



## Locally Grown

Neighborhood restaurants are more creative and delicious than ever—and easy on the environment



BY LIZ JOHNSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN VOTE

People often ask me for restaurant recommendations—until recently, mostly for places for occasion dining: birthdays, anniversaries, visiting in-laws, that sort of thing. But the other day, I got a different sort of request.

“We’re in the theater district,” my friend said. “Where can we get something good to eat? Nothing fancy,” she clarified. “Just good food.”

I thought for a moment.

“Don’t you hate when people do this?” she laughed.

On the contrary. I love helping someone find a great meal at a great price. And lately, coming up with a neighborhood

restaurant to recommend—one that has a creative menu, serves delicious food and doesn’t break the bank—has been getting easier than ever.

Sure, everyone’s been talking about eating local and going green, and that’s admirable. So, to me, it defeats the purpose of “eating local” if you’re driving two hours to dine at the fancypants restaurant just because it procures its butter from the dairy down the road.

What about the pub in your own town? Mine—the Olde Village Inne, or OVI, in Nyack, N.Y.—buys its beer from a local craft brewer, and the bar snacks, especially the wings, are made with care. But when



Left to right:  
The entrance  
to J's Oyster  
restaurant; J's  
Maine lobster  
dinner; and what it's  
all about—oysters.

it comes down to it, the kitchen orders its ingredients from a big distributor.

That's OK. I figure if it's close enough for me to walk there, I'm saving some of the energy and gas the OVI spent in food miles to get the vegetable oil for my French fries. (And you can do the same, even if you're traveling on business.)

People might be tempted to spend more of their restaurant dollars at the neighborhood café because of hard economic times, figuring there just isn't money for white tablecloths and tuxedoed waiters.

Could be. But there are always going to be people (tourists, business travel-

ers, the very wealthy) who dine at high-end restaurants, no matter what the economic climate.

I think there's another reason it's easier to find good local spots lately: There are just better restaurants out there these days—period. It's a sure sign of an evolving, maturing food scene. Anybody can pay a lot of money for a great meal. Show me a place where I want to pop in for a glass of wine and a couple appetizers on a Tuesday night.

#### **Rockwellian Meals**

I work in White Plains, N.Y. My commute takes about 20 minutes along the Cross

Westchester Expressway. Every night, as I steer my 15-year-old green Camry toward the entrance ramp, it takes all my willpower not to turn the wheel and head toward Peniche in downtown White Plains.

Peniche is exactly the new breed of neighborhood restaurant I applaud: a Portuguese-style tapas joint. It might be a bit more upscale than some people's locals—there are walnut tables and a white marble bar—but it's not so fancy that you can't wear jeans, or even shorts in the summer. The menu has enough selections to keep it interesting, but it's not so mammoth that you can't choose.

Sometimes I'll settle in at the bar and

Clockwise from top left: J's Oyster tucked away on the Portland pier; seafood bouillabaisse; Chef Jacob Pitcher; an essential dining lobster tool, the cracker; a chowder companion, oyster crackers; interior detail at J's Oyster.



order sliced-to-order Spanish hams and cheeses; the always interesting selection is served on a beautiful wooden cutting board. Other nights I'll take a table with a few friends and order several courses: a plate of lamb chops, sliders with blue cheese or a seasonal special such as heirloom tomato salad (in summer) or roasted butternut squash with candied pecans (in fall).

"It's the way I like to eat," says chef-owner Anthony Goncalves. He likes to push the envelope when he cooks, and he does just that at his upscale restaurant, 42, atop the Ritz-Carlton a block away. But when he goes out? He's looking for a comfortable place where he can graze the menu. A place like Peniche.

Peniche has all the things Don Rockwell says make for a great neighborhood restaurant. Rockwell, an experienced eater who runs *dcdining.com* and a chat board about dining in Washington, D.C., at *donrockwell.com*, e-mailed me a list of requirements a restaurant should meet

before being considered your local neighborhood fave.

Seriously.

Here's the list, with my comments in parenthesis.

1. A casual, comfortable atmosphere. This could be a dive bar, a pub-type atmosphere or a casual, family eatery. Nothing fancy, but it also can't be sterile. (Check.)

2. Well-prepared, reliable food that appeals to a broad base of people. Quite often, this means pizza, steak, fried chicken, basic fish and meat preps. (My favorites also do more creative dishes.)

3. Inexpensive-to-moderate prices—somewhere you can go on a Tuesday night and not bat an eye. (What's with the Tuesday night thing?)

4. Somewhere you *wouldn't* go on your 50th birthday or 10th wedding anniversary, unless there are sentimental reasons. (Good point, for most people, though I must admit I stopped by the OVI after my wedding reception.)

5. A good beer list and/or a good wine

list. Especially with wines, moderate pricing is imperative. (Indeed. Absolutely imperative.)

6. Friendly, casual, "neighborly" service. Nothing pretentious or stuffy. (Ever.)

7. A place that makes you feel comfortable; a place where you'd go to ground yourself after a rough day at work. (A third place, you might say, after home and work.)

8. Child friendly, but not child friendly to the extreme, if that makes sense. (I get you, Don. I might want to take my well-behaved 5-year-old nephew, but I don't want other kids screaming and banging their personal DVD players on the tables around us.)

Rockwell might also add "off the beaten track" to his list.

"Neighborhood restaurants aren't things you can stumble across," he tells me later by phone. "You have to live in the neighborhood or you have to know they're there. They're not sitting near a metro stop or near a hotel."

## in the hood

**Barbone**, 186 Avenue B, Manhattan. 212-254-6047, barbonenyc.com

**Bar Pilar**, 1833 14th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 202-265-1751, barpilar.com

**Cork Wine Bar**, 1720 14th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 202-265-2675, corkdc.com

**Da Andrea**, 557 Hudson St., Manhattan. 212-367-1979, biassanot.com

**Employees Only**, 510 Hudson St., Manhattan. 212-242-3021, employeesonlynyc.com

**Evening Star Café**, 2000 Mount Vernon Ave., Alexandria, Va. 703-549-5051, eveningstarcafe.net

**The Freelance Café**, 506 Piermont Ave., Piermont, N.Y. 845-365-3250, xaviars.com/freelance/index.html

**J's Oyster**, 5 Portland Pier, Portland, Me. 207-772-4828.

**La Riviera Trattoria**, 421 Piaget Ave., Clifton, N.J. 973-478-4181.

**Malatesta Trattoria**, 649 Washington St., Manhattan. 212-741-1207.

**Mercato Restaurant**, 1216 Spruce St., Philadelphia. 215-985-2962, mercatobyob.com

**Momofuku Ssäm Bar**, 207 Second Ave., Manhattan. momofuku.com

**Olde Village Inne**, 97 Main Street, Nyack, N.Y. 845-358-1160.

**Peniche**, 175 Main St., White Plains, N.Y. 914-421-5012, penichetapas.com

**The Smith**, 55 Third Ave., Manhattan. 212-420-9800, ctrnyc.com/th smith/index.html

**Toros Cuisine**, 489 Hazel St., Clifton, N.J. 973-772-8032, torosrestaurant.com

### The Restaurant Around the Corner

Take Portland, Maine, for example. Right on the waterfront is a very well-known—very obvious and easy-to-spot—restaurant where all the tourists go: Portland Lobster Company. It's bright and cheery and the lobster roll is very popular.

But just poke around the corner. Right on the docks, you'll find J's Oyster.

It's dark, with wood paneling and low ceilings, and a rowdy crowd gathers around the horseshoe-shaped bar to drink cold Allagash on tap. There is a gigantic pile of oysters ready for shucking on an island in the center of the bar, and the lobster rolls come on a heavy, industrial white plate with chips and a pickle. The lobster comes without mayonnaise, unless you ask for it.

I wouldn't have known to go to J's unless a friend tipped me off. It was my favorite lobster roll of the weekend. (Yes, I ate many.)

That's the thing about neighborhood restaurants, says Josh Ozersky, the senior editor of restaurants at New York's *citysearch.com* and a blogger at *the-feedbag.com*. They're geared toward making a few good things really well, "that people will come back to eat over and over."

Even if you're just visiting, as I was at J's.

"It's smart for people who are coming

in from out of town to experience that as well as the four-star, bells-and-whistles type restaurants," he says. "The measure and flavor of a restaurant city isn't in the places that are in the global guidebooks. You wouldn't want to go to New York and do nothing but visit Times Square and Ground Zero and see nothing but other tourists."

He's right, because the tourists aren't going to make friends with you at the table next to yours. They won't steer you toward their favorite appetizer or tell you that they've met the beermaker responsible for your draft. The tourists won't make you feel warm and welcome.

"The feeling of going and eating in a restaurant with the people who live in that neighborhood is a way of traveling and visiting that's more genuine and meaningful than just paying your money and eating at a rich person's restaurant," says Ozersky.

He thinks neighborhood restaurants should have a real personality—"not like an airport bar"—and serve "simple food, very well executed, at a price that can get people to come in on a Tuesday night."

Right. A Tuesday night.

Surely you already have your own local favorite—your J's or OVI or Peniche. But how do you find these gems in a neighborhood other than your own?

You could start with newspapers and

**Right: The main dining room at Peniche. Below: Chef Goncalves' sliders.**



magazines, but more often than not, the print press is covering the big fancy opening of the season. A better place to investigate is online. Check out *chowhound.com*, where you can often find forum discussions of not-so-known places. *Roadfood.com*, a guide to the restaurants on the blue roads by *Gourmet* writers Jane and Michael Stern, is also helpful.

Or browse the blogs. In New York, *eater.com*, New York magazine's Grub Street and Ozersky's The Feedbag are reliable ones; in Boston, check out *eatanddestroy.com* and *The Food Monkey*. Philadelphia has *hollyeats.com* and *philafoodie.blogspot.com*. I'm also a fan of *Baltimore Sun* writer Elizabeth Large's Top Ten Tuesdays on her blog Dining@Large. She compiles Top 10 lists along with readers, and you can find anything from cheap eats to wine bars to restaurants that are off the beaten path. Even Frank Bruni, the restaurant critic for the *New York Times*, listed his favorite locals for a Times Topics Web page—search Google for “Frank Bruni's Casual Favorites” and it'll pop right up.

And Rockwell—the guy with the list—loves the “big, luscious, fall-apart short rib” at Evening Star Café in Alexandria, Va.; the “unusually good food” at Cork on 14th Street N.W.; and “the immensely talented bartender” at Bar Pilar across the street.

And on a typical Tuesday night, you'll likely find Ozersky at Barbone in the East Village or at Employees Only or Da Andrea in the West Village.

But the best thing to do is ask the locals. Ask the person in front

of you in the coffee line. Ask the guy at the reception desk before your meeting. Or just ask your friends, especially if they love food.

My friends were very obliging:

My friend Ted loves food. And he loves Mercato in Philadelphia. “Awesome BYO with outstanding cheese plate, Italian comfort food, etc.,” he e-mailed.

My friend Karen says her local is La Riviera Trattoria in Clifton, N.J. “We affectionately call it La Riv,” she says. “Portions are well sized, food is fairly priced and it's really tasty.” Also in Clifton, her new favorite is Toros—a tucked-away Turkish enclave on Hazel Street with “the best, freshest shepherd's salad I've ever eaten.”

My friend Kara is a big fan of The Smith on Third Avenue and 11th Street in Manhattan. “It's a stone's throw from NYU, so it's reasonably priced and open until the wee hours,” she told me. “Cozy bistro-style comfort food—I love their Alsatian pizza. Amazing bar with creative and classic drinks and a great selection of beers and wine by the glass. They do a kick-ass Aviation.”

Me? Well, on Tuesdays it's probably Peniche.

Mondays, the OVI. Wednesdays? The Freelance Café in Piermont, N.Y. Thursdays? Momofuku Ssäm Bar in the East Village. Fridays? I like Malatesta in the West Village. But Saturdays?

On Saturdays you'll find me at home. After all, there's a reason I'm so familiar with the restaurants in my neighborhood. It's where I live. 🍴

