

# THE CITY'S BEST NEW RESTAURANTS

2025

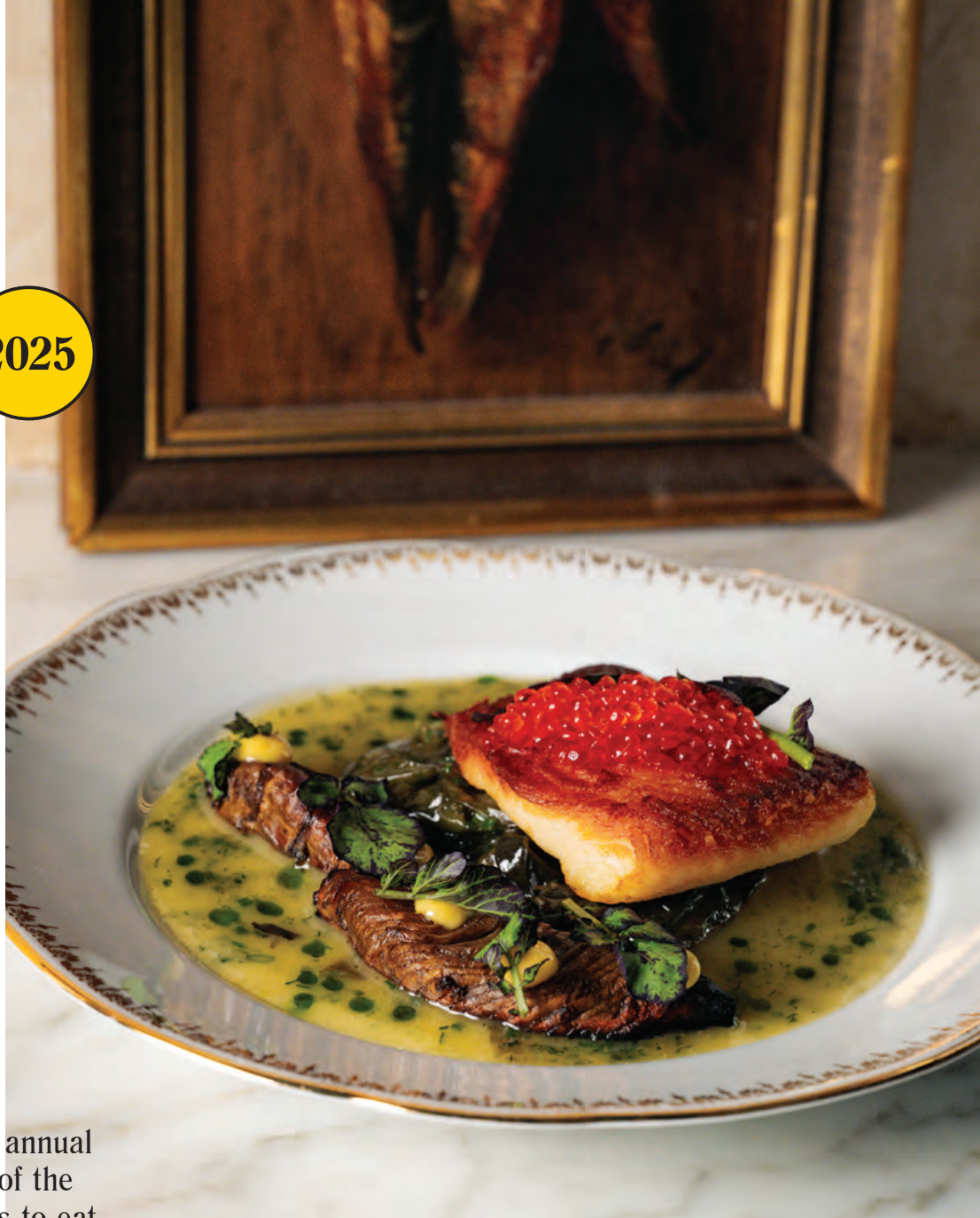
Our 43rd annual ranking of the best places to eat right now

BY LIZA AGRBA,  
CAROLINE AKSICH  
AND ERIN  
HERSHBERG

IT WASN'T SO long ago that Toronto chefs eschewed the word *fusion*. Even dishes like foie gras-stuffed dumplings or kimchi-topped poutine were instead dubbed “global cuisine” or “modern Canadian.” In the industry, fusion was taboo, the other F word. But everything old is new again, and fusion is back in a big way. And why not? In a multicultural city like Toronto, having many cooks in the kitchen is a good thing. This year’s list of best new restaurants includes a Korean Ecuadorian diner, a supper club that showcases regional Chinese dishes tweaked with seasonal Canadian ingredients and a Parkdale chaat house that makes a mean Pakistani Sloppy Joe. It also includes more than one Palestinian restaurant and

eastern European everything—suddenly schnitzel is the new steak.

But the top restaurant this year is a pub—albeit the most elegant one the city has ever seen. Behind it is Jen Agg, the woman who introduced Toronto to nose-to-tail dining and dared to open a fancy wine bar in Kensington Market. Now she’s at it again, in a former auto body shop on Geary Avenue. Where mechanics once serviced cars, guests now indulge in gussied-up British staples, ice-cold martinis and bumps of sturgeon caviar. Only Agg, famous for her powers of transformation, could take a grease-stained concrete bunker and turn it into a drop-dead gorgeous restaurant where there isn’t a single bad seat in the house—not even the one tucked under the stairs.





FOR A WHILE NOW, Geary Avenue has been quietly edging out Ossington as Toronto's hippest strip, but the opening of Jen Agg's new restaurant, General Public, last summer was the clincher. This comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Agg's contributions to Toronto's food scene. Over the past 17 years, she has transformed neighbourhoods with her innovative concepts. In 2008, she opened the Black Hoof on what was then a sleepy section of Dundas West. In 2017, she opened Grey Gardens, a wine bar, in Kensington Market—a location no high-end restaurateur would touch. General Public, Agg's most ambitious project to date, is poised to elevate Geary as well. It's an elegant 100-seat, day-to-night pub—and there's nothing generic about it.

Before Agg got to it, the blocky concrete building was an auto body shop. Now it's a splashy two-level space that Agg has described as "part Narnia, part fancy British pub and part '80s cocaine dream." The main level is all curvy banquettes and olive-green velvet, with a cathedral-like bar and warm-wood everything. Meanwhile, the mezzanine, decked out in peach and rose and pink flamingos, is giving *Golden Girls*.

That business-downstairs-party-upstairs vibe matches chef James Santon's menu of serious pub fare with a playful side. For lunch, there are soft-boiled "dippy eggs" served with sourdough toast soldiers. The breakfast sandwich ingeniously incorporates a hashbrown patty. And the pig's head terrine, gloriously porky, panko-coated and fried into a croquette, contains some of that Black Hoof DNA, as does the black pudding, which shows up next to a couple of fried eggs. Jimmy Dean this is not.

Dinner brings more delicious dichotomous dishes. A bowl of fried clams and mussels is a grown-up take on popcorn chicken. Paper-thin slices of bluefin carpaccio, adorned with crunchy cheddar tuille and malt vinegar aioli, tastes like a luxe version of a tuna melt. And the Nordic shrimp trifle—a layered dish of punchy cocktail sauce, itty-bitty shrimp and green goddess avocado mousse, served with a stack of saltines—is what happens when a retro appetizer and a classic dessert get together over one too many of the bar's pre-batched gin martinis. There's also rib-eye, roast chicken in a lip-smacking leek vinaigrette and schnitzel that, in a surprise twist, is made with lion's mane mushrooms. Of course there's also offal, which shows up in the beef-and-tongue pie, tucked under layers of golden-brown pastry petals, and in the surf and turf, where fried sweetbreads sit next to a poached lobster claw in a pool of beurre monté.

The restaurant's dual personality reveals Agg's understanding that indulgence can be a high-low affair. It can mean happy-hour burgers and pints of house lager or spendy seafood towers chased with Chablis. At most pubs, being offered "bubbles and a bump" could spell trouble, but here it's a cheeky \$15 combo: a shot of champagne and two grams of sturgeon caviar. We wouldn't expect anything less from the woman who brought us the bone marrow luge.



Housed in a former auto body shop, General Public proves it's what's inside that counts



NO. 1

# GENERAL PUBLIC



PREVIOUS PAGE BY DANIEL NEUHAUS. GENERAL PUBLIC BY SHLOMI AMIGA AND DEREK SHAPTON

201 GEARY AVE.,  
GENERALPUBLIC.CA

Jen Agg's gorgeous new British pub on Geary

# YAN DINING ROOM

NO.  
2

195 DUNDAS ST. W.,  
HONGSHING.COM/YAN

Chef Eva Chin's  
sort-of-secret  
neo-Chinese  
supper club



YAN BY JOSHUA BEST AND BORIS MELEV

Dinners at Yan are loud, fun, family-style affairs

**I**N THE PRIVATE dining room at Hong Shing, a 28-year-old Chinatown stalwart best known for satisfying late-night General Tso chicken cravings, there's a whole other restaurant. Three nights a week, 26 guests squeeze in for one of chef Eva Chin's neo-Chinese feasts, which are equal parts Michelin polish, Ontario terroir and Chinese soul.

For a while, fusion fell out of favour in Toronto restaurants, but for Chin, it's always been gospel. (The former Kojin Momofuku chef made waves with her Loco Moco smash burger, an Asian Pacific take on the ubiquitous patty.) At Yan, regional Chinese influences collide in unexpected ways—like Cantonese-style sea bream, aged for seven days and swimming in a sweet-and-sour jus of preserved Niagara cherries, its skin blistered to a delicate, glassy crisp. Or scallop crudo, served in its shell and bobbing in a Sichuan peppercorn-spiked citrus sauce, with sweet Asian pear and fermented microgreens tucked beneath. “It doesn’t get more confusing—or more fusion—than this,” says Chin. “And that’s exactly the point.”

Unlike the cautionary tales of fusion cooking, Chin's plates aren't gimmicky; they're personal. She takes the flavours from her childhood—a mix of home-cooked meals and hawker-stall favourites—then reimagines and refines them while keeping their comfort-food soul intact. Yan's menus are the product of Chin's classical Western training, her experience in Michelin-starred kitchens and a two-year culinary rumspringa during which she cooked her way through Hong Kong, Beijing, Guangzhou and Nanjing, learning regional cuisines by working the line.

The dish that best illustrates her talent for culinary invention is her wok-fired E-Fu wheat noodles. Cooked al dente and clinging to a clam-and-baijiu-infused French butter sauce, it's rich, briny and borderless.

Chef Eva Chin  
(and her very cool  
spoon tattoo)





NO.  
3



A spread of elevated eastern European small plates at Stop



STOP BY MARCSANTOS AND DEREK SHAPTON



Chef-owner Denis Ganshonkov and chef Ella Hough

**T**HE WORDS “EASTERN European cuisine” conjure images of heavy, hearty comfort food—cabbage rolls, pierogies, schnitzel. But, at Stop, chef-owner Denis Ganshonkov flips the Slavic script. His post-Soviet upbringing and training in classic French cuisine translate to elegant, ambitious rotating dishes that evoke pre-revolutionary Russian opulence.

His restaurant started life as the Ossington Stop, a bar serving late-night snacks, then shifted its focus to eastern European comfort staples—pelmeni, potato pancakes. But, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Ganshonkov leaned in to the cuisine’s French influence. An electrical fire in 2023 forced Stop to adopt a brief nomadic life as a pop-up. Now, Stop is making a new start on Roncesvalles.

The seasonal borscht is nothing like your babcia’s: the ruby-red broth shimmers with slow-roasted beets, spoon-tender beef shank and velvety, melty marrow. Dill oil cuts through the richness, and tangy crème fraîche brightens things up. Ganshonkov is a pro at balancing flavours. The long-haired, hulking 37-year-old, often sporting a sleeveless Nazareth T-shirt, looks like a circus strongman, but he handles ingredients with a deft touch. Nowhere is that more evident than in the delicate Digby scallop and leek terrine, dressed with a brown butter vinaigrette and quivering caviar.

The room, with its belle époque charm and hint of irreverence, matches the food. Antique cabinets, copper pots and cheeky pet portraits (including a few cigarette-puffing cats) keep things warm, not precious. And the same goes for the service: laid-back, friendly, sharp as a Sabatier.

# STOP RESTAURANT

397 RONCESVALLES AVE.,  
RESTAURANTSTOP.CA

A romantic eastern European restaurant and wine bar on Roncesvalles

# MAVEN

112 HARBORD ST.,  
MAVENTORONTO.CA

Chef Shauna Godfrey's  
Harbord Village ode to  
her bubbe

NO.  
4

SHAUNA GODFREY'S restaurant is a homage to her paternal bubbe, Rose, a Holocaust survivor who communicated her love through cooking. Maven (which was Rose's nickname for a young Godfrey) is rooted in history and affection, right down to its location in Harbord Village, home to some of the city's first eastern European Jews.

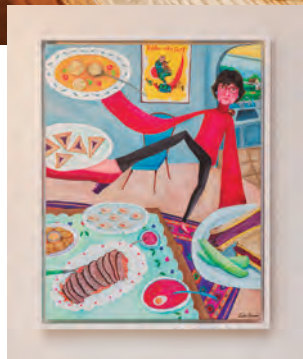
The menu is vintage delicatessen: chicken schnitzel, pickled beets, barbecue salami, freshly baked challah buns and cheesecake as New York-style as it comes. Other chefs resurrect old-school recipes with irony; Godfrey's approach is entirely earnest. With the utmost dedication, she weaves the thread of deli into almost everything, including the complimentary coleslaw and the cocktails (like a martini made with cornichon brine).

A meal here starts strong with challah—the first recipe Rose taught Godfrey to make and the staple that launched her Covid-times takeover operation. Godfrey translates the classic loaf into pull-apart buns that are slightly sweet, soft and gently elastic. They're served with a choice of high-quality butter and Maldon salt or

a one-two punch of silky chicken liver mousse and sour cherry compote.

A palate cleanser arrives in the form of a bright and creamy-crunchy endive salad, constructed on a sweet-and-sour bed of roasted squash with pickled pear, sliced almonds and fresh mint. It's all brought together by a poppyseed-buttermilk vinaigrette, a sweet-tart dressing that was popular in the '50s.

There are obvious crowd pleasers, like crispy potatoes, a recent version of which were served with bonito flakes and dill pickle dip, or chicken schnitzel with brown butter, lacto-fermented plum sauce and Kozlik's grainy Russian mustard. But the sleeping Goliath of the menu is duck confit on a bed of schmaltzy onions slow-cooked in garlic and thyme and served with a romano bean cholent, a slow-simmering Sabbath stew that's heart-warming and harmonious.



This quirky painting of Rose hangs in the restaurant



MAVEN BY SHLOMI A MIGA AND DANIEL NEUHAUS



BEST NEW RESTAURANTS 2025



**P**ARKDALE'S CHARMING LITTLE chaat house—like so many new restaurants these days—began as a pop-up. Jalil Bokhari and his fiancée, Emma Tanaka, launched the roving restaurant in the spring of 2024. It started as a one-trick pony serving only dahi puri, deep-fried semolina spheres stuffed with spiced chickpeas and two chutneys (cilantro yogurt, tamarind), then crowned with Kashmiri chili and seasoned crunchy noodle crumbles.

They're still on the menu at Jamil's 2.0, joined by a selection of former Sakai Bar chef Eric McDonald's salty, sweet and assertively spicy dishes. And while Pakistani flavours dominate, McDonald also occasionally veers from tradition.

The naan, for instance, is made with a sourdough starter using baker's and red-ife flour from Toronto's BrodfLOUR

and sprinkled with sesame seeds. It's poofy and chewy like its predecessors, but the starter gives it a pleasant funk, and the seeds add some nuttiness. Then there's the Karahi chicken bun, a Pakistani take on the Sloppy Joe that loads a squishy potato roll with pulled chicken, slow-cooked in a tomato-based masala, and a vibrant ginger slaw.

McDonald's smoked baingan kachumar, her offbeat take on a traditional veggie side dish, is the star. For it, she smokes charred eggplant, then marinates it overnight in a garam-masala dashi. It arrives at the table dressed in a robust vinaigrette made from the smoking liquid and citrus and finished with toasted cumin, dried fenugreek leaves, fermented chili, garlic and roasted tomato achaar. It's a complicated route to Pakistan that tastes both foreign and familiar.

BEST NEW RESTAURANTS 2025



JAMIL'S BY SHLOMI AMIGA AND DEREK SHAPTON

Jamil's owners  
Jalil Bokhari  
and his fiancée,  
Emma Tanaka



NO.  
**5**

# JAMIL'S CHAAT HOUSE

1086 QUEEN ST. W.,  
JAMILS.CA

Parkdale's new spot for  
Pakistani small plates



Fluke and fennel carpaccio with watercress



Schwartz (far right) with just some of the Linny's team

NO. 6

# LINNY'S

176 OSSINGTON AVE.,  
LINNYSRESTAURANT.COM

Chef David Schwartz's new  
(but also old-school)  
steakhouse

TORONTO'S delicatessen denizens know good beef salami is sacred—which is to say, if it's not shrink-wrapped and labelled Chicago 58, it's not the best. Chef David Schwartz, the owner of Ossington's deli-inspired steakhouse, is wise to this, so he made a recent addition to the menu: Linny's 58, house-made salami and an ode to the 100-year-old Toronto brand.

Schwartz, who grew up on the humble food of his Jewish parents and grandparents, designed a menu inspired by his past, when steak was eaten only on special occasions and salami starred on the plate.

He and head chef Ethan Rogers have subtly reinvented the classics. They treat pastrami as royally as prime rib. Instead of lox and bagels, they serve thin slices of cured Ora King salmon atop crisp potato pancakes slathered with cream cheese and sprinkled with fresh dill. Velvety chicken liver pâté is spread on sourdough and finished with a flurry of cured egg yolk shavings and fried onions.

The bone-in New York strip is seasoned with salt, cooked under an overfired broiler and finished on the flat-top before being anointed with an appropriately fatty trifecta: rendered pastrami pan drippings, tallow and butter.

Then there's that salami. The cured sausage—grilled, cut into thick chunks and served with honey mustard and pickles—is the sleeper hit. Smoky and salty, tasting of school lunches and family barbecues, it's nothing fancy, but it's filthy rich.



# LOUF

NO. 7

501 DAVENPORT RD.,  
LOUFTORONTO.COM

A celebration of  
Palestinian food  
in the shadow  
of Casa Loma



A sautéed mushroom salad



House bread with a selection of tabilat (condiments) for snacking

CHEF FADI KATTAN was running two restaurants—Fawda, in his hometown of Bethlehem, and Akub, in London, England—when he struck up a friendship with Toronto entrepreneur Nicole Mankinen, who contacted him about a recipe. Now he's running a third, with Maniken as his co-owner.

The restaurant celebrates Palestinian culinary tradition and cultural heritage through Ontario's terroir. Kattan's tartare is inspired by kibbeh nayeh, traditionally a smooth paste of raw beef. He cures tenderloin with salt, za'atar leaves and sage, then dices it, mixes it with bulgur and Palestinian olive oil, and seasons it all with warm spices. The result tastes unlike

any other tartare in the city. Also among the starters is a delightfully light and airy moutabal foul (fava beans puréed with tahini, lemon, cumin and olive oil). Oval-shaped house-baked ka'ek al quds (sesame bread) act as edible shovels.

Of the more substantial mains, there's a six-hour braised beef that makes its own gravy. (Kattan first removes any fat from the cut, then renders it back into the braising liquid.) It's served over a tamarind sauce and dotted with pomegranate seeds.

Palestinian flavours make their way into the cocktails too, including one that pairs coffee liqueur with nigella seeds, cardamom and black tahini—a refreshing alternative to the espresso martini.

LINNY'S BY SHLOMI AMIGA, LOUF BY RYAN NANGREAVES

# MARTINE'S WINE BAR

NO. 8



Fresh strands of spaghetti alla chitarra

Wood-fired cabbage topped with potato espuma



**L**AST SUMMER, when Grant van Gameren opened Martine's in the old Woodlot space, he was commuting from Prince Edward County, where he's been living and running a farm and Airbnb since 2021. This restaurant, with a menu that feels both home-spun and experimental, seems to bridge the gap between van Gameren's old life (charcuterie, cocktails) and his new one (garlic-harvesting, vegetable-growing).

Weekly, van Gameren carts in weird and wonderful produce from PEC—dragon's egg cucumbers, lemon drop melons—then chef Luke Haines makes sure those ingredients sing on the plate. One end-of-winter night, brightness came in the form of chilled beets with tahini, crème fraîche and a kicky mojo rojo. Roasted cabbage, charred from the wood-fired oven, was covered in a blanket of potato espuma and sprinkled with dill.

A recent fish dish showcased line-caught turbot, harvested by Inuit ice fishers and flown in from Baffin Island. It was pan-fried, served on savoury tosazu butter with salty trout roe and finished with a smoked cod roe mayo.

The kitchen uses an old-school chitarra to make their pasta. For a recent spaghetti special, they coated freshly cut noodles in a lip-smacking tomato sauce along with meatballs and whipped ricotta. It tasted like a Sunday lunch in Tuscany by way of Ontario's Greenbelt.

MARTINE'S BY NICOLE AND BAGOL AND DANIEL NEUHAUS, LSL BY ASHLEY VAN DER LAAN

**“A** MASTER CHEF and Yo-Yo Ma walk into a restaurant” sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but it's how this 11-seat, \$680-a-head spot came to be. During the pandemic, chef Masaki Saito, who was slated to cook for the cellist at his eponymous Yorkville sushi spot, came down with Covid, so French chef Didier Leroy stepped in. According to Leroy, who loves to tell this story, his use of Saito's ingredients yielded a meal so good it made Ma cry. But why stop at two celebrity chefs? Soon afterward, they were joined by Christian Le Squer (of Le Cinq in Paris), and LSL—Leroy, Saito, Le Squer—was born.

Walking into a restaurant that requires a \$340 deposit is intimidating, but the charming maitre d' and a name check from Didier himself instantly put diners at ease. Service is carried out with military precision, the Limoges porcelain plates laid out by white-gloved servers in unison and cleared in the same fashion. Meanwhile, Leroy gleefully explains each dish in his Gallic-inflected English. To start, a trio of pastry cups: one filled with umeshu jelly and sweet hairy crab; another with passion fruit, coffee and foie gras; the third with an orb full of Campari pearls, like a beautiful one-bite negroni.

Hokkaido scallop crudo is accompanied by Japanese sea urchin (flown in at \$600 a box), lychee two ways (gelée, whole) and nubs of cucumber. It's garnished with honeysuckle flowers and a dehydrated scallop mousse crumble. The meal culminates in a preternaturally red Japanese tomato that's been poached, skinned and hollowed out to fit cubes of rich, fatty bluefin tuna. Surrounded by a coulis of tomato and tarragon oil and crowned with sturgeon caviar and a fleck of edible gold, it is the tomato against which all future tomatoes will be measured.

Chef Saito inspects a hairy crab

Vichyssoise with a celery and cucumber sorbet and sea urchin



Far right: the tomato that will ruin all other tomatoes



NO. 9



2066 AVENUE RD.,  
LSLRESTAURANT.CA

An 11-seat spot from three of the world's best chefs

# LSL

293 PALMERSTON AVE.,  
MARTINESWINEBAR.COM

A farm-to-table kitchen that makes good use of the county's bounty



NO. 10

**M**OEEN ABUZAIID took a circuitous route to get here. As a boy, he spent weekends selling herbs to his neighbours in the UN refugee camp where he lived. By the time he was 15, he was cooking for Jordan's Ministry of Youth programs. He went on to work in Michelin-starred restaurants in Europe and eventually landed at WD-50, Wylie Dufresne's Brooklyn hotspot. It was in New York that he met his future wife, Asma Syed, who's from Toronto.

In 2019, after their son was born, the couple moved here, and last year they opened Arbequina, named for an olive native to Palestine. Those olives (as well as spices from Abuzaid's family's market in Jordan) inspire his menu. The fruity olive oil enriches freshly baked bread, spiced with fresh za'atar leaves and served with whipped labneh that's lightly sweetened with maple syrup. Cardamom and cinnamon come together in an aromatic baharat blend, which flavours slow-cooked boneless Angus short ribs. They're glazed with pomegranate and date molasses and served with flaky saj flatbread and an Indian-inspired curry leaf tahini.

Abuzaid's favourite, inspired by Levantine street food, is chicken two ways: juicy sheesh tawouk and boneless fried. As part of Arbequina's zero-waste ethos, the whole bird makes its way into the dish—a stock made with the neck and bones is reduced to form the base of an aioli, and crispy crumbles of deep-fried skin finish a side of smoked potatoes. It comes with hot sauce, beet-pickled turnips and lettuce cups for DIY wraps.

Arbequina, which serves only halal meat, is also alcohol-free, but between excellent zero-proof wines and mocktails—like one made with white peach, sumac and orange blossom, which tastes of summer—the booze isn't missed.

Flatbread topped with muhammara, a red pepper dip

Broccolini with jameed, a funky yogurt sauce

Chicken two ways, with Boston lettuce for DIY wraps

Dry-aged, spiced and fried lamb chops



325 RONCESVALLES AVE.,  
ARBEQUINATO.COM

A reimagining of Jordanian and Palestinian dishes

DOPAMINA

45 GROSVENOR ST.,  
DOPAMINARESTAURANT.COM

Fine dining downtown with a Michelin connection

NO. 11

**A**T THE CORNER of Bay and Grosvenor—behind Hospital Row and next to a Nando's—chef So Sakata (formerly of the now-closed Michelin-starred Frilu) sends punchy small plates out of his fine-dining kitchen. There's a \$185 tasting menu but also an abundance of à la carte options.

What's not optional—in other words, a must-try—is the pull-apart milk bread, sprinkled with Maldon salt and served with white sesame butter. It sets the stage for a meal full of subtle surprises. Even a plain-sounding salad—baby gem lettuce, pickled pear, puffed farro—sings in a cucumber-shiso vinaigrette complemented by dollops of horseradish buttermilk.

For his take on chawanmushi, the Japanese egg custard, instead of dashi, Sakata uses a blend of steamed chicken broth and fresh cream. He tops it with confit shiitake mushrooms, parmesan foam and truffle shavings. It tastes like cream of mushroom soup on performance-enhancing drugs.

The star, though, is the steelhead trout, brined then poached in olive oil to keep it tender. The sauce is a refined blend of dashi and white wine, finished with salty ikura and chives. The flavour profile evokes the heavenly combo of lox and cream cheese, and it's soul-satisfying in the same way as breakfast for dinner.



Chef Sakata (left) with owner Gary Tsang

Grilled A5 Wagyu tenderloin with a truffle beef jus

A bowl of Occhiolino's simple-is-best tonnarelli

NO. 12

OCCHIOLINO

499 BATHURST ST., OCCHIOLINO.CA

A pasta palazzo across from Sneaky Dee's



**F**ROM HIS KITCHEN inside a converted auto body shop, chef Nick Manzone is turning out nonna-quality noodles. Occhiolino is wedged behind Michelin-starred DaNico at College and Bathurst, a corner now densely packed with very good Italian food where before there were just nachos.

Skewers of semi-dried tomatoes and pesto-slathered mortadella are the way to kick off a meal, but everyone's here for the noodles. Save for a truffle shaving or two, the pasta

dishes coming out of the kitchen are extremely high-quality, simple-is-best classics. The gnocchi ai funghi are earthy little pillows, and the bouncy radiatore alla norcina soak up every bit of the sausage-and-cream sauce they swim in. But Manzone's tonnarelli is the gold standard. He gives al dente semolina strands a luscious glug of olive oil, a hint of garlic, some chili heat, a bit of parsley for colour and focaccia breadcrumbs for texture. It's a celebration of restraint—and that's Occhiolino in a noce shell.

ARBEQUINA



The three-tier Deluxe Sea and Land tower

# PII NONG THAI

3321 YONGE ST., PIINONGTHAI.COM

A 10,000-square-foot chunk of Thailand in midtown

NO. 13

**F**EW RESTAURANTS in Toronto transport guests to Thailand quite like this one. At the centre of it all is the perpetually in-motion Pii Nong, a chef who operates like she has extra hours in the day. Before moving here in 2010, Nong ran a Bangkok street food stall with her mother while training as a masseuse at the legendary Wat Po temple. Now she's merging her two talents. With business partner Thomas Ha, she's launched a flagship that's a Thai market, a 120-seat restaurant and—weird but cool—a massage studio.

The food leans southern—bold, spicy, seafood-driven. No other Thai spot in town

does cold shellfish like this, with spreads of pristine prawns, scallops, oysters and clams—some raw, others lightly poached in lemongrass broth. Not everything is so chill here, though. The Thai pong karee crab brings a two-pound Dungeness dripping in coconutty yellow curry that demands a side of Nong's flaky roti to soak up every last drop. And the khao soi contains an eight-hour-braised beef rib so tender it collapses at the mere sight of a fork.

Nong has recreated the full Land of Smiles experience at Yonge and Lawrence, from street eats to spa indulgence (which, to avoid being pumelled on a full stomach, is best enjoyed before dinner).



Char siu pork Iberico with a Bajan-style take on chimichurri



The room is inspired by classic Hong Kong cinematography

NO. 14

**C**HEFS Kevin Shawcross and Danvee Kwok first met in Vancouver before moving to Hong Kong to work for Black Sheep Restaurants, where Shawcross ran a Caribbean pop-up. They invited chef Craig Wong of Patois—Toronto's popular Chinese Jamaican fusion spot—to come cook with them, sparking a collaboration that eventually led to Ayla, a tribute to Hong Kong's kaleidoscopic food scene and a kitchen the chefs say could exist only in Toronto.

The menu lists familiar-sounding dishes, but guests will be surprised (in a good way) by what arrives at the table. There's cheung fun, the dim sum staple, stuffed with a Vietnamese beef tartare and dressed with fish sauce and Marmite. And the caesar salad swaps out romaine for chrysanthemum greens, lacing them with sesame dressing and a shower of pecorino. Bacon bits are wisely subbed out for toasted buckwheat.

Drawing from such a broad range of cuisines could yield discordant dishes; here, every element on each plate pulls in the same delectable direction, no matter its origins.

# BONITO'S

180 OSSINGTON AVE., @BONIITOS

NO. 15

A nostalgic Korean Ecuadorian diner

Llapingachos taiyaki, cheese-stuffed potato cakes

The vibe is grandma's house meets basement rec room



**B**ONITO'S BEGAN as a coin laundry where Milou chef and co-owner Mikey Kim and his business partner Adrian Montesdeoca did their washing. Now it's a day-to-night diner with a rec-room vibe (think '90s sports posters and wood-paneled everything) serving food inspired by Kim's and Montesdeoca's respective Korean and Ecuadorian roots.

Taiyaki, popular fish-shaped pastries, are typically filled with red bean. Here, they're based on llapingachos (cheesy mashed potato cakes) and come with a

tomato salsa that's sharp and spicy with lime and scotch bonnet. Chicken-stuffed chicken wings glazed in gochujang are served with a yuzu-spiked ranch, and tteokbokki, Korean rice cakes, arrive in a creamy corn velouté, topped with croutons and fried corn kernels.

Kim cites the *White Lotus* vacation-core aesthetic as an influence for the cocktails—and Uncle Mikey's Highball, a blend of apple-mango soju with shiso tea and Topo Chico, is the kind of drink that could blind someone to the murder mystery slowly unfolding around them.

# CASA MORALES

152 AUGUSTA AVE., @CASAMORALES.TO

A modern Mexican kitchen in Kensington Market

NO. 16

**K**ENSINGTON MARKET'S new Mexican restaurant doesn't wear its culinary heritage on its sleeve. Unlike at other taquerias, there are no sombreros or lucha libre masks hanging on the walls. But the sweet smell of charred pasilla and guajillo chilies coming from the kitchen is a spoiler.

Casa Morales is from the team behind Gus Tacos, but here chef Felipe Kwon takes a refined approach to Mexican food without sacrificing its soul. So any abuelita will recognize the dishes, even if they aren't plated in a traditional fashion.

What looks like pea soup in a bread bowl is actually crema poblana, charred poblano peppers blended into béchamel and finished with white corn and queso fresco. And smoky mole, with flavour as deep as its crimson colour, blankets a crisp corn tortilla stuffed with chicken. It pairs well with the Bendito Dios, a daisy-yellow blend of mezcal, lime, pineapple and agave.

Kwon calls it "modern Mexican," an embrace of the country's evolving cuisine and a gentle rejection of the idea that culinary traditions should be frozen in time.

PII NONG BY JELENA SUBOTIC; AYL A AND BONITO'S BY SHLOMI AMIGA; CASA MORALES BY RYAN NANGREAVES



Crema poblana in a very Canadian bread bowl

The sweet, boozy Bendito Dios



NO.  
17

## BAR CLAMS

802 DUNDAS ST. W., BARCLAMS.CA

Matty Matheson's East Coast-inspired diner

**A**FTER HIS Mexican restaurant, Fonda Balam, closed last year, Matty Matheson opened Bar Clams in its place, an elevated neighbourhood spot with a laid-back East Coast attitude. He was inspired by the food he grew up eating and originally envisioned Bar Clams as a casual companion to Prime Seafood Palace, his swanky temple to surf and turf on Queen West.

Hearty sandwiches and seafood served without theatrics make up the menu. Any place with the word “clams” in its name needs to have some serious raw bar game, and the seafood plate—jumbo shrimp, briny oysters and fresh clams, plus a sampler of tuna crudo—proves that they came to play. It arrives

with the classic fixings: a lemon wedge, some house mignonette and hot sauce.

Comfort-food standards include a hot turkey sandwich, swimming in gravy and festooned with green peas, and a donair, spiced sausage (a mix of beef, pork and lamb) nestled in pillowy pita and slathered with the traditional sauce of condensed milk and vinegar, plus some green tomato chow on the side. It all goes down nicely with a glass of citrus riesling, custom-made from Niagara's Rosewood Estates Winery. This may be unfussy food, but it's wearing its best button-up shirt.

A hot turkey sandwich, drowning in gravy and covered in peas



# AMBER KITCHEN

4 BOULTON AVE.,  
AMBERKITCHEN.CA

A new brunch staple lands in Riverdale

NO.  
18



Perfectly poached eggs and roasted mushrooms on cheesy polenta

**B**ONJOUR BRICHOE has ruled the east end's brunch scene since 1997, but Amber is coming for its croissant-shaped crown. The new restaurant is from ex-Parallel chef George Grabsky, who was born in Ukraine, lived in Israel and came to Toronto in 2018 to work for the Ozery brothers, Toronto's tahini kings.

Amber is Grabsky's break for culinary freedom—he's more than just a hummus guy. Most dishes are served on, or with, his freshly baked potato baguettes or (also fresh) whole wheat bagels—both unconventional and equally delicious. While plans for a dinner menu are in the works, right now Grabsky is serving up sandwiches (Ethiopian-spiced pulled beef, confit artichoke) and brunch, featuring buttery polenta packed with parm and topped with roasted mushrooms and two poached eggs that could make Jacques Pépin throw in his torchon.

A sassy sister  
snack bar to  
Lake Inez

NO.  
19

**S**MACK-DAB in the middle of a changing stretch of Gerrard East sits Belle Isle, a dreamy little bar from the team behind Lake Inez, its more buttoned-up sister restaurant a few doors east.

Diners can count on a kitschy collection of small plates—some seemingly plucked from Mad Libs—like spinach dip salad and charred pineapple butter with Calabrian anchovies. Less difficult to unpack are the Coney dogs, a Michigan staple (co-owner Zac Schwartz is from Detroit) that tops steamed wieners with bean-free chili, diced white onion and yellow mustard.

Perhaps the most interesting of the rotating snacks is the muffuletta hoagie tartare. Stuffed with melt-in-your-mouth raw Wagyu beef, finely chopped giardiniera, provolone cheese and a slice of bologna, it flips the bird at the French classic by blue-collarizing it into a sandwich.

The drinks menu includes a sassy Jell-O shot in the shape of a swear word and cocktails with bonkers names. To wit: the Divorced Dad Dinner—a boozy, balanced blend of Cinnamon Toast Crunch–infused bourbon, Amaro Averna, cacao, vermouth and Amarena cherry. It's smooth, spicy and (unlike the feelings harboured by dad's ex) sweet.



Belle Isle's NSFV  
Jell-O shot



## ARIETE E TORO

12 KEEWATIN AVE., [ARIETETORO.COM](http://ARIETETORO.COM)

A Florentine sandwich shop in midtown

NO.  
20



Behold, the San  
Lazzaro sandwich

**M**ATT BLONDIN, founder of Blondies Pizza, took trips to Italy in 2023 and 2024, where he ate his weight in sandwiches and concocted a new business plan to bring back to Toronto. His tiny takeout counter in midtown serves a short menu of eight sandwiches, and—just like at Saperi Toscani, his favourite Florence-based sandwich shop—lunchtime attracts a steady line that spills out the door.

Each sandwich starts with golden schiacciata, a Tuscan flatbread sturdy enough to withstand the fillings without

overpowering them. Our favourite, the San Lazzaro, is layered with San Michele 16-month prosciutto, a gorgonzola dolce crema and thin slices of raw honeycrisp apple. It's finished with peppery arugula, a drizzle of Olio De Carlo olive oil and Saba vinegar—a syrupy grape-must reduction that adds gentle sweetness and a mellow wine-like acidity. It comes tucked into its own sturdy branded cardboard box, which may seem like overkill until the first bite—something this good deserves to be well protected.