart and sweet notes, but wine director Claire Paparazzo's 125-selection list has the versatility to handle them. It is broken into stylistic categories, from "crisp and bright" whites (such as Pellé Menetou-Salon 2007 for \$48), to "big and bold" reds. Paparazzo deftly matches dishes to wine categories, but given a free hand, takes more chances. She paired Sean H. Thackrey's Pleiades XVI, an exuberant blend of Carignane, Petite Sirah, Sangiovese and Viognier, with the veal; the wine used the spicy sauce as a launching pad and blasted off into a funky flavor explosion. America, even on the plate, has never been for the faint of heart.

**COOKSHOP** offers a more casual and less expensive, but not less committed, version of the genre. Chef-owner Marc Meyer, who worked for Larry Forgione, one of the pioneers of New American cuisine, opened Five Points in Greenwich Village in 1999 with his wife, Vicki Freeman, and then Cookshop in 2005.

Cookshop's menu is full of bold, down-home flavors. Salty fried hominy, a juicy, mineral-scented steak from grass-fed cattle, and Vermont cheeses from organic milk all make you feel as if you're eating on a farm. And don't think of skipping dessert—the maple flan and chocolate cake are incredibly satisfying.

Richard Luftig's 125-label list wine list matches the food step for step, emphasizing artisanal producers and organic ingredients. Prices top out around \$200, with about half the selections priced at less than \$50.

The decor is as solid and plainspoken as the food, with simple wooden tables, an open kitchen, and a chalkboard that lists the farms whose produce is featured. Floor-to-ceiling windows open onto 10th Avenue and 20th Street in the heart of Chelsea's gallery district. The neighborhood is not fancy, but its unassuming warehouses show some of the city's most adventurous new art. Cookshop feels right at home.

Of course, America is not only about authenticity and nature; it also embraces creativity and artifice. Which is why it's puzzling that so few American chefs have embraced the futuristic culinary approach of Ferran Adrià, the genius behind El Bulli in Spain.

But New Yorkers have a few options to explore this innovative cuisine. One bright prospect is the new Corton, with Paul Liebrandt cooking in partnership with Drew Nieporent in the old Montrachet space. And Wylie Dufresne, one of the most accomplished practitioners of what might be called "Newer Than New" American cuisine, is working on the Lower East Side.

Dufresne's trajectory started with a degree in philosophy. After culinary school, followed by five years with Vongerichten, he moved to the lively, rough-edged 71 Clinton Fresh Food, then opened his unassuming yet bold-hearted **WD-50** in 2003. The menu descriptions are straightforward ("pork ribs, fried plantain, hibiscus, jerk consommé"), but most hide surprises of execution, presentation and flavor.

Dufresne, like Adrià, embraces the marriage of technology and creativity in order to make eating not simply a way to satiate hunger, but also to entertain and provoke. He wants you to think about what you're eating, and sometimes he wants you to laugh out loud. I recommend going all in and ordering the \$140, 12-course tasting menu. Not every plate will hit the bull's-eye, but you'll get a clear idea of the target.

It's not always easy to decipher what is what on the plate. At some point, you'll just give up and go with the flow. Most dishes play with texture and temperature, employing colorful sauces, powders, gels and foams. There aren't a lot of luxury ingredients, and many of the products are processed into unrecognizable forms. Yet overall the flavors are bright and pleasing, the combinations find a balance, and by the end of the meal you'll have been both entertained and satisfied.

This food is not an easy partner for wine. A pairing can be ordered with the tasting menu (\$75 for six eclectic wines), and some of the matches are terrific. Or you can explore the list, an international lineup with plenty of gems. Here too you'll find brief, evocative descriptions: "citrus, slate, pear" to describe Rafael Palacios Valdeorras As Sortes Val do Bibei 2006 (\$70); "earthy, minerals, black tea, red fruit" for Dehlinger Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Goldridge Vineyard 1997 (\$245).

Aside from the food, and despite its slightly edgy neighborhood, WD-50 is a "normal" restaurant, drawing a lively crowd that mingles burghers with bohemians. The decor is a modernist take on the Craftsman style; the young staff is friendly and informed. It may not look like much from the street, but as modest rock clubs have nurtured seminal bands, so WD-50 is turning out some of New York's most exciting food.

**THE RIVER CAFÉ**, on the other hand, could easily be mistaken for one of those tourist-driven destinations that depend on their amazing location to print money, making little effort to deliver great food or good value. But in fact, this cozy piano bar with a magnificent view was a pioneer in the development of New American cuisine and is still among the top rank of its practitioners.

Owner Michael "Buzzy" O'Keefe opened the restaurant in 1977, in a small barge anchored directly under the Brooklyn Bridge, when the Brooklyn waterfront was more Marlon Brando than millionaires' condos. For the restaurant's 30th anniversary dinner, its former chefs returned to cook, an all-star team of American cuisine: Larry Forgione (1979-1983), Charlie Palmer (1983-1987), David Burke (1987-1992) and Rick Laakkonen (1994-2000).

Current chef Brad Steelman has remained faithful to the ingredients-driven approach of his predecessors, but his menu is bold and enticing. Tender duck breast, glazed with fennel pollen- and white truffle-infused honey, is accompanied by bok choy and carrots with a rich yet subtle sauce. Portions are very generous, justifying the price tag of \$98 for three courses.

Joseph DeLissio has been wine director since the beginning. He was an early champion of American wines and today offers Cabernet in a range of styles and vintages, from Screaming Eagle 2001 (\$3,000) to Freemark Abbey 1968 (\$410). The 650-selection list also ranges widely, with savvy choices from Spain, Italy and France.

The dining room is beautiful, with low light glowing off polished wood, but defers to the view across the East River to the Manhattan skyline and the Statue of Liberty beyond. It makes every meal a special occasion, even as the friendly staff treats every diner like a regular. It may sound corny, but the River Café makes me happy to be in New York, and, from a culinary point of view, proud to be an American.

All the restaurants I've discussed so far care deeply about wine. But there are those restaurants that give wine pride of place, and structure the rest of the dining experience to support an extraordinary cellar. New York currently boasts seven restaurants with Grand Awards, *Wine Spectator's* highest honor for wine lists. That's more than any other city and represents nearly 10 percent of all the current Grand Award holders in the world.

The most recent winners are built around private cellars assembled by owner-investors. They feature small, luxurious dining rooms, creative chefs who know how to showcase the flavors of great wine, and talented, experienced sommeliers who have become stars in their own right. The pioneer was Veritas, which opened in 1998; it now counts 192,000 bottles in its inventory, the experienced Tim Kopec, formerly of Montrachet, as wine director, and an exciting new chef, Gregory Pugin.

**CRU** opened in 2004 and earned its Grand Award in 2005. Its cellar of 145,000 bottles draws heavily from the collection of owner Roy Welland, and offers more than 4,000 selections in two leather-bound volumes. It's hard to find a weakness in a list that offers more than 125 white Burgundies from the Montrachet grand cru family, and nearly 50 bottlings of Guigal's single-vineyard Côte-Rôties. And beyond these classics and rarities, there are 500 bottles at \$100 or less, all chosen with care.

This extraordinary collection is curated by Robert Bohr, who is assisted by sommelier Michel Couvreur (previously of Le Bernardin). They work with a knowledgeable and personable waitstaff to create a seamless dining experience. The small, comfortable dining room is a sober study in cream and brown, with a large wooden credenza giving it the feel of a library—whose shelves are filled with stemware and decanters.

It's a subdued atmosphere, but chef Shea Gallante's food supplies some fireworks. He trained with Lidia Bastianich at Felidia (a former Grand Award winner) and David Bouley. His menu at Cru moves from clean, focused presentations (crudo, foie gras terrine), to richer, homier flavors (pastas), to more experimental dishes based on traditional centerpieces such as sole and venison. The food shows creativity, even daring, yet always matches well with wine. Cru's list makes it a destination for wine lovers, but the quality of the food and service make it an outstanding experience for everyone.

New York has long loved Italian food, but its Italian restaurants rarely aimed for the upper echelon of fine dining occupied by the French restaurants, and they seldom built serious wine lists. There have been exceptions, though. Barbetta, opened in 1906 and still in the Maioglio family, claims to have introduced risotto, white truffles and Barbaresco to New York. Alto, which opened in 2005 and now holds a Grand Award, has 37,000 bottles in the cellar, overseen by Eric Zillier, formerly of Veritas, while chef Michael White turns out creative Italian food.

**DEL POSTO** is a full-throated opera on a grand stage. Opened in 2005, enormous and luxurious, it is the most ambitious project yet by chef Mario Batali and his business partner Joseph Bastianich, along with Bastianich's mother, Lidia. Batali and Bastianich's collection of New York restaurants includes Babbo, Esca, Lupa and Otto. Del Posto not only serves great food, it makes a convincing argument that Italian cuisine deserves respect at the highest level.

"Il Menu del Posto" (four courses for \$95) presents the basic Italian meal: antipasti, pasta (two different dishes), main course and dessert. Brilliantly executed by Mark Ladner, the progression allows you to taste classic Italian flavors brightened with contemporary creativity.

My favorites are hearty dishes with earthy flavors. Most use very few principal flavors, relying on the quality of the ingredients and aiming for harmony rather than complexity. A meaty, juicy pork chop picks up a fresh green note from winter savory and lively acidity from persimmon. The dish is simple yet balanced.

This is food that loves wine, and the 25,000-bottle cellar, overseen by wine director Morgan Rich, covers Italy like a detailed road map. The great strength is Piedmont, with nearly 400 Barolos and more than 100 Barbarescos. Less expensive gems can be found from Veneto, Campania and Sicily. Del Posto, which earned a Grand Award in 2008, has taken its place among New York's best restaurants—and the top Italian restaurants in the country.

In the past decade, a wave of wine bars has refreshed the city. Generally small, casual and inexpensive and often focused on one or two wine regions, these lively places offer eclectic selections and surprisingly serious food. Having lived in Spain, I am particularly drawn to Bar Jamón and Casa Mono. Owned by Batali and Bastianich in partnership with chef Andy Nusser and Nancy Selzer, these two places combine to offer the most exciting array of Spanish wine in the city.

**CASA MONO** occupies a small, cheerful space with colorful cracked-tile floors, wine racks from floor to ceiling and simple wooden tables. The restaurant is lively, loud and crowded. Next door is Bar Jamón, even smaller and simpler but just as lively, where you can enjoy a glass of wine and some serrano ham or Manchego cheese.

Nusser, formerly at Babbo, delivers powerful flavors in small portions, the most expensive at \$19, that feature creative riffs on traditional themes. Bacalao croquetas are crisp outside and fluffy inside, the salty cod balanced by a bright orange aioli. Fideos, soft Catalan noodles, are savory with chorizo and clams. This is rich, rustic food; order tripe, cock's comb or sweetbreads and you'll mop the plate every time.

The 500-selection wine list explores every nook and cranny in Spain, offering both traditional and new wave-style wines. In Rioja, for example, you can compare the defiantly anachronistic R. López de Heredia Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva 1964

(\$410) with the powerful, modern Bodegas Muga Torre Muga 2004 (\$195). To explore more widely, sample among a dozen wines offered by the cuarto, a small decanter that holds about 8 ounces (\$12 to \$33).

I am often asked to name my favorite restaurant, but that's an impossible question to answer. As with wine, it all depends on context. My favorite for what occasion? In which neighborhood? For what price? In this story, I have selected a dozen restaurants that capture New York's culinary spirit today. They are all "favorites." But one seamlessly combines elements of all three categories: **ELEVEN MADISON PARK**.

The restaurant's location is deeply intertwined with the city and its history. It occupies the ground floor of the landmark Metropolitan Life tower on lower Madison Avenue, which looks across the small, lovely Madison Square Park (home of the original Madison Square Garden) to the historic Flatiron Building.

The restaurant, which opened in 1998, maintains this connection. The high-ceilinged space retains the Art Deco majesty of its 1930s construction and benefits from huge windows that face onto the park. The decor features well-spaced tables, enormous floral arrangements and a collection of beautiful decanters. Paintings and photographs of old New York add to the historical ambience.

The food, always good, has reached an extraordinary level since chef Daniel Humm arrived in 2006. Born in Switzerland, Humm trained in Michelin palaces that honed impeccable technical skills. He previously worked at Campton Place in San Francisco, where he learned American tastes and ingredients. Only 31, he has the physical energy to match his creative vision—he ran his first marathon last year in New York, finishing in less than three hours.

The meal begins with an assortment of jewel-like canapés. Colorful and precise, they might include cucumber and smoked salmon, or a foie gras tart glazed with fruit jelly, or a warm cornet of veal sweetbread. They show the focus, inventiveness and plain hard work that animate the entire menu.

Hawaiian prawns are served with grilled sea scallops and cauliflower "couscous," then finished with a light, intense crustacean jus, poured at the table. The earthy cauliflower (tiny pearls on top of a creamy flan) and the savory sauce set off the sweetness of the shellfish, the flavors deep yet delicate. More gutsy is a roast loin of Colorado lamb, with crosnes, carrots and crisp fried lamb sweetbreads. The cumin-scented sauce, again poured tableside, is extraordinary.

These dishes are balanced perfectly for wine. Wine director John Ragan came with Humm from Campton Place, and he has expanded the wine list from fewer than 400 selections (in 2001) to its current 1,525 selections. It covers the world, but Burgundy is its strong point, with alluring rarities such as a selection of whites from the Côte de Nuits (Marc Roy Marsannay Blanc Champs Perdrix is \$70), and depth such as 16 grands crus from Vosne-Romanee (Méo-Camuzet Richebourg 1989 is \$1,750).

Wine service is impeccable, and the servers in general are friendly yet extremely professional, rarely missing a beat or making an ungraceful move. That's to be expected, as Eleven Madison Park is part of the Danny Meyer group (which also includes such standouts as Union Square Cafe and Gramercy Tavern), known for an emphasis on hospitality.

Eleven Madison Park is performing at an extraordinary level, yet remains slightly under the radar, compared with Midtown stars such as Le Bernardin or media darlings such as Blue Hill. Perhaps this combination is responsible for its clientele, which is sophisticated yet relaxed, enjoying their meals and each other's company. Joining them in that airy room, especially at lunch, when natural light pours through the windows, I always feel as though I have found the very heart of this great city.

For someone who loves food and wine, discovering a great restaurant is like arriving at a destination you didn't even know you were searching for; suddenly you feel at home. These restaurants make me feel at home. I trust they will welcome you as well.

- **WineSpectator.com BONUS VIDEO:** Join celebrated WD50 chef Wylie Dufresne and his wine director father, Dewey, as they match a white and a red to the restaurant's Wagyu skirt steak with peanut butter noodles and Chinese long beans.