

Restaurant Review: Critic's favourites of the year

[Gina Mallet](#) Dec 17, 2010 – 2:11 PM ET | Last Updated: Dec 17, 2010 3:12 PM ET



Aaron Lynett/National Post

Ici Bistro

- [Comments](#)
- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [inShare0](#)
-

The standard this year is good cooking, of course, but quirky, adventurous restaurants, as well, and several firsts — the first foreign star chef, the first daily-changing local menu, the first haute-veg cuisine. For the full restaurant reviews, click on the links in the blurbs below.

1. Ici Bistro, 538 Manning Ave. [J.P. Challet's lean cuisine, classic French, streamlined for Toronto's tastes.](#) Takes some moxie to shake up venerable classics, turning trad white blanquette de veau into a creamy brown stew with black trumpet mushrooms tucked inside a cannellone. The menu is designed to stoke the old passion for French cooking — creamy steak tartare, lobster thermidor, torchon of foie gras with floating figs, Grand Marnier soufflé. Book early for 24 seats.

2. Scarpetta, Thompson Hotel, 550 Wellington St. W. [Sassy, fat and fun, and the most famous spaghetti with tomato sauce in the world!](#) As a diner, I yearn for new ideas and fresh chefs, wherever they're from. I'm therefore dismayed by the parochial trashing of Scott Conant's Lamborghini of a U.S. restaurant. But eating well is the best revenge. Dishes to die for — silken polenta with wild mushrooms and the purée of cauliflower soup with poached oysters.

3. Origin, 107 King St. E. Claudio Aprile catches the waves — snacking cuisine, wild and natural ingredients — [with an alluring menu of shared plates](#): mozzarella di bufala from Italy; wild striped bass with dribbles of smoked trout roe and candied yuzu; grilled rock hen spiked with dates, olives, hot harissa. Earth-toned restaurant is in elegantly made-over historic building with the requisite patio.

4. Frank's Kitchen, 588 College St. Frank Parhizgar, formerly of Centro, [makes his own bread and pasta, cures pigs and butchers meat](#), while never forgetting that, ultimately, it's the cooking that counts. Leisurely dinner, amuse bouche, a cleansing sorbet, little madeleines strewn across the table. Menu ranges from oysters Rockefeller to St. Jacob's pork three ways — rack, loin, crispy belly — with Calvados reduction. Home-style service.

5. Woodlot, 293 Palmerston Ave. Reserve a seat in the balcony of this dramatic split-level space, and [watch the drama below as the food is cooked in our ancestors' wood-burning oven](#). Just opened, David Haman's kitchen is already producing two must-haves: braised Savoy cabbage duck, chestnut and prune rolls and succulent wood-fired apple and ricotta galette.

6. La Palette, 256 Augusta Ave. Meat heaven. Like the just-closed original in Kensington Market, [the new bistro spotlights horse](#) — the tastiest flesh after pig, beef, lamb. On offer: horse tartare and a juicy horse tenderloin. Not just

that. Here, you can eat a bison rib-eye that (so rare for tame game) tastes terrific, seared rare with kidney and bone marrow persillade.

7. Ruby Watchco, 730 Queen St. E. It's like having [Iron Chef contender Lynn Crawford as your private chef](#). You gotta trust her whatever she gives you. Mission is the promotion of local growers. Great for them, not so great for diners because the ingredients take precedence over the cooking. It's kitchen stadium all right — how to gin up yet another root.

8. Guu Izakaya, 398 Church St. Chuck E. Cheese for grownups. This Vancouver import's mission statement: Get drunk and have fun. Staff greets you with a great wave of "welcome" and shoo you out after two hours with another shout of arigato! Saucy food bites [include giant oysters with garlic mayo, fried Brie in mango/blueberry sauce — great with warm sake](#).

9. Enoteca Sociale, 1288 Dundas St. W. Salute to Nonna. Bustling jolly rustic Italian menu with super-friendly welcome. Menu is an Italian collage of simple dishes. [Bobbles of deep-fried sweetbreads nesting in arugula, white anchovies and Ontario mozzarella](#), a rich, dark oxtail stew with gravy ... zeppole (doughnuts) for dessert.

11. L.A.B., Live And Breathe, 651 College St. The first blogger's resto. Howard Dubrovsky of Food Cult has gone off-line with a unique haute-veg cuisine. Knockout: [a bronze beer consommé garnished with parsnip purée and little chips of candied parsnip](#). Plus, squishy sweet potato perogies with foxy grape sauce. For relapsed carnivores, an excellent steak sous-vide.

12. Koko! Share Bar, 81 Yorkville Ave. Playwright/entrepreneur Sang Kim presents the bossam: First, Boston lettuce leaves the size of a small elephant's ear. Now, [wrap them round roasted pork belly, spicy chicken, Korean pork BBQ, boiled cabbage leaves](#), slivers of spanish onion, chili mayo, sweet chili past, salted baby shrimp, rice, lotus roots ... and tuck in. Remember to wrap napkin round the neck. Too much? Consider sushi/sashimi with kimchi.