

The Year's Best Places To ...

From charcuterie to condiments, our favorite culinary offerings throughout the Corridor

BY LIZ JOHNSON

Roasted rack of lamb, artichoke puree & lemon from Tinto



At the table, the best doesn't have to mean the most fancy. Fine dining has its place, and you don't need us to tell you about the Per Ses, the Le Bec Fins and the Citronelles of the Northeast. Your concierge can do that.

Instead, our "bests" are restaurants that get you excited. Ones where you can take a bite of delicious food, smile and kick your friend under the table because you're so happy. Some of them you've likely heard of (o ya, Blue Hill at Stone Barns); some of them you might not have (Surf Taco, Swoon). But all are the best at what they do—whether that's fancy or not.

Pop a Liquid Olive Minibar

(in Cafe Atlantico) 405 8th St., NW, Washington, D.C.

202-393-0812; cafeatlantico.com

There are only 6 seats at Minibar, the restaurant-within-a-restaurant tucked

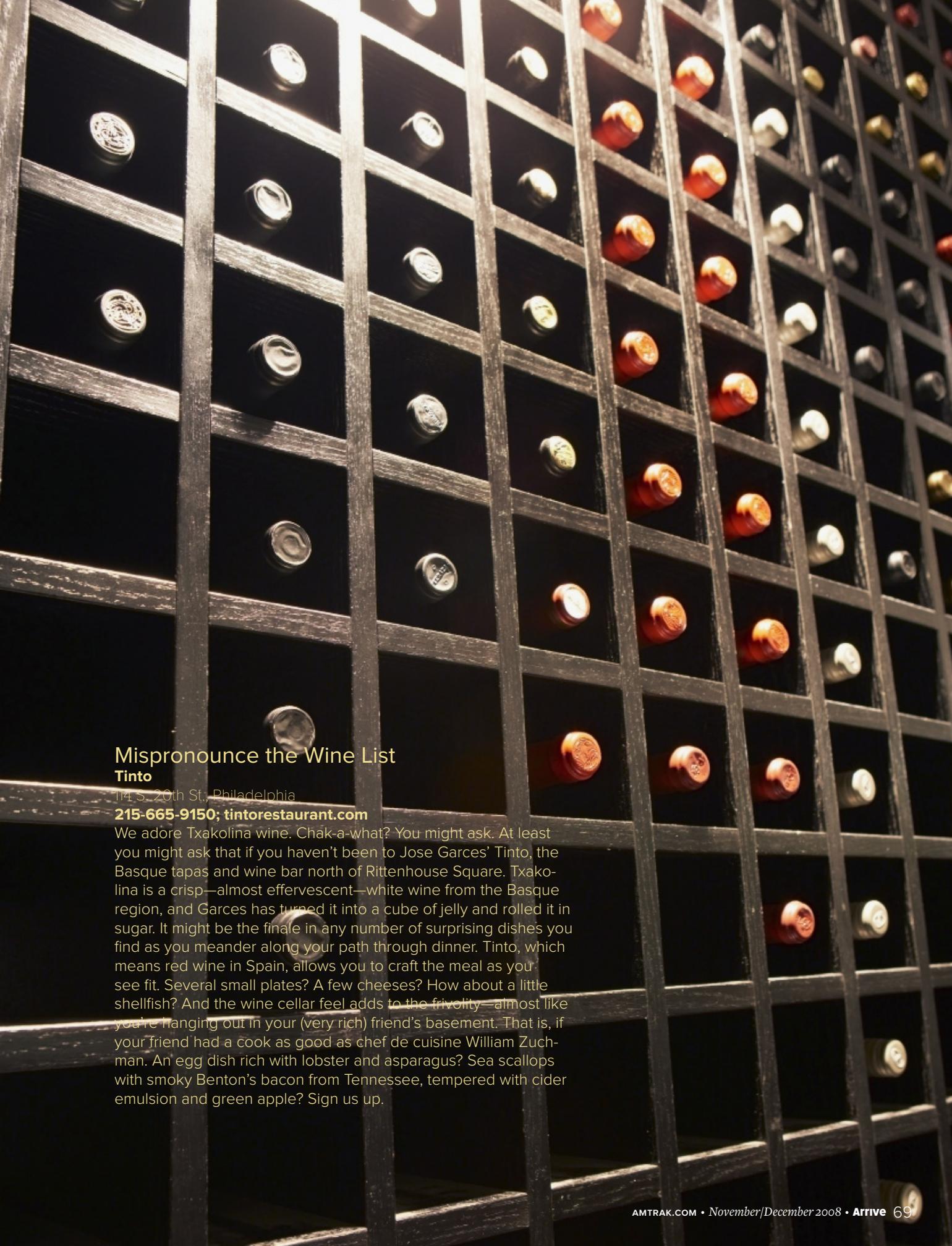
in the corner of the second floor of Cafe Atlantico in the Penn Quarter. They are almost always booked. There is a good reason for this. After 5 1/2 years, chef-owner José Andrés and chef de cuisine Katsuya Fukushima are still serving some of the city's innovative food.

The cooking style—hypermodern, which combines cooking and chemistry to come up with new textures and flavors—might be trendy (or even a bit passé), but the food is still assertive, surprising, bold and fun. Even after 30 tiny courses, who would expect an olive to pop, then melt in your mouth so you can drink it? Or a tumbleweed of beets to dissolve in your mouth yet taste like a terra chip? Just go. You'll see.

Best Fish Taco outside San Diego Surf Taco, N.J.

Several locations, surftaco.com

Perfectly crispy, lightly fried cod. Crunchy white cabbage. Creamy, tart sauce with lime and cilantro. All wrapped in a soft tortilla and sprinkled



Mispronounce the Wine List

Tinto

114 S. 20th St., Philadelphia

215-665-9150; tintorestaurant.com

We adore Txakolina wine. Chak-a-what? You might ask. At least you might ask that if you haven't been to Jose Garces' Tinto, the Basque tapas and wine bar north of Rittenhouse Square. Txakolina is a crisp—almost effervescent—white wine from the Basque region, and Garces has turned it into a cube of jelly and rolled it in sugar. It might be the finale in any number of surprising dishes you find as you meander along your path through dinner. Tinto, which means red wine in Spain, allows you to craft the meal as you see fit. Several small plates? A few cheeses? How about a little shellfish? And the wine cellar feel adds to the frivolity—almost like you're hanging out in your (very rich) friend's basement. That is, if your friend had a cook as good as chef de cuisine William Zuchman. An egg dish rich with lobster and asparagus? Sea scallops with smoky Benton's bacon from Tennessee, tempered with cider emulsion and green apple? Sign us up.



Forget About Nonna's Sunday Gravy

Cinghiale

822 Lancaster St., Baltimore

410-547-8282; cinghiale-osteria.com

When a town's food scene is known for Italian-American red sauces coming out of its Little Italy, it's a hard sell to convince people authentic Northern Italian cuisine is worth the diversion. With Cinghiale, which means wild boar in Italian, chef Cindy Wolf and husband and co-owner Tony Foreman have done just that.

Their modern, two-pronged approach to Italian cuisine—an osteria with white tablecloths and mahogany on one side of the restaurant; an enoteca with cheeses, salami and 40 wines by the glass on the other—has taken the city by surprise—and for good reason. Fried artichokes with basil mayonnaise. Risotto with pears and Parmesan. Housemade sausage tucked into half-moon ravioli and anointed with sage and butter. And of course, the eponymous cinghiale, which is served over gnocchi with lavender oil.

with tomatoes and jalapenos. It's the restaurant's namesake—the Surf Taco—and it's the ideal beach meal. There are seven Surf Taco branches along the Jersey Shore, and an eighth is on the way. The restaurants' California-style vibe—reggae on the radio, bright blue walls and orange ceilings, a blackboard of specials written in neon-colored chalk—is so laid back you can go with your bathing suit on, but this taco is so good you'll want to come back after you're showered for dinner. Or try the quesadillas, burritos and wraps, if you must.

Unearth the Lost Art of Charcuterie

Bar Boulud

1900 Broadway (across from Lincoln Center between 63rd and 64th streets) Manhattan

212-595-0303; danielnyc.com

There's a glass case along the eating bar at Bar Boulud, and you would be wise to sit in front of it. That way, even if you don't have room to try each variety of charcuterie, you can still marvel at their hand-crafted beauty: terrines glistening with aspic, pâtés with pockets of pork, rillettes so rich you want to take a bath in them. Yes, it's superchef Daniel Boulud's menu. But chef charcutier Sylvain Gasdon, who studied under master charcutier Gilles Verot, is offering dishes like we've never seen in the U.S. His pâté grand-mère with chicken liver, pork and cognac is utterly ethereal—and traditional; it's like you're in Lyons. But there's innovation, too: lamb terrine with eggplant and sweet potato; beef-cheek compote with onion confit and pistachio; tourte of duck, foie gras and figs. Find a spot in front of that case and order a slice of something. You'll truly marvel.

Be Punished for Desiring Delicious Food

Momofuku Ko

163 First Ave. (between 10th and 11th streets), Manhattan

No phone. Momofuku.com

Reservations are only available online, and the web site opens exactly at 10 a.m. daily. By 10:01, all seats are gone. But despite what some are calling the most annoying reservation system ever invented, and despite the fact that

there's no menu, no hard booze, and that one of the most talked-about dishes is an English muffin with pork fat, Momofuku Ko became one of the most celebrated restaurants of 2008. The chef, David Chang, has been worshipped in every publication from the Eater blog to *The New Yorker*, and for good reason: the spicy buttermilk-poppysseed dressing that accompanies his sashimi (flake or scallops, mostly); the "smoked" egg whose yolk oozes out into a caviar dish

and onions soubise (they are mixed with a Béchamel-based cheese sauce); the grated foie gras with lychee and pine nut brittle. The dishes are inventive and delicious and take the original Momofuku concept of casual Korean-American cooking to haute cuisine—except for the uncomfortable chairs and the blaring music. If you ever get a reservation, the experience will leave you saying, "Thank you, sir, may I have another?"

Best Place to Ignore Doctor's Orders

Granville Moore's

1238 H St., NE, Washington, D.C.

202-399-2546; granvillemoores.com

Granville Moore's is named after Dr. Granville Moore, and every once in a while the phone still rings with calls for the family medical history. That is, when the phone isn't tied up by the staff, which is making calls to the throngs of folks who leave their mobile numbers at the door, hoping for a table to open up. Granville Moore's is a gritty restaurant, and it calls itself a gastropub with a Belgian tilt, which means it serves French-and-Belgian-style food in a pub setting (wooden beams and exposed brick). When it opened in late 2007, it was among the first dining destinations in the edgy Atlas District, and that's mostly because of the mussels. There are six kinds (try the Au Pesto, made with walnut-arugula pesto). (Of course there are frites, too: these are hand cut and served with a choice of six sauces.) And to wash it down? A list of more than 50 Belgian beers. Just don't tell the doctor.



Eat the Landscape

Blue Hill at Stone Barns

630 Bedford Rd., Pocantico Hills, N.Y.
914-366-9600; Bluehillstonebarns.com

A meal at Blue Hill at Stone Barns might start with peas. That's it. Peas. They're grown in the fields just outside. The meal might end with a pristine lamb chop, garnished with tiny pea shoots. You'll certainly know where they came from—and what they taste like. That is, unless you choose to ignore that in favor of concentrating on the intense flavor of the sauce, the brilliant pairing of the wine or the professional service of the staff. You get what you put in to a meal at Blue Hill. If you're interested that the hen-of-the-woods mushroom weighed 30 pounds when a forager brought it in, you'll come away enlightened. But if you'd prefer to admire the architecture of the Norman-style barns that once housed Rockefeller cattle or the dapple of the light in the mural of the Hudson Valley farm scene—no one's stopping you. Our advice? Put yourself in chef Dan Barber's capable hands and let the meal come as it may. It will be blissful.

Travel without Leaving the Neighborhood

Oleana

134 Hampshire St., Cambridge, Mass.
617-661-0505; oleanarestaurant.com

Oleana is a simple neighborhood restaurant. But it has the kind of flavors that make you look knowingly at your dinner companion and nod. Chef-owner Ana Sortun likes to use the sultry spices—cumin, cinnamon, turmeric—to flavor her seasonal cuisine. She is influenced by Turkey and the Middle East, and her menu might have appetizers like rabbit schawarma with tahini, radish, cucumber and sumac or her much-celebrated deviled eggs with tuna and black olives. For entrees, Sortun is especially adept at fish. (If it's on the menu, try the halibut wrapped in a leaf, pine nuts, currants and sorrel butter.) The surprise-your-mouth flavors continue into desserts, which are made by pastry chef Maura Kilpatrick. She'll do goat's milk ice cream and flavor it with rose petal jam, and she also plays with Middle Eastern textures, like last



summer's nougat glaze with poached nectarines. If it's nice outside, be sure to request a table in the garden; if it's not, ask for one by the fire.

o ya

9 East St., Boston
617-654-9900; oyarestaurantboston.com

For a restaurant named after the Japanese expression “gee whiz,” o ya certainly has something to say “aw shucks” about. *Boston Magazine* named it the best new restaurant in the city. *The New York*

Discover a New Condiment

Duck Fat

43 Middle St., Portland, Me.

207-774-8080

Everyone talks about the fries here. And for good reason.

The potatoes are grown at Skylandia Farm in Aroostook County, cooked in duck fat, served in a cone and are very close to perfect. But there's something else very special at this tiny (a few tables and a some stools at a bar along a brick wall) neighborhood cafe, owned by Rob Evans (Hugo's) and Nancy Pugh: the truffle ketchup. Sure, there are delicious panini, a \$5 milkshake (that goes for \$4), soups and salads—even dessert (the churros are popular) and homemade sodas (try the ginger). But there's nothing like sitting at a cafe table outside on one of Portland's rare sunny days and dipping your French fry—perfectly-crunchy-on-the-outside, warm-airy-and-tender on the inside—into some earthy, rich and satisfying ketchup. Yes, it's the kind you want to slurp. It's that good.

Times named it the best new restaurant in the country. And *Food & Wine* called it one of the top 10 in the world. And yet the restaurant is unpretentious, cozy and warm. This could have to do with its intimacy; a former firehouse with brick walls and concrete floors, it has only 37 seats, almost half at the sushi bar. But it more than likely has to do with the food: the most pristine of ingredients showcased with an artist's eye attuned to appearance, but also flavor and texture. A crispy shiso leaf alongside buttery

lobster. A tiny microgreen balanced atop of the most delicate slice of salmon. A single kumamoto oyster with tiny pearls of watermelon and a cucumber mignonette. These dishes read like they're delicate, but you'll be dazzled.

Forget You're Miles Away From a Metropolis

Swoon Kitchenbar

340 Warren St., Hudson

518-822-8938

At Swoon Kitchenbar, you might find a cookbook called *Pork & Sons* on top of the zinc bar and a guy wearing red suspenders behind it. Between that and the earthen crocks that decorate the lounge and the billowy curtains that soften the dining room, you'll feel like you're in a quaint little village in the country. That is, until you eat the food. Nearly all of it is sourced locally, and every provenance is listed on the back of the menu, from the farm that raises the pork to the person that picks the flowers. And it's delicious (the food; not the flowers). Lusty beef with a rich red wine sauce. Delicate greens with a local blue cheese. Runny poached eggs on duck confit hash potatoes. This is real food, cooked simply and without pretense.

Remember Fine Dining is Fun

The White Barn Inn

37 Beach Ave., Kennebunkport, Me.

207-967-2321

These days, it might seem unusual for waiters to wear white tuxedo jackets, especially at a place that's only a stone's throw from the beach. But most of the beachgoers at the White Barn Inn probably weren't making sandcastles with the kids; they likely were lounging on the yacht. Whichever you were doing, you'll revel in the luxury of the restaurant: its soaring wooden-beamed ceilings and old hay loft, the twinkling of a piano, the affable but professional service. Chef Jonathan Cartwright's food—scallop on salsify puree with American paddlefish caviar, prawn carpaccio with passion fruit and yuzu, pesto-glazed lamb—is well-balanced and creative, and the restaurant stands tall among the clam shacks and tourists traps, shining a beacon of light for gourmands passing in the night. 🍴