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Best Restaurants

Our 41 favorite places to eat this year.

Edited by Suzanne Loudermilk

BY JOHN FARLOW, SUZANNE LOUDERMILK, MARY MAUSHARD, LINDA PERLSTEIN, AND BIANCA SIENRA

Everyone has a favorite restaurant. Just ask. Diners are usually quite passionate about their choices. Response to our readers poll, included in this section, showed us that. But the criteria for a good dining experience varies from person to person. And it doesn't necessarily mean fine dining, although white-cloth places like The Prime Rib and Linwoods continue to wow. There are just as many devotees of such eclectic spots as The Chameleon Cafe and Peter's Inn, where chefs are dedicated to innovative food without the frippery. For us, we look at the sum of the parts—food, service, ambiance, and value. That's why, when you look at our list of 41 restaurants, you'll find a mix of settings and cuisines. We also decided that Annapolis restaurants are worthy of their own dining package, so you won't find them among this year's choices. Instead, we'll showcase them in our June issue. As we surveyed the restaurant scene, we looked at the new and the old on the list and rechecked quite a few others. You'll see some fresh-faced offerings: Cinghiale, The Dogwood and Woodberry Kitchen, whose heralded openings were greeted enthusiastically. Tabrizi's found its way on there, too, with chef Michael Tabrizi re-introducing his outstanding Middle Eastern fare. But some restaurants didn't make it for one reason or another. We'll certainly give them another visit for next year's list. We started our eating frenzy months ago. Senior editor Suzanne Loudermilk, dining critic Bianca Siena, wine critic John Farlow and longtime foodies Mary Maushard and Linda Perlstein spread out to sample the fare of more than 50 restaurants. And eat we did. We're sated now and can reminisce about all the duck breasts, crab cakes, *pomme frites* in truffle oil, and desserts in martini glasses that are on today's menus. We also are appreciative of the focus on farm-to-table ingredients, and we applaud chefs like Spike Gjerde of Woodberry Kitchen and Galen Sampson of The Dogwood for making the most of local, seasonal products. What we really like, though, is that you can't pigeonhole Baltimore's dining scene. Take a look at this year's list. You'll see what we mean. There's something for everyone.

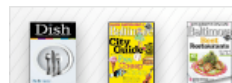


Aida Bistro & Wine Bar

7185-A Columbia Gateway Drive, Columbia, 410-953-0500. Moderate. Deep in the heart of Columbia's dizzying maze of suburban cul-de-sacs, the

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sweet but sophisticated Aida lies tucked away in a nondescript shopping plaza, quietly providing pretty much everything you could possibly want in a neighborhood Italian restaurant. Aida successfully walks the fine line between bistro and cozy mom-and-pop operation by offering well-executed standards like toothsome homemade cheese ravioli and superb eggplant Parmesan alongside slightly more adventurous but equally satisfying specials like Caesar salad featuring grilled romaine and tempura Maine lobster, and seasonal entrées like grilled venison chops or quail stuffed with herbs, porcini, and Parmesan risotto. Whether homespun or high-end, the food delights with quality ingredients and careful preparations. Oenophiles take note: Aida makes good on its wine-bar designation by offering one of the most extensive and beautifully annotated wine lists around. Combine that with the pleasant, knowledgeable wait staff and lovely, low-lit surrounds, and it's no wonder Aida has become a mainstay of Columbia's dining landscape.

Aldo's Ristorante Italiano

306 S. High Street, 410-727-0700 Expensive.

It's not hard to find a good antipasto platter in Little Italy. But filet mignon topped with seared foie gras and smothered in a truffle and porcini sauce so good you'll sop up every bit? That's what Aldo's is for. The restaurant offers the standards, of course: pasta bolognese, tiramisù, an osso buco so tender you won't need a knife, though the tiny spoon offered to scoop out the marrow is a charming touch. Where Aldo's stands out is the dishes that reach beyond the Italian-restaurant trope, like the tournedos Rossini, and flavors that do not miss. Waiters provide attentive service in a series of intimate dining rooms that recollect a colonnaded, peach-walled storybook version of Italy more than they do Italy itself, but they are pleasant nonetheless. The wine list is vast, carefully selected, and diverse, though pickings by the glass are notably slim. Desserts delight, especially if you pass up the usual suspects and head for something custard-based. In particular, a marvelous zabaglione with strawberries ends any meal on a cheerful note.

Antrim 1844

30 Trevanion Road, Taneytown, 410-756-6812, Expensive.

If you make the trek out to the elegant 19th century Antrim 1844 country inn solely to savor Michael Gettier's six course, *prix-fixe* menu, you will be handsomely rewarded. A pre-dinner cocktail-and-hors-d'oeuvres gathering in the inn's antiques-gilded parlors will make you feel like a guest at the poshest house party around. Dinner keeps the festive vibe going with outrageously rich starters like airy salmon quenelles wrapped around silken foie gras, or the simple luxury of jumbo lump crab in a rich velouté. Entrees like delicate Dover sole beneath a luscious gratin of Comté cheese or the earthy cassoulet Toulousaine will leave you filled with pleasure. Classic French like this deserves a wine list equal to the food, and Antrim's has many treasures to pair with every course. All this is certainly worth the drive, but by evening's end, you'll wonder why you didn't book a room. Gettier's cuisine is most definitely special-occasion food, so even if you don't have a particular occasion to celebrate, invent one and go. And stay—your sleepy, sated body will thank you, and you can have that post-prandial nightcap in the cozy, fire-lit bar with impunity.

b

1501 Bolton Street, 410-383-8600. Moderate.

With its comfortable neighborhood vibe and easy-going menu, b continues to be one of our favorites for pretty much any night of the week. The bistro-style seating and ebullient noise level may not be the perfect match for a romantic dinner or for closing a deal, but it lends b a casual countenance that we appreciate. We regularly dine off the specials menu, figured prominently on the large chalkboard. It is there that you will find treasures like pumpkin ravioli served in a walnut and sage butter sauce, or pan-roasted duck breast. For starters, we're impressed with a simple salad

dressed with roasted fennel and a zingy vinaigrette, or the never-overdone calamari. If you are interested in a quick but delicious meal on your way to other evening engagements, consider one of b's homemade pizzas. No matter what you choose, there is a focused selection of wine and imported beer on hand, including some hard-to-find labels, to complement your meal.

The Bicycle

1444 Light Street, 410-234-1900. Expensive.

Long after the frenzy for global fusion has supposedly passed, Bicycle chef/owner Nicholas Batey has found a way to make world cuisine better, fresher, more inventive than ever. He simply does it very, very well, blending quality ingredients from around the world into thrilling combinations that never taste passé. Take, for example, his appetizer of sashimi tuna and avocado tartare. Been there, done that, right? Uh, no. At a time when chefs are complaining about the lack of primo sushi grade out there, Batey's is glistening, firm, and succulent. He combines large hunks of it with cubes of creamy avocado and douses the vibrant mound of red and green with savory-sweet Balinese peanut dressing. The result is the best of its kind. The same can be said of his Mongolian BBQ beef short ribs, which feature lush, falling-off-the-bone meat in a sauce that manages to be not too sweet as well as brimming with subtle fire. With this fusion, no flavor overwhelms another, and no ingredient—from banana leaf to yucca—is used gratuitously. Service is quietly expert, capable of helping you negotiate your way through the food delights. That Bicycle also continues its marvelous tradition of offering 18 terrific wines for \$18 every night, and that it's located in one of the sleekest modern digs around, makes it one of the best places in town.

The Black Olive

814 S. Bond Street, 410-276-7141. Very Expensive.

We were a tad dismayed one Friday night when, upon arriving at The Black Olive at a not-ungodly 8:30 pm, we had to press our server to give us the usual, eagerly anticipated tour of the bounteous refrigerated fish case, as if the waiter decided it was really too late to indulge in such fripperies. The wait staff seemed weary, and, although the place was full, it felt as if we'd arrived late to the party. But who can argue with the pristine items in that fish case—from bronzini to turbot and seemingly everything in between? And once we'd made our picks, our waiter luckily rebounded—quite well enough to minister to us with proper attentiveness as we plowed through platters of grilled sardines in grape leaves and supernal grilled calamari stuffed with cheeses, and then to perform an expert fillet job on our heavenly whole, sautéed Dover sole. That's what it's all about: fresh fish, a little lemon and olive oil, a proper application of heat. Add that to an award-winning wine list, and we're willing—for now—to overlook a less-than-enthusiastic reception. This is still the best place in town for simple, beautiful, fresh fish.

The Brass Elephant

924 N. Charles Street, 410-547-8485. Expensive.

This Mt. Vernon restaurant remains a classic. With its rich interior, excellent service, and menu that combines tradition and innovation, the Brass Elephant has justifiably become a mainstay of fine dining in Baltimore. The richness of the historic surroundings carries over into the food, which has deep, memorable flavors. A tomato heirloom salad alternates thin slices of red and yellow tomatoes with creamy mozzarella and a sprig of greens, although the granité atop the greens is almost too icy. The cheese plate features goat and cow's milk and an Oregon blue paired with figs, quince paste, and candied nuts. The pan-seared rockfish with sautéed peppers and a pancake laced with shrimp and scallions shows the restaurant's interest in traditional foods. The duo of lamb combines rack and leg meat and is excellent with the lamb jus and cannelloni beans. Apple strudel may seem an odd choice in a mostly Italian restaurant, but it is

excellent with a flaky crust and deep apple flavor. The dark chocolate mousse torte is the kind of dessert to drown in—cake, mousse, and ganache. The fine food is matched by equally fine service, conscientious with a glad-you're-here attitude.

Brasserie Tatin

105 W. 39th Street, 443-278-9110. Expensive.

It's true that we have been disappointed in the past by some of our experiences at Tatin. We know what it is capable of and found on a couple of occasions that it simply didn't deliver. But we've been back a few times over the last 12 months and are happy to report that all is well again. Comfortable, high quality, classic bistro fare is once again the focus. It's just about the only place in town to indulge in frog legs nestled on a bed of spaghetti squash and drizzled with butter and parsley. But we really flipped for the mussels—they are big, juicy bivalves awash in an anise-infused creamy broth that reinvigorated our appreciation for this ubiquitous French restaurant offering. The eponymous *tarte Tatin* is decadent as well, bursting with baked apples and resting in a generous pool of caramel, all escorted by a dollop of apple sorbet. Consider indulging in one of the bar's Calvados selections, as this Normandy apple brandy is a no-brainer postscript to a thoroughly satisfying meal.

The Brewer's Art

1106 N. Charles Street, 410-547-6925. Expensive.

Go for the beer and the dessert at The Brewer's Art. Not necessarily together, though the chocolate torte does count ale among its ingredients. In a downtown brew pub with a lively crowd, the wide selection of good beers is no surprise but the good-to-the-last-crumbs desserts are. The "real food" in between is good, but not exceptional, and the service can be slightly brusque. The pumpkin-leek soup with *crème fraîche* is an interesting, seasonal start—velvety thick and somewhat sweet, served in the shallowest of soup bowls. The Caesar salad is more traditional, though slightly dry, with white anchovies on top and Parmesan croutons throughout. The sirloin steak is delicious, if lacking tenderness, and great with the Cerberus Tripel, one of the six beers on tap that night. Accompanying the steak are healthy servings of dressed greens and rosemary fries. The suzuki, a lovely, almost sweet white fish served atop a potato croquette, is flavorful and unusual. Ah, but those desserts. The dried cherry and apple phyllo tart is luscious with *crème anglaise* and an apple butter and raspberry sauce. The chocolate tart is a masterpiece of dark chocolate cake, dark Proletary Ale, and chocolate ganache. These happy endings are a great match for the hoppy beginnings.

The Capital Grille

500 E. Pratt Street, 443-703-4064. Very Expensive.

Not everybody knows your name at The Capital Grille, but your server does and will welcome you soon after you're seated. This personal touch foreshadows the attention and atmosphere in this comfortably elegant steakhouse. It is also the beginning of a wonderful experience—great food in large portions, an impressive wine list, and lots of TLC in sophisticated surroundings. Much of the menu is beef—dry-aged at the Pratt Street restaurant, we were told. The signature 24-ounce porterhouse is a luscious cut that includes both the sirloin and the fillet. The swordfish *jardinière* is equally delicious, grilled perfectly and served with spinach, asparagus, and a light sauce. The Baltimore crab cocktail provides a great beginning, though the \$19 price tag shocked us. Great lumps of melt-in-your-mouth crab are combined with avocado and tomatoes in a peppery mustard sauce, all served in a martini glass. Desserts don't disappoint. The coconut *crème pie* has an extremely rich, tart-like crust and a creamy center; the berries with cream combine blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries in a raspberry *crème anglaise*, served—again—in a martini glass. As much as the food is memorable, so is the service. The Capital Grille is impressive, especially for a chain restaurant, and it provides a capital dining experience.

The Chameleon Cafe

4341 Harford Road, Lauraville. 410-254-2376. Moderate.

There's no way to get around using the clichéd "hidden gem" tag for this adorable restaurant. Housed in a nondescript, corner rowhouse, next to a Safeway, the exterior belies the creativity in the galley kitchen. Diners get their first inkling as they traipse past the enticing aromas of the cooking station on their way to the intimate dining room in the back. Muted orange walls, colorful artwork and pale green tablecloths set a soothing stage for a flavor-packed evening. The food represents New American cuisine at its edgiest, offering clever, ethnic twists on old favorites. A *gougère* appetizer is stuffed with ricotta atop a salad of spicy arugula and pine nuts. Plump oysters are flash-fried in a cornmeal coating and served with sautéed spinach liquored up with Herbsaint. The food play goes on. Grilled duck breast embraces a lovely veal stock-tomato reduction, though the pink meat could have spent a few more minutes on the grill. Grilled trout arrives with steamed clams, a seemingly odd pairing that somehow works. Both dishes come with this season's vegetable darling, broccolini, sautéed perfectly, though the kitchen could have eased up on the salt shaker. A rich chocolate almond terrine and an apple-custard pastry give us a sweet boost.

Charleston

1000 Lancaster Street, 410-332-7373. Very Expensive.

Charleston is a fine dining experience. The experience, however, at times overwhelms the dining. Charleston features a "tasting menu," from which diners choose a number of courses—meals are priced accordingly—each a "small-plate" serving that allows you to sample such fine fare as shellfish bisque, baby arugula with Stilton in a lemon-vinegar dressing, pan-fried wild rockfish, grilled lamb with pomegranates, country chicken, English cheese, and oysters fried in cornmeal, which are wonderful. The *pre-fixe* choice reduces the decision-making and offers some extras, such as a lovely cheese service. Dessert, however, is not counted as a course. At Charleston, the exquisite flavors and beautiful plates just keep coming—but each in its own time, with the proper plating and silverware. This is where the experience can detract from the food. Servers whisk plates on and off the table and replace unused knives throughout the meal. And the service, though highly competent, can be stuffy, even intimidating. We actually feel rushed sometimes, as if sitting over cocktails did not fit the house schedule. Nevertheless, with an extensive wine list, an innovative approach to dining, and artfully prepared food, Charleston continues to distinguish itself among area restaurants

Christopher Daniel

106 W. Padonia Road, Timonium, 410-308-1800. Expensive.

The menu has to win Best of Show for the most inventive descriptions in town—lobster cappuccino risotto, exotic mushroom reduction, gaufrette potatoes. Luckily, servers are knowledgeable about the kitchen's preparations. Start off with cashew-crusting lamb chops with hoisin barbecue sauce, and you won't be disappointed. Portions here will please hearty appetites, especially with the entrees. The Kurobuta pork chop with pecan stuffing and apple chutney is an immense, tender chop from a breed of pig often called the "Kobe beef of pork." The Oriental barbecue salmon with potato scallion spring roll is a creative offering, centering on an excellent center-cut fillet. Presentations are well thought out with plates in various shapes and sizes—rectangles, triangles, circles. Drizzles and dustings also give a nice finish. A flourless chocolate cake sits prettily in a swirl of raspberry sauce, while a French apple tart is rimmed by a flourish of cinnamon. Although there are crisp, white cloths on the tables, the setting veers to casual. There are even sandwiches on the menu if you have a hankering for a great burger or shrimp salad on Kaiser roll. But the prices say special occasion. You won't be disappointed.

Cinghiale

822 Lancaster Street, 410-547-8282. Expensive to Very Expensive.

When Tony Foreman (along with wife and chef/co-owner Cindy Wolf) opens a new restaurant, buzz—controversy, kudos, general ruckus—is sure to follow. Foreman thinks of himself as an educator as much as a restaurateur, bent on raising the bar for local dining. Baltimoreans, equally known—deservedly or not—for their provincialism, sometimes balk at such educative attempts. So it is with Cinghiale, the Charleston Group's grandest exploit yet, a large and quietly spectacular rendering of an authentic Italian enoteca and osteria. Murmurs from the local fooderati included the usual grumbling about portion size (too small), noise (too loud), wine service (pretentious). The buzz increased when original chef Stefano Frigerio (formerly of Maestro) left and was replaced by Julian Marucci from Charleston—could the youthful Marucci match the former's rep? Well, here's our verdict, folks. Pre- or post-Marucci, Cinghiale is far and away the best upscale Italian in Baltimore, and it's way past time we got such a place. The food—featuring the robust and tomato-less cuisine of Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, and Umbria—is pure Italian and mostly sublime, with portions perfectly in accord with the rich earthiness of the dishes. The solicitous wine service (wait staff decants and tastes every bottle) is exactly what customers should expect from any venue that takes pride in its cellar (400 Italian bottles and counting). The bustle and noise from the gorgeous Patrick Sutton-designed rooms are in keeping with a place that's packed most nights with diners who don't care about any of the controversy. They're just there to enjoy a great dining experience, putting to rest once and for all, we hope, Baltimore's rep as a culinary backwater.

Corks

1026 S. Charles Street, 410-752-3810. Expensive.

Chef Levi Briggs has grown into the job of wielding the sauté pans at Corks quite nicely over the last year, interpreting owner Jerry Pellegrino's menu with skill and verve. Check out the merguez sausage corn dog appetizer, a spicy lamb sausage enrobed in corn batter and served up with a saffron aioli. Carnivores will stampede for the grilled bison flat-iron steak, which we enjoyed medium rare; it's slightly gamier and a bit leaner than beef, and just the ticket for a cold night. Its accompanying bacon and onion hash was a smoky, savory delight, as were the sautéed Brussels sprouts. If you hate Brussels, well, we pity you, because these are not to be missed. At the same time, vegetarians can look forward to vegetable egg rolls bursting with flavor and set in a purée of parsnips, finished with sweet-and-sour currant sauce. Wine director Chris Coker is on hand to guide you through the extensive North American wine list, and takes pride in the passel of offbeat bottles he has assembled. We're just about ready to start an office pool over when Pellegrino will spring for new carpet and some paint, but in the end, we're not going to quibble. The service is impeccable, the wines are engaging, and the food is great. Which, in the end, is all we *really* care about.

Della Notte Ristorante

801 Eastern Avenue, 410-837-5500. Expensive.

Dinner at Della Notte is a business casual experience. The food and service are serious while the atmosphere is comfortable. The inviting round dining room offers a view into newly chic Baltimore from Della Notte's many windows. Inside, the scene is all about food. The menu offers a wide selection of Italian specialties, such as the appetizer *melanzane timbalo*—stacked slices of roasted eggplant, tomatoes, cheese, and basil—which oozes with flavor. Follow up with the *vitello*, an entree of sliced veal tenderloin arranged attractively around a small mound of potatoes and onions, or whole, grilled bronzini. Served on a bed of vegetables, the fish has a slightly crispy, but not oily, skin that plays off the creamy flesh. Spinach *aglio* is a great way to “eat your vegetables.” Zabaglione with sliced, marinated strawberries doesn't disappoint as Marsala slices through the velvety egg custard served in a martini glass. Competing for dessert honors is the individual round cheesecake, topped with a single raspberry and drizzled

with chocolate.

The Dogwood

911 W. 36th Street, 410-889-0952. Moderate.

We've watched this sweet but ambitious little Hampden enterprise go from deli to cafe to full-blown restaurant, with an expansion this year that transformed the previously forbidding below-street venue into handsome and spacious digs for fine dining. And fine dining it is, with Galen Sampson, former executive chef at the four-star Hampton's at Harbor Court, at the helm of a kitchen devoted to cuisine of local provenance and to providing a culinary training ground for recovering addicts and the formerly homeless or incarcerated. We applaud the worthy mission, but Sampson's way with food is reason enough for a visit. The seasonal menu boasts vibrant flavors in lush combinations, like summer's grilled calamari with peak-flavor heirloom tomatoes and arugula, or fall's delicate starter of homemade pumpkin gnocchi with wild mushrooms, sage pesto, and fontina. Entrees feature prime organic meat from the likes of local Springfield Farm—say, a tenderloin of pork in cider jus—and seafood like Chesapeake oysters from the bay, thoughtfully prepared. On busy nights, the kitchen may back up, but the atmosphere and spirit of the place are so convivial, you won't mind too much. Consider eating here doing a good deed—with benefits.

The Helmand

806 N. Charles Street, 410-752-0311. Moderate.

The Helmand, perhaps more than any restaurant in Baltimore, is made for a first date. There's nothing distracting about the décor, which features Afghan crafts and low light. The plates beg to be shared. With entrees hovering around \$11 or \$12, even a grad student can treat. And The Helmand provides lots to talk about. Did you know *pumpkin* could pass as gourmet? (In a tasty yogurt garlic sauce, oh, yes.) When's the last time you went to a restaurant where the vegetarians ate as well as—or better than—anyone else? What's the difference between challow and pallow? (One's rice with cumin, one's with cinnamon; both are delicious sopping devices for the restaurants great sauces.) Desserts aren't great, but enjoy the delicious cardamom tea. Then, there's this to arm-wrestle over: Who gets to take home the leftover lamb dwopiazza?

Henninger's Tavern

1812 Bank Street, 410-342-2172. Moderate.

We're beginning to think that maybe the key to fine dining in Baltimore is to redefine the term "fine." Is it highbrow digs and valet parking, or is it more reliably to be found in comfortable neighborhood joints that consistently overreach? We'll leave that to a more substantial examination later, but in the meantime, we can attest that Henninger's is a fine choice to head for when you're tired of being hovered over. Hang out at the care-worn bar, or have a seat in the dining room that is styled in a way not entirely unlike your great-grandmother's. Tuck into the chunky lump crab cakes or Cuban-spiced pork loin accompanied by black beans and chimichurri sauce, wrapping up with a refreshingly bittersweet version of a flourless chocolate tart. Choose something to wash it all down from an intelligent selection of beers and wines, and you shall exit Henninger's quite satisfied, indeed. All that's left to do is find your car, as there is precious little after-hours parking in this densely populated section of Fells Point. Pity there's no valet.

The Iron Bridge Wine Company

10435 State Route 108, Columbia, 410-997-3456. Moderate.

The first question anyone in and around Baltimore may ask about Iron Bridge is likely to be: Is it worth the drive? The answer: Yes. Lucky are those who are close to supper at this very successful Columbia endeavor. Subtly lit fashionable environs, delicious food, and a broad array of wine choices combine to make the restaurant one of our favorite places to dine. On our last visit, we completely enjoyed our meal, ranging from chorizo

sausage with a large, fresh baked, salt-encrusted pretzel and pickled onion to roasted rack of lamb with garlic custard, and an outstanding English pea risotto. The wine program, already impressive compared with many area competitors, seems to have become more focused of late with more iconic producers from every corner of the wine-producing world and more emphasis on old-world esoterica. In spite of proprietor Steve Wecker's attention being split by the opening of a second location in Warrenton, Virginia, Iron Bridge is an ironclad choice for a cozy meal with family, friends, or even a second date.

Ixia

518 N. Charles Street, 410-727-1800. Expensive.

That old saw about blue being a bad color for dining rooms? Whoever came up with that bit of psychology obviously never ate at Ixia, where the electric, eye-popping blue color scheme thrills our senses and reliably jazzes our appetites every time we go. The space is more gorgeous than ever—loopy and luxurious with hot art, gauzes, beads, bangles, and judiciously applied gilding on mirrors and mantelpieces. Somehow, the effect is coolly elegant, not crazy. But maybe we salivate the minute we walk through the door because chef Kevin Miller's cooking, like the décor, just keeps getting better. Sumptuously comforting braised pork belly gets extra earthiness from chestnut purée and roasted garlic; Kona kampachi sashimi with yuzu and radish is art on the plate and in the mouth. More art: salmon prepared four ways (yes, Miller dubs it a “study of Scottish salmon”)—in a tartare with chili and cilantro, pepper-seared with wild mushroom ragout, black-tea smoked and floating in dashi broth, butter poached on red lentils and chard. Wow. We floated on a food-lover's dream till late in the meal, when Ixia's longstanding bugaboo—service—reared its ugly head. Suddenly, we couldn't get our server's—or any wait staff's—attention; moreover, the dessert we waited ages for—coconut tapioca with mango sorbet— was wan and bland. We implore owner Un Kim to finally repair these flaws in what we've always found to be one of the best dining experiences in town.

Jordan's Steakhouse

8085 Main Street, Ellicott City, 410-461-9776. Very Expensive.

Jordan's doesn't try and compete with the big-boy, chain steakhouses, although if you order right, you'll get a great hunk of beef or fish. Instead, it focuses its individuality on a charming, speakeasy setting with live jazz nightly. The main room is plush with sink-into Victorian sofas and chairs and soft lighting from period lamps. The food, for the most part, supports the elegant mood. One night, you'll find a 6-ounce petite filet cooked as requested, medium rare, and butter tender with not a bit of fat. Another time, though, the New York strip, a prime cut, is gristled and over-charred. Mostly, the meal is a delight: tuna tartare with melt-in-your-mouth pearls of rosy tuna, oysters Rockefeller with applewood smoked bacon and creamed spinach, and the dish to go back for, grilled Caesar salad, a huge portion of grilled hearts of romaine with slivers of roasted tomatoes, pine nuts and Asiago and Parmesan cheeses. The crab cakes also are simply awesome. Desserts complement the hearty portions. The melted (it's supposed to be that way) gelato (we chose vanilla) with Grand Marnier and ripe, juicy strawberries, even in winter, is a palate pleaser. Chocolate pâté and crème brûlée also are worthy endings to consider.

Kali's Court

1606 Thames Street, 410-276-4700. Expensive.

Was it our imagination or just a bad night? Late last winter, a visit to this longstanding stalwart—easily one of the top seafood restaurants in town—left us wondering if something had gone terribly amiss. The food was wan and unexceptional, service was lackluster, even the romantic, candlelit dining room seemed to give us the cold shoulder. Perhaps we'd caught the very tail end of chef Rashad Edwards's tenure, just as he was leaving to take charge of Meli, the Kali Group's new venture at The Admiral Fell Inn. Whatever the reason, we were dumbfounded. And then, quick as you can

say “grilled bronzini,” everything changed. Right after the New Year, Damon Hersh, an equally longstanding favorite Baltimore chef (Louisiana, Red Fish), took over the kitchen at Kali’s and seems to have seriously revitalized the place with his mere presence. Service is once again professional and enthusiastic, buoyed, it seems, by Hersh’s creative sensibility and verve. Much of the menu remains the same, but Hersh has already introduced some knockout additions to the mostly seafood menu—a succulent little appetizer of quail stuffed with a Grecian medley of spinach, pine nuts, and feta, and nestled on a bed of black lentils; a deeply flavorful hunk of mahi mahi (not our favorite fish, until now) accompanied by crispy oxtail-stuffed dumplings and Brussels sprouts with smoky bacon—and plans to add more. Even those gorgeous digs felt as seriously sexy as ever. We say, “Welcome back,” to both Hersh and Kali’s.

Linwoods

25 Crossroads Drive, Owings Mills, 410-356-3030. Expensive.

When Linwood Dame opened his namesake restaurant more than a decade ago, it was praised for its innovative open kitchen, creative fare and sleek New York-style design. It’s nice to know that Linwoods keeps standing up to the test of time. The chic look is the same, and the kitchen turns out inspired dishes for diners who travel to the suburban outpost. A wild mushroom tart and pan-seared diver scallops will get you off to a happy start. The restaurant claims its crab cakes are the “best in Maryland,” and while we’re not decreeing a winner, the two fist-size balls are all lump crab and will appease even the most finicky local. The beef tenderloin is a carnivore’s delight with sliced, rare beef in a black-pepper sauce. It’s the perfect partner for a cone of heavenly truffle-infused *pomme frites*. The kitchen also turns out glorious desserts, like custard-filled beignets—three miniature pastries filled with custard and served with a warm chocolate sauce—and pumpkin bread pudding in a properly decadent caramel sauce and lush pillow of fresh whipped cream.

Nasu Blanca

1036 E. Fort Avenue, 410-962-9890. Expensive.

Sometimes we think it’s best to forget the quirky concept behind Nasu Blanca (half-Japanese, half-Spanish, and never the twain shall meet) and think of it as something else entirely, something less, well, conceptual: as an elegant, understated venue for equally subtle but striking cuisine. Okay, so the wine list is composed of nothing but very nice selections of sakes and Spanish wines. Similarly, the appetizer menu is carefully divided between “zensai,” like a knockout lobster tempura or a silky dish of Japanese eggplant, and tapas, like a truly fine and simple *pan con tomate* (grilled bread rubbed with cut tomato, excellent olive oil, and garlic) and luscious white bean soup studded with chorizo. But get beyond those categories and the entrees reveal a certain loosening of strictures. To wit, a very American grilled strip steak paired with pimenton-sprinkled fingerlings, Cabrales butter, tempranillo reduction (Spain, no problem), and tempura Vidalia onions (Japan? Georgia? Say what?). Likewise, we’re hard-pressed to guess the provenance of seared sea scallops with beet vinaigrette and mushroom ragout; all we know is it all tastes damned good. We love the food here; we love the hip downstairs bar with its scrumptious fancy cocktails; we love the sophisticated Rita St. Clair décor. So forget about the great Spanish/Japanese divide. They’re just the two cuisines that chef David Sherman likes to play around with, and we’re happy to mess around in his playground any time.

The Oceanaire Seafood Room

801 Aliceanna Street, 443-872-0000. Very Expensive.

The restaurant chain sets the stage for diners to be transported to a different time and place. The retro relish tray, sleek, red banquettes, and crooning music exude the 1930s and ’40s. And it’s not a leap to imagine you’re onboard a luxurious ocean liner in a chic dining room heading toward an impressive destination—in this case, a mountain of food that will

leave you wanting a deck chair afterward. Seafood is the star, with fresh fish selections changing daily. On a recent visit, diver scallops were magnificent, perfectly cooked specimens but the kitchen is too heavy handed with the Old Bay. It doesn't make sense since there's a can of the spice blend on the table if diners want to indulge. We also opt for the dressed-up wild rockfish with a tantalizing chipotle-honey glaze and yummy fried leeks. But the "oh, my" moment comes when the broccoli with Parmesan is delivered to the table. These Gulliver-size stalks could boost the veggie intake of many, many people. The potatoes au gratin, another huge serving, is addictive with the addition of white truffle oil. Save room for desserts. The tableside flaming of the baked Alaska is fun with delicious results, and the Key lime pie will make any Floridian proud.

Pazo

1425 Aliceanna Street, 410-534-7296. Moderate.

There's probably no more stylish dining room in Baltimore than the one at Pazo, which manages to be at the same time industrial and elegant, soaring—with cathedral ceilings—and intimate. The food, too, covers a great expanse, from homey to daring, often in the same dish. The first hint comes to the table in the form of sunflower-seed crackers, which pull off both savory and sweet. Menu items seen many times before are reinvented in the best ways: smoky eggplant dip, an elegant dish that pairs braised lamb shoulder with perfectly chilled chops, an ice-cream sandwich nestled in brioche. It's sort of pretentious when the waiter announces that a journey through the small plates on the menu will "surprise your senses all night," but he's absolutely right. The word most associated with Pazo since it opened three years ago is "trendy," but in a good way. An expansive menu of treats you won't find anywhere else? Innovative cocktails? Consistent execution and service? While we're at it, free valet parking? These are some trends we'd be happy to see other restaurants follow.

Peter's Inn

504 S. Ann Street, 410-675-7313. Moderate.

The decor at Peter's Inn is cozy and odd. The trophies and wood paneling in the tiny back room evoke a 1970s rec room, the bulletin board advertising old pickup trucks for sale evokes a dive, and the giant mounted swordfish that peers over a framed print of Anne Frank evokes ... who knows what? The menu is less idiosyncratic, centering on simple but never boring comfort food. On one recent visit, shrimp and grits were transported to a higher plane with discs of chorizo and a tomato "fondue," and the duck breast in a composed salad was so perfectly cooked as to be a revelation. The menu rotates each week and (unlike the ample beer selection) stays small, about eight dishes, some of which can pass as starters, but all of which are usually big enough for a meal. Typically, a constantly changing menu implies the chef is at the market selecting what's great that week, which makes it strange that, at Peter's, asparagus and fresh cherries might land on your plate in the middle of winter. But still. When the cherries are an extra bonus alongside a pitch-perfect dish of cappuccino-hazelnut gelato, shortly before the crazy-low bill arrives on a kitschy tourist ashtray, nobody seems to mind.

Petit Louis Bistro

4800 Roland Avenue, 410-366-9393. Moderate.

This charming restaurant revels in the ambiance of a friendly neighborhood wine bar in France, except there are no dogs accompanying their masters like you see there. You'll feel very cozy with your neighbors, though, since the tables are close and the noise level is loud. It's not a place for a private *tête-à-tête*. Instead, focus on the fine French comfort food and excellent selection of French wines by the glass and bottle. The wait staff is helpful on both accounts. You can count on Louis's famous onion soup, a flavorful broth with just the right amount of onion and gooey Gruyere, and the duck foie gras, classically prepared with a layer of duck fat on top and served with buttery crostini—although this rich dish isn't for the weak of heart.

Bistro mainstays like steak *frites* with a generous mound of crispy fries, and *coquilles St. Jacques* in a light wine sauce are true to form. End in style with cups of French roast and a decadent chocolate pâté with crème anglaise, or a delectable crème caramel.

The Prime Rib

1101 N. Calvert Street, 410-539-1804. Very Expensive.

The Prime Rib is, of course, a Baltimore institution and the closest thing we have to a genuine supper club since the days when live jazz in Baltimore was as common as sno-balls in July. The tinkling of standards on that Plexiglas grand piano, the courtly waiters in their tuxedos, the crazy leopard skin carpet, the lustrous black walls with their dramatically lit art . . . what more could you want in retro luxe? We admit there were times in the past when these glories made up for food that we sometimes felt was overpriced and underwhelming. But on recent visits, those monumental slabs of eponymous beef, the outrageously sinful deep-fried Greenberg potato skins, the intensely flavorful dry-aged New York strip were better than ever. Last visit, we strayed from the well-trodden, four-legged path and also ordered imperial crab-stuffed flounder—a retro dish if ever there was one—and were rewarded with the *ne plus ultra* of this succulently old-fashioned creation. And speaking of old-fashioned, now that Marconi's is defunct, where else can you get a hot fudge sundae for dessert? Don't forget, gentlemen: jacket required. Would you have it any other way?

Roy's

720B Aliceanna Street, 410-659-0099. Expensive.

In a dining scene swimming in excellent seafood, Roy's holds its own. This Hawaiian-based chain showcases a menu awash in seafood and tropical influence. One of many restaurants in Harbor East, Roy's also offers diners a look at the passing scene and a bustling atmosphere that is noisy but fun. Roy's serves sushi and sashimi and some unusual seafood selections, as well as nontraditional preparations of more traditional fare. Take the calamari, for instance. It's probably not like any you have ever eaten. Slightly breaded and fried in a wok, it comes with stir-fried vegetables and a Mongolian chili kick. The blackened island ahi tuna, just warm in the center, provides a milder beginning. Some dishes, such as the ahi, are "Roy's classics," served in all its restaurant. Others are specific to a location, such as the spicy lemon-grass sea scallops. These silver-dollar-sized scallops, each perched atop a vegetable tempura roll, provide an unusual presentation and wonderful flavors. Another entree, a bacon-crusted ono, contrasts a heavy smoked flavor with a mild fish and plays off curry and black Thai rice with a bit too much coconut. The hot chocolate soufflé is a signature dessert large enough for two. The cake, with its hot, gooey center, is luscious with ice cream and raspberry coulis. It takes a while to prepare, so order early or enjoy the wait. It's worth it.

Ruth's Chris Steak House

multiple locations including Pier 5 at the Inner Harbor, 711 Eastern Avenue, 410-230-0033, and 600 Water Street, 410-783-0033. Very Expensive.

The theme of Ruth's Chris Steak House is abundance: lots of dressing on the salads, lots of inquiries from the wait staff about how you are doing, lots of butter sizzling on nearly every plate that comes out from the kitchen. If you've ordered a gigantic steak to nestle in that butter—and why else would you be here?—you're in luck. When it comes to meat, every bite at Ruth's Chris is perfect, most certainly if you order a strip or a T-bone. In a world where restaurants think they're doing customers a favor if they call a pinkish brown steak "medium-rare," this is a place that knows the value of *red*. Nothing else you order will be memorable—not the veggies, not the underseasoned potatoes, not the mammoth desserts. But you won't soon forget the beef. There are several branches in the area, including two downtown that are just blocks, but worlds, apart. The Water Street restaurant has the feel of an old-school club (albeit one that is happy to

count everyone as a member), while the Pier 5 location lights up with tourists, younger diners, and a more modern décor. This is a national chain, still, so everything that arrives on the plate is exactly the same no matter where you're eating it.

Salt

2127 E. Pratt Street, 410-276-5480. Moderate.

Yes, it's impossible to find a parking space anywhere within shouting distance of Patterson Park's Salt; yes, the place is always crowded and loud; and, yes, those massive green lamps above the bar are, uh, peculiar. Oh, and then there are the foie-gras protesters, who seem to show up a lot. But all are tiny inconveniences in the face of Salt's awesomely sterling attributes. Little details, like the remarkable tomato tapenade and house-baked olive bread that arrive the minute you sit down, will instantly make you forget everything but the happiness of being here. With starters like homemade agnolotti stuffed with oxtail and tallegio, and dolloped with roasted grapes and Madeira . . . you won't care if you hiked a mile to get here. Entrees like creamy, chunky monkfish osso buco over toasted faro, smoky bacon, pine nuts, and grilled radicchio are worth wading through a sea of protesters. (Frankly, the dish that causes all the fuss—kobe beef sliders topped with foie gras—is likewise pure heaven.) And the crowds? They're here because, like you, they're eating chef Jason Ambrose's fabulous food and having a fine time. Come feel the noise. Even those crazy lamps start to grow on you after a while.

Sotto Sopra

405 N. Charles Street, 410-625-0534. Expensive.

Sotto Sopra can be considered a Baltimore stalwart, having first bowed in these pages back in 1996. But Riccardo Bosio's comfortable, attractive space continues to serve up fine fare that's worth going back for. We've noticed that the menu has tightened up quite a bit over the last year, and we believe it reflects a renewed focus from the kitchen. On our most recent visit, we eschewed the dining room for a more casual dinner at the bar. It was difficult to resist pigging out, as every menu selection beckoned our taste buds. After homemade pasta smothered in wild mushrooms and veal stock, and an impeccably prepared piece of pompano, we struggled to polish off the warm apple strudel with crème anglaise. But polish it off we did, dear reader, with the last dregs of our delicious bottle of charetto and a little digestive help from an amaro. We keep meaning to check out Sotto Sopra's Opera Night, when a *prix-fixe* menu of \$55 is complemented by live opera singers. It sounds to us like great fun but sells out quickly, so call well in advance if you want to give it a whirl.

Tabrizi's

500 Harborview Drive, 410-727-3663. Moderate to Expensive.

We love a comeback story, especially when the narrative involves the welcome return of a successful and much beloved local restaurateur. Sometime in the 1990s, at the peak of his success, Michael Tabrizi left the business to explore other opportunities, leaving behind a legion of fans devoted to his Mediterranean cooking—his elegant, utterly authentic homemade hummus and baba ghanoush, his lamb-stuffed grilled grape leaves, his tabbouleh and kibbes and kabobs. Back then, such ethnic delights were relatively new to Baltimore; now, the cuisine of the Middle East is everywhere. But when Tabrizi moved into his new, stylish digs at 500 Harbor View last summer, food fans quickly learned that the Master was still, well, the Master. Tabrizi is back, and is, as the tagline goes, better than ever. His Middle Eastern favorites will remind you of why you fell in love with all those lovely mezze in the first place; his way with grilled seafood gives the local competition a serious run for its money; and his sophisticated French, Asian, and Italian-inflected entrees open up the repertoire just enough to keep things interesting. Add to that the quietly posh surrounds, the spectacular view (this may be the one place in town where view and food are evenly matched), crack service, a decidedly

interesting wine list, and it's easy to see why we're expecting the Michael Tabrizi story to be a blockbuster hit.

Tersiguel's

8293 Main Street, Ellicott City, 410-465-4004. Expensive.

Enter the vestibule of the quaint, 19th century home turned restaurant and you'll feel like a family guest rather than just another paying customer. You're greeted enthusiastically as coats are whisked away and you're escorted to one of the six intimate dining rooms. The staff is solicitous but not obtrusive. And the pleasantness continues until you walk out the door with a wrapped, beribboned packet of biscotti "from the chef for your morning coffee." On our last visit, we settled into the intimate bar area with two tables for two and a fireplace casting a romantic glow with tiny lights. It didn't take long for our love affair with Tersiguel's to begin anew. How can you not be seduced by chickpea crepes filled with goat cheese and topped with sun-dried tomatoes, duck in two styles—leg confit and seared breast in a piquant apple reduction with red cabbage and spaetzle—and *coquilles St. Jacques*, plump scallops and red-beet risotto drizzled with a passion-fruit vinaigrette? The flavor flirtation continues through dessert with an ethereal pear tarte Tatin and a rich coffee brûlée. Isn't love grand?

Three...

2901 E. Baltimore Street, 410-327-3333. Moderate.

We've already sung the praises of Three... a few months ago, so this installment is simply an affirmation of what we already knew. And that is that Three..., the punctuation-laden Patterson Park bistro, is a great place to grab a meal and a drink. And there certainly is drink aplenty, from organic apple cider to intoxicating red wine from isolated villages like Montpeyrux, France. Food here is focused on small plates, allowing for a dazzling parade of flavors to cross your table on any given visit. On one such occasion, we helped ourselves to chick-pea soup, endive stuffed with grilled eggplant, roasted fingerling potatoes and arugula, roasted beets drizzled with fine extra virgin olive oil, a venison chop, fried cauliflower fritters, and a slice of Dangerously Delicious Key lime pie. As you can imagine, we were in a stupor at the end, and that has as much to do with the fact that our bill came to \$86 after all that. Include the most expensive bottle of wine on the list, and our tab still clocked in under \$150 for two absolutely stuffed and sated food lovers—two diners that will always be happy to return to Three...

Timothy Dean Bistro

1717 Eastern Avenue, 410-534-5650. Expensive.

About three years ago, Timothy Dean—protégé of the likes of Jean-Louis Palladin and Alain Ducasse—landed in Baltimore after a short but peripatetic career in some of the swankiest kitchens around. His charming, jazzy little Fells Point boîte was an immediate hit, due largely to Dean's rich and imaginative cooking and his equally expansive, hail-fellow-well-met personality, often in evidence at the front of the house. But service problems and kitchen snafus had always dogged the place, and that unevenness was one reason TD disappeared from this list last year. Since we've always been big fans of Dean's New American and slightly Southern take on French cuisine (think fabulous butter-poached lobster with decadent macaroni and cheese, or foie gras with rhubarb and huckleberry sauce), we're delighted to report that those service issues seem to have disappeared, perhaps due to the hiring of a consultant a while back. And the food? Better than ever. Try the velvety Palladin chestnut soup with braised duck leg ragout and shallot confit to start; continue with a simple but divine free-range roasted chicken (a guy who's mastered this art always gets our nod) with white truffle mousseline; and, to finish (just in case you haven't sated your truffle fix), try the deeply decadent black truffle ice cream. A bonus is the eminently reasonable wine list studded with terrific bargains. TD himself is just as much in evidence as always, and still charmingly cagey about his recipes. Is it really plain old grapeseed oil that gives your spectacular crab cake that crispy, smoky goodness, Chef Dean?

The Wine Market

921 E. Fort Avenue, 410-244-6166. Moderate.

What a lovely, inexpensive way to spend an evening, strolling around The Wine Market's copiously stocked storefront wine shop is. Pick out a couple of good bottles, and then stroll over to the big dining room in back to sample them (for a delightfully reasonable corkage fee of \$9, way below markup) with the restaurant's terrific, wine-friendly food. Small plates, like the three-cheese plate with quince paste and cardamom spiced almonds, or a killer house-made pork pâté with apricot brandy compote, vie with fabulous flatbread pizzas as perfect nibbles for sharing. More substantial starters—smoked trout Napoleon layered with wonton crisps and green apples is a standout—could comprise a light dinner paired with salad, but why pass up the chance to sample the meltingly good African barbecued lamb shank with plaintains, yams, and dried currant hash. Amble back to the wine shop and pick up, say, a nice South African pinotage, and you've got yourself a fine pairing. Ah, the possibilities are endless. Well, not quite. With 900 bottles for perusing, you've got precisely 899 pairings to go.

Woodberry Kitchen

2010 Clipper Park Road, 410-464-8000. Moderate.

It is into the current atmosphere of concept restaurants and stylized fine dining that Spike Gjerde has pitched the Baltimore dining scene a major curve ball. Along with sommelier and partner Nelson Carey, he has opened a place devoted to serving you supper: uncomplicated, unadorned, and decidedly unpretentious. This simple idea is married to a commitment to recyclable and renewable approaches that inform every aspect of the endeavor, from the reclaimed wood bar to partnerships with local producers who practice low-impact farming. We're already devotees of affordable favorites like fried squash rings, cider-brined pork chops, and especially carrots and their tops—succulent roots finished in a sauce derived from the greens. But we're looking forward to what warmer weather brings; Spike's dedication to local and sustainable farming means that his menu is highly seasonal, so don't become too wedded to any one dish. Nelson Carey has populated the wine list with organic and biodynamic offerings from around the world, and several local favorites as well. The atmosphere could be described as rustic minimalist, providing the warmth of a lodge but stopping well short of being overtly Yellowstone. Kids are welcome with a special menu of their own, and we're pretty sure this is the only joint in the area that employs a barista, ensuring the very last thing you taste from Woodberry Kitchen is as delicious and lovingly prepared as the first.