A New FOOD ORDER Emerges

THE LIST

BADGES BY ALLEN PETERS; PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW THOMAS LEE

THE RESTAURANT WORLD IS CHANGING.

THANK GOD.

BY TED ALLEN

Josh Ozersky was hungry. He looked like a man who could put it away. And put it away he did, for his own satisfaction, sure. But also for yours.

Because Josh Ozersky lived to chow and tell. He was hungry for whiskey and argument (always a good pairing); hungry for validation of his work, which he received but probably distrusted (writers are like that); hungry for camaraderie and song. And, of course, just plain hungry, for the new-school and the old, the salty and fatty, the crispy on the outside and juicy in the middle—especially if it once possessed four hooves and a tail. But deeper than his need to ingest great cooking was his hunger to share his discoveries and to soak in the pleasure of affirmation from his audience. In that sense, Josh possessed a drive like that of great chefs, equal parts generosity and need for applause—not just for praise but also for surety that the rest of us tasted his discoveries and understood.

Josh chose most of the restaurants herein and devoured as many of their delights as he could, just in time to exhaust the Best New Restaurants travel budget, but not in time, sadly, to write the stories. Every death is untimely, but Josh's was especially so, happening as it did when he was just forty-seven in the early hours of May 4, 2015, the very day he was supposed to cheer on his favorite chefs at the James Beard Awards in Chicago. So a team of Esquire pros and great new voices from all over the country, including Beard Award winners John Birdsall and John DeVore, picked up the fork and finished the job.

No tribute could be more fitting, because we are as blown away by these restaurants and the cultural shifts they represent as Josh was. There is something of a New Food Order emerging—the rules, like the complexion of the country itself, are changing.

The restaurant of the year, Shaya, serves Israeli cuisine—in, of all places, New Orleans. And if you doubt that pita and tabbouleh could merit such an accolade, consider that their elevation comes at the hand of a chef, Alon Shaya, who has cooked for NoLa revolutionary John Besh since his first of (now) twelve restaurants began transforming that former time-capsule culture of Commander's Palace and Brennan's. And if that's not enough, imagine sinking your teeth into a pomegranate-lacquered lamb shank, blackened and glistening from hours at the roast.

There is a restaurant that basically serves only birds. A restaurant on a bleak block in Harlem that no sooner saw success than it was shut down by a ridiculous rent increase. Yet somehow it managed to reopen ten months later, bringing its beacon to a different careworn stretch of the city.

In more restaurants than ever, Latin Americans are not just rocking the line but also running the show, with confidence and style. Witness Ray Garcia: I went to his L. A. joint Broken Spanish in its ninth week, before it even had a sign out front. He takes familiar flavors and formats from the Mexican playbook and brilliantly interweaves them with surprises like black garlic and foie-gras butter.

Perhaps most important is that after a decade of tatt-sleeved male chefs whose primary concern was building empires rather than flavors, we are entering a new era of collaboration and cooperation that focuses more on cooking and less on big-swinging solo-artist brand development. Chefs who use the pronoun *we* when describing their creative process, like husband-and-wife chef-owners Nicole Krasinski and Stuart Brioza, of the Progress in San Francisco. These are craftspeople with their chests unpuffed and their heads down over their pots, developing loyal teams of homegrown cooks just as surely as they develop killer dishes—and upending the bro culture of the American kitchen.

If only Josh could have seen this through. The last memory anybody seems to have of him belongs to John Currence, a friend and the chef at City Grocery in Oxford, Mississippi. Having decamped from the Beards' annual Chefs' Night Out cocktail party in search of Jim Beam, the two, along with Charleston chef-kings Jason Stanhope and Mike Lata, found their way to a basement karaoke dive. "Nobody was singing, so Josh just started devouring the microphone and dragging people onstage." Among the selections: the duet "Islands in the Stream," with Stanhope. "It was really one of the most joyful things to watch."

Because for food, for whiskey, for one more song, Josh Ozersky was hungry. You're hungry. I'm hungry. Let's eat.

JOSH
By Danit Lidor, his wife

Among the many unusual things about Josh is that he never took notes. But even though he wasn't writing anything down, I was listening. And he had big plans for this year's Best New Restaurants.

Muscadine was his reigning queen of fried chicken—the secret is in chef Rhoman's gravy. Josh's enthusiasm for Shaya was, even for Josh, beyond giddy. He pronounced the Progress a "prodromal symptom of an evolution in third-wave gastronomy," and he declared Jockey Hollow's Chris Cannon "master and commander of authentically curated restaurants." In chef Bailey of the Grey Josh saw a dream—something Josh, ever the dreamer himself, always respected. "Finally," he used to say to me. "It's about time."

Josh was perpetually late and aggravatingly absentminded, but he was a brilliant writer and both generous and genuine. He was truly hilarious, easily dominating conversations with off-color Borscht Belt jokes, obscure historical references, ten-dollar words, and profound observations—and his intuitions about food trends were spot-on. His short time at Esquire was a dream fulfilled for a lonely child prodigy from Atlantic City. Josh was so much bigger than life—one friend described him as five people in one body. I wish—we all wish—he would have been around for so much more.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MCKENDRY

THE BEST NEW RESTAURANT IN AMERICA

Shaya

A PILGRIMAGE TO ESQUIRE'S RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR

BY TOM JUNOD

Gluttony is harder than it looks. It's listed as a sin, as something you give in to, when really it's a skill, requiring not just hunger but resilience. That's why the most resilient city in the country, New Orleans, is also the most gluttonous. That's why Josh Ozersky, the most gluttonous food writer in the country, was also the most skillful, a hungry man who whetted the appetites of his readers while exploring the mystery of his own. And that's why, when I went to New Orleans to eat at the new restaurant Josh picked as the year's best before he died, I got worried.

I didn't worry for the obvious reason, which is that I couldn't eat like Josh. No one could eat like Josh. My worry, then, was not that I would wind up reaching the outer limits of my capacity on my visit to New Orleans. It was that I wouldn't be sufficiently tested, because the place Josh had picked didn't portend an evening of extravagance. It's called Shaya, and it serves Israeli food. Now, I love Israeli food, love *Jerusalem: A Cookbook*, love the homey exoticism, the fusion forged in the crucible of an eternally contested crossroads. I just didn't know if I would love Israeli food in New Orleans. Friends who live there said that Shaya had the best pita bread, hummus, and tabbouleh they had ever tasted. But who goes to New Orleans for pita bread, hummus, and tabbouleh? It's like going to a bordello for Bible instruction.

Nevertheless, I went, and John Besh was waiting for me. Besh is one of the partners behind Shaya; moreover, he's the man who transformed the restaurant scene in New Orleans by making it more like everyplace else's. That's a compliment. For a long time, New Orleans was the classic-rock station of American cuisine, its reputation for flamboyance belying its playlist conservatism. Besh has changed all that, with twelve restaurants as open to the culinary trends of the past thirty years as, say, restaurants in Houston. Besh met with Josh—"Joshy"—six weeks before Josh died, and now his persistent smile was charged with a pointed sense of expectation. Chef John Besh wanted me to eat.

And so I—we—ate. The platter of salads came first, with fresh layers of pita bread made in the pizza oven installed in the back corner of the dining room. It was entirely familiar, with a few exceptions, the novelty of wood-roasted okra balanced by the baba ghanoush, the za'atar-infused olive oil, and, yes, the best tabbouleh and hummus I've ever had. But what does that even mean? There's always a lovely astringency to Israeli food, a bracing quality that seems based on a knowledge of life itself, the sour never far from the sweet and bitter herbs essential to the grandest feast. It's not the food of the conqueror but rather of the conquered and the unconquerable, which is what makes it hard to decide if the "best" Israeli food is food that breaks with tradition or exemplifies it. Luckily, the food at Shaya does both—its tabbouleh harking back not only to some ancient recipe but also to some local farm, and its hummus . . . well, its hummus wasn't just, like, creamy. It was just like cream.

OTHER THINGS BORN IN THE DESERT

Burning Man
•
OPEC
•
Christianity

And it kept coming. Besh was joined at the table by the man himself—the chef, Alon Shaya, who had a ready explanation for how food born in the desert found its way to a city born in a swamp. He was born in Israel, and when he moved to Philadelphia at the age of four, the food prepared by his mother and grandmother provided him with a connection to a past he barely had a chance to remember. He eventually came to New Orleans to work at Besh Steak, and when Katrina flooded the city he began cooking Louisiana staples for hospital and relief workers. Six years later, he traveled with his girlfriend and Besh to Israel, where he cooked "kosher Louisiana food"—duck CONTINUED ›

CONTINUED ›

jambalaya—for Israeli soldiers and also asked his girlfriend to marry him. They came home with Shaya already in mind, their inevitable offspring.

The story answered the question I had about Shaya, the question of how food that might please one of the desert fathers might also satisfy a sybarite. There's nothing richer than soul food, even if it's soul food laced with hyssop. But it didn't answer the question I had about Josh, the question of how he kept eating like I was eating at Shaya, how he kept opening himself up to the experience of absolute appetite. The log of halloumi cheese, sautéed and served on a bed of fresh apple butter made with apples from Alabama and peppers from Turkey; the red snapper that came in a cast-iron pan full of chraime sauce and the broken and toasted vermicelli Alon Shaya called Egyptian rice; the frankly obscene lamb shank, lacquered black under its pomegranate glaze and wobbling with figs: I started getting full. Worse, I started committing the glutton's sin—I began to pick, to the extent that when faced with a selection of three desserts, I merely made a show of eating the burnt-honey ice cream that trembled on a disc of puffy labneh cheesecake like panna cotta.

Besh saw that I was faking it. "Take a bite!" he ordered, his smile suggesting that our friend Joshy would expect no less. I did so and felt as though I might burst until chef Shaya produced a press of hot Moroccan green tea flavored with mint and honey. It was, like the hummus and tabbouleh, the best I've ever tasted. But what does that even mean, in the context of something as commonplace as tea? It means this: I had been surprised that Josh had selected Shaya as his restaurant of the year, because he had always been catholic in his tastes rather than kosher. But what Shaya showed me—what Josh showed me—was how intricately virtue and excess are woven in the act of eating. You don't go to New Orleans for the green tea, after all. You do only if it lets you take another bite, if not quite muster, in the end, the strength to finish.

4213 Magazine Street; 504-891-4213

BEST USE OF THE LORD'S BOUNTY

Townsman

A SOUTHERNER EXPERIENCES A LAND OF PLENTY

BY JOHN DEVORE

When I was growing up down south, my only exposure to New England food was postchurch lunch at Red Lobster. As we waited to be seated, I would push my nose against the fish tank's glass and marvel at the miserable and valuable lobsters inside. I knew never to actually order lobster, even at restaurants that had "lobster" in their name, because they were the most expensive thing in the world. We could order anything except lobster—that would bankrupt us.

My fascination only increased when a friend raised in Connecticut informed me about the lobster roll. There was a part of the country where these magical sea beasts were so plentiful that their precious flesh was slopped on hot-dog buns? Apparently, this abundance was God's way of saying "Sorry for the eight months of snow."

After seven years of professional food writing, lobsters still make me feel like my nose is pressed against the tank. But here I was at chef Matt Jennings's Townsman, in Boston, experiencing the torrid, too-short love affair of a New England summer.

The meal started off with simple brown bread, a dense chowder sponge. This said New England to me: simple, matter-of-fact, the kind of gut spackle needed to weather a brutal environment. But after that humble serving came the show: oysters swimming in brine, ribbons of cured ham, headcheese, and a marvelous blood-sausage mortadella, a nod to Boston's Irish and Italian heritage. A summer-squash fritter seemed to say, "You'll miss this in three months."

Next was the rich bluefish pâté, which Jennings's mother would make during summers on Nantucket. Bluefish is peasant food, a working-class protein; Jennings piles on delectables, like pickled chard stems and marinated cornichons, without compromising the simplicity of his mother's recipe.

Beef tartare, crispy pork loin, crab claws, a summer-vegetable salad. Collard kimchi, a reminder that Boston is as diverse as its higher-maintenance sibling, New York.

Finally, there was the foie gras, served with blueberries. Blueberries! Not the bitter purple ball bearings sold in supermarkets—blue like the ocean in a good mood.

When I was growing up in Virginia, we didn't know what the Yankees had already figured out: Lobster is a commoner's delicacy, best left to buns and mayo. Blueberries, delicious, fleeting blueberries, are the more valuable treasure.

The foie gras tasted only as good as suffering can. But these tiny fruits were sweetness and juice and sunshine. At Townsman, New England cuisine erupts like the blueberries of the summer.

Winter is harsh because she is jealous of the bounty summer provides. No wonder they built a civilization here.

120 Kingston Street; 617-993-0750

BEST COLLABORATION

THE PROGRESS

THE END OF THE SWINGING-DICK KITCHEN GOD

BY JOHN BIRDSALL

Stuart Brioza approaches my table at the Progress, the San Francisco restaurant he and his wife and co-chef, Nicole Krasinski, opened next door to its less-formal sibling, State Bird Provisions. "A little something that's not on the menu," he says, dropping the plate. "A lingcod dish we started playing with today." (Whenever Brioza says something about the creative process, he uses the pronoun *we*.) The dish has an air of salty astringency, of a tidal pool made delicious: crisply browned spiced fish scattered within a sweet-sour habitat of tiny seared romano beans and minuscule grapes. It's challenging in the quietest way possible. Brioza dips his head in a little gesture of deference, and he's gone.

Krasinski and Brioza's quiet ascendancy, along with that of other couple-owners, like Take Root's Elise Kornack and Anna Hieronimus and Via Carota's Rita Sodi and Jody Williams, is a lo-fi win for the humble. It's not as if they're invisible—in 2013, State Bird got the James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant, and this year Krasinski and Brioza shared one for Best Chef: West. But while most in food media were chasing an international party circuit of festivals and food conferences, a bunch of nerds started changing kitchen culture.

The past decade has seen a media narrative about a leading group of chefs, all male, that has risen to rapper heights. David Chang, Danny Bowien, Rene Redzépi. They're chefs of amazing skill, but they always seem to be showing up like some alpha frat of the sleeve-tattooed at Instacrawl hunts for the "perfect" taco in Mexico while running a locked-loop conversation about the importance of what they, the World's Greatest Chefs, do. This conversation culminated with *Time* magazine's "The Gods of Food," a power list of the industry's biggest ballers, all male, naturally. *Time* became the dim-witted catalyst for a broader discussion of chef-bro culture and the spectra of misogyny and homophobia that can accompany it.

For a while, it seemed like an industry stacked with female chefs would be the solution—women would be more compassionate, less ego-driven, nicer. But even a chef as self-consciously poetic as Dominique Crenn of Atelier Crenn, in San Francisco, has said that surviving in high-end kitchens as a woman means learning to push back harder than the biggest hardass on the line. It's about not simply the sex of the cook but also abandoning the old trope of the chef as solo artist turned empire builder. Because any chef, male or female, who is focused on building an empire is not primarily focused on making food.

This redefined notion of success, which privileges the smallest of perfect gestures from a team of collaborators rather than the colossal ego stroke of solo ambition, is something you can taste in Brioza and Krasinski's food. The Progress feels like a large-scale pop-up in which the cooks aren't forcing submission to any formal experience but rather floating experimental dishes like soap bubbles. An exposed lath wall in the Progress suggests not only vulnerability but also openness about process, as if everything Brioza and Krasinski cooks exists on a continuum of endeavor. Not *Here is the flawless expression of our artistry,* but *Here's what we've been working on. What do you guys think?*

After a tour of Brioza and Krasinski's prep kitchen, the twenty-five-year-old sous chef of State Bird, Gaby Maeda, explains what it's like to work for the couple. She talks about the party they threw for the staffs of the Progress and State Bird after winning their latest Beard. As everybody munched on Chicago-style hot dogs, she says, the chefs spoke about it as a team win and the Beard medallion circulated so that people could slip it on and snap group selfies. Maeda says, "They were like, 'Yeah, it's a medal.'" Just a hunk of bronze with a nylon ribbon strung through it. Nothing whatsoever to be all dick about.

1525 Fillmore Street; 415-673-1294

BEST SOUTHERN FOOD IN THE NORTH

Muscadine

A SOUTHERNER COOKING SOUTHERN FOOD IN THE NORTH . . .

BY JAMES ROSS GARDNER

Bobbie Gentry's above the bar, her hair a windswept riot as she crosses the Tallahatchie Bridge. And the furniture—bentwood chairs with floral-patterned cushions—would not look out of place in the sitting room of a jilted Faulkner character. But chef Laura Rhoman, an eighth-generation native of Tupelo, Mississippi, has conjured more than a shrine to the South.

At Muscadine, in Portland, Oregon, the needle's as likely to drop on Bell Biv DeVoe's "Poison" as it is on anything by Johnny Cash. The coffee, Cellar Door, is local. And the food, southern standards plucked from family-recipe books, revels in the Pacific Northwest's abundance. The creamed corn from a Portland farmers' market is fresh and crunchy, not stewed; Rhoman's salmon croquettes swap the customary payload of briny canned salmon for fresh sockeye from Alaska's Copper River.

But there's still plenty to get nostalgic about: heaping plates of biscuits and gravy, fried okra, and cornbread sliced like pie. Shipments of grits and Sea Island red peas from Anson Mills in South Carolina close the miles between the chef and her culinary heritage and defy the sacrosanct locavore affectations of her fellow Portland restaurateurs. (Mix those two sides together and the texture of the peas, cooked al dente, adds ballast to the old-school chunky grits.)

Muscadine serves only breakfast and lunch, and with food this good, that can be a cruel thing. Then again, limitation has a way of focusing you, honing the senses. Do you go for the fried chicken with the crispiest skin and the juiciest meat you've ever tasted? Or the catfish—which the kitchen is known to send out one piece at a time to ensure only the most freshly fried portions hit your plate?

There's also the Cochon, a puck of smoked pulled pork, breaded and slathered in tangy Carolina Gold barbecue sauce, capped with a poached egg, and laid on a nest of slaw and crispy potatoes. No, Laura Rhoman has not built a shrine to the South in the Pacific Northwest. But her menu's standout dish, a mandala of swirling flavors and textures, is a portal between them.

1465 Northeast Prescott Street; 503-841-5576

BEST SOUTHERN FOOD IN THE SOUTH

The Grey

. . . AND A NORTHERNER COOKING SOUTHERN FOOD IN THE SOUTH

BY JENNIFER V. COLE

In a former Jim Crow–era Greyhound bus depot in Savannah, the Grey melds history and a modern take on southern food. A horseshoe bar frames the former departure gates. Bronze greyhounds stand watch from banquette corners. Faces from the First African Baptist Church—black-and-white photos from 1978—fill the once-segregated waiting room. And the kitchen pass occupies the old baggage counter, where chef Mashama Bailey double-checks dishes.

Though she grew up in Queens, Bailey spent summers in Georgia and is no stranger to the pork-laden pleasures of soul food. But as a New Yorker (one who matriculated through the kitchen at Gabrielle Hamilton's Prune), she has a fresh perspective, freeing her from the clichés of the Savannah diningscape: shrimp and grits, crab soup. Her collards, fragrant with pecan smoke, camp out over low-burning embers and arrive with a sidecar of serrano pickling vinegar. Roasted chicken, crowned with a turmeric sauce and currant-and-green-pepper relish, recalls Country Captain, a classic Savannah dish of curried chicken and rice that stems directly from the spice trade. A watermelon salad, its fruit compressed into silken cubes, is dressed with almonds, shishitos, and sherry.

Throughout the night, silver trays of gin gimlets and Scotch bob throughout the dining room, serving everyone from bearded Savannah College of Art and Design students to antique ladies lassoed by antique pearls. Bailey has created a modern restaurant that reckons with the past without being haunted by it—no small feat in a city that sells its ghosts every night for seventeen bucks (hearse ride included).

109 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard; 912-662-5999

MOST IMPOSSIBLE CONCEPT

Jockey Hollow

EXCESS (IN MODERATION)

BY SCOTT RAAB

Even in New Jersey, men dream big. Chris Cannon's dreaming now as he sits over oysters in a fifteen-thousand-square-foot century-old Italianate mansion in Morristown. This is Cannon's new joint, Jockey Hollow Bar & Kitchen, a culinary multiplex under one vast palazzo roof in a town that hasn't seen much action since George Washington and the Continental Army huddled here for warmth during the winter of 1779.

It sounds a little nuts: Up the twin marble staircase, you've got a four- or six-course prix-fixe menu served in what was once an oligarch's parlor; the main floor has a cocktail lounge and this oyster bar, each with a separate menu; and in the basement, for good measure, there's a German beer hall, the Rathskeller. Because the long-empty building is a historic landmark, its restoration was exacting and expensive, hewing to the original materials. And because art was the only way to shape Jockey Hollow to his aesthetic, Cannon filled the place with paintings, photos, and sculptures that he commissioned, veering from Dada to abstract to The-Hell-If-I-Know.

In truth, it's totally nuts, yeah, and it's wonderful. Jockey Hollow transmutes crazy into magic because Chris Cannon—dapper, fierce, and manic—has the balls to match his dream. Plus a grudge: A New York City native who made his name opening fine-dining establishments in Manhattan with star chef Michael White, Cannon was leveraged out of a partnership by a Wall Street jackal and chased out of the city by lawyers whose specialty is suing high-profile restaurants for the time-hallowed gray-area practice of including salaried sommeliers and maître-d's in the waitstaff's tip pool. Instead of battling in court, Cannon shuttered his last two restaurants in the city.

"There was a period where these guys made me hate my business. All five restaurants I owned in the city got three stars in *The New York Times*. I said, 'I'm gonna come back better than I've ever been, doing something more ambitious, more interesting.' We were looked at like carpetbaggers trying to dictate what New Jersey should eat. When you open a restaurant, the customer finds you—but you also find the right customer. And when we find the right customer, they're our friends. Within a couple of years, this place is gonna be a restaurant full of the people that love us and that we love."

It took Cannon three and a half years and five and a half million dollars to open Jockey Hollow. Lord, it was worth it. For the oysters alone, these succulent jewels, it was worth it. They're from Forty North, a Jersey-shore oyster farm Cannon helped with funding after Hurricane Sandy. He gets produce and pork from a farm in Mendham, five miles away.

"Jersey is so misunderstood, so maligned. Three quarters of the stuff from the Union Square greenmarket is coming from New Jersey. My staff, all the key guys, moved from the city out here."

That includes chef Kevin Sippel, who began working with Cannon in 2002 in New York City. "The shyest chef I've ever met in my life," Cannon says. "He's got a real blue-collar mentality—he's a cook, but he's got an amazingly sophisticated palate."

I'll vouch for Sippel's palate: On my first Jockey Hollow visit—dinner upstairs in the Dining Room—I tried his six-course tasting menu, which began with a scrambled hen egg with caviar, followed by sweetbread saltimbocca. The egg was exquisite, and the first bite of the sweetbreads moved me close to honest tears.

"You take good food and you stay out of its way," Cannon says. "It's just Italian food. This is shit that's been done for centuries. It's simple."

The food at hand right now is a new dish: a basket of fried chicken. It's simple, yeah—buttermilk, wine, pepper—and it's yegods perfect.

"Pretty damn good," Cannon says. "You should eat fried chicken once a week. Fuck it. It'll be in the Rathskeller tomorrow. You can do everything here. We've had people come and have a beautiful six-course menu and then on a Saturday go down to the Rathskeller and end up dancing on the tables. Eating should be joy. It should be in your heart, not your fucking head. Always. *Always.*"

110 South Street; 973-644-3180

OTHER THINGS BORN IN NEW JERSEY

Valium
•
Danny DeVito
•
The Golden Age of Television

WHERE TO EAT IN LOS ANGELES

Josh Ozersky claimed the only person he trusted for L. A. restaurant recommendations was Veronica Rogov, who was then a server at Chi Spacca. Now she's our authority on the Los Angeles dining scene.

Broken Spanish
Ray Garcia's food is unique but comfortable, and the service is soulful but efficient. Michael Lay, one of the best beverage directors in the city, designed the cocktail program. *1050 South Flower Street; 213-749-1460*

Nicole Rucker's Doughnuts at Cofax Coffee
Rucker just became a partner at Cofax Coffee, where she collaborates with local tastemakers, like Compartés chocolate, to capture L. A. *440 North Fairfax Avenue; 323-424-7485*

Gjusta
At Travis Lett's new spot, an army of cooks makes whipped burrata and rabbit-pheasant terrine and oil-cured anchovies and just incredible porchetta—it's an orchestra of delectables. *320 Sunset Avenue; 310-314-0320*

CHEF OF THE YEAR

Ray Garcia

TURNS OUT YOU CAN REINVENT THE WHEEL

BY DAVE HOLMES

Depending on your perspective, Los Angeles either is drowning in Mexican-food options or has five. We've got the taco truck; the corner taqueria; the kitschy throwback where the bachelorette parties pound pitchers of margaritas; the new-school ones, which serve a salsa flight with the chips; and Chipotle. Los Angeles needs water, a permanent solution to the man-bun problem, and someone to elevate the Mexican-food situation.

Ray Garcia is here to elevate the Mexican-food situation. He and his chef de cuisine, Geter Atienza, are sampling mushrooms from the back of their forager's truck on a Tuesday morning, and I'm tasting the produce and trying to think of something to say beyond "These taste good." I'm wondering why they're spending so much time here, but then a few hours later I taste a tostada that rips my head off my neck. It's a plate of shrooms tossed in a black-garlic sauce with chile de árbol and set over a grilled masa cake, familiar yet brand-new. Right now we're down by the Staples Center, behind Garcia's restaurant Broken Spanish, which he opened less than ninety days after launching B.S. Taqueria just up the street. Two restaurants in three months is a massive undertaking, even more so when you find out they're his first. This is like a band debuting with a double album; it never happens. (Yes, Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention did it, but so did Frankie Goes to Hollywood. I will say no more.)

Garcia got to culinary school by way of UCLA, a Department of Justice internship, and the notion of a law degree abandoned after looking around D. C. and noticing everyone was miserable. At night, after class at a culinary school that doesn't exist anymore, he would make recipes from *Cooking for Dummies* for his friends. Even then, when he was cooking casseroles with cream-of-mushroom soup, he wanted to raise the bar: "I'd get so worked up, like, My God, this isn't right. Let me make it hotter. Wait, I can fix that. Let me wipe your plate again."

From there, he begged his way into a job at the Belvedere, in Los Angeles, where his boss told him: "I don't give you more than six weeks." By the time he left six years later, he was the executive sous chef. "There's something masochistic about me. I like the struggle." (If the struggle CONTINUED ›

CONTINUED > leads to lamb-neck tamales like these, I wish Garcia a lifetime of it.)

Then it was six years at Santa Monica's Fig, where his job as executive chef was to stick to the script—seasonal farm-to-table fare. But when they'd open the place for charity events and celebrity-chef competitions, he got to relax and cook Mexican dishes. He won a bunch of those competitions, including the prestigious national pig-cooking showdown Cochon 555. But more exciting for him was the diners' personal connection to the food. "They'd share a hangover story, or they'd have a grandmother story," he says. But it wasn't until Ink's Michael Voltaggio told him he needed to open his own Mexican restaurant that the lightbulb flicked on.

So on to the long-term to-do list it went: launch a modern Mexican restaurant informed by his own Los Angeles Mexican-American upbringing, with meat and produce sourced from small family farms. And maybe a few years down the line, once that restaurant was up and recognized, open a more traditional, franchisable taqueria iteration. But then spaces opened for both, blocks away from each another, weeks apart. Two prime pieces of real estate were the mothers of invention.

B.S. Taqueria came first. It looks like a taco joint in the post–Border Grill tradition, but the menu is constantly changing based on what's fresh and local. The waiter tells me, "My mind was blown and expanded by the beet taco," and I want to laugh at him, but then I take a bite and I'll be damned. The meal is redolent of Mexican food I've had in the past but somehow brand-new. Creative. A brown paper bag of crispy chicken-oyster chicharrones. Clam-and-lardo tacos. The B.S. Handshake, a rich and spicy take on the michelada.

At Broken Spanish, over the gentle din of rock en español—you have not lived until you've heard "Hang on Sloopy" in Spanish—my mind is further altered by a traditional Mexican dish called *camote*, a sweet potato poached in sugarcane water with pig snout and tail. I finish with an Abuelita hot chocolate, reimagined here as a molten ancho-chocolate cake, crunchy with high-quality cacao nibs from Oaxaca.

The kitchen in both places is open, and during the dinner rush Garcia is as calm and decisive as when he's sampling pea tendrils from the forager. He's still got the early-career need to prove himself, evident as he tastes sauces and replates a whole red snapper, and the staff knows to step back and let him work. But if he's at all stressed from opening two restaurants, it doesn't show; he approaches the work, all of it, with something that looks like genuine enthusiasm and joy. It's also possible that he's delirious with fatigue.

During meals at B.S. Taqueria and Broken Spanish, I find myself in the position of being absolutely full yet scraping my plate for every last bit. It's not until long after that I realize I didn't have so much as one tortilla chip, one margarita, one dollop of guac. Ray Garcia went into a city drowning in Mexican restaurants and invented a sixth kind. And then, immediately afterward, a seventh.

B.S. Taqueria, 514 West Seventh Street; 213-622-3744 • Broken Spanish, 1050 South Flower Street; 213-749-1460

BEST NEW RESTAURANTS IN CHICAGO

Chicagoans expect the unexpected in Fulton Market, the old meatpacking district. They expect only the familiar in Chinatown, because they rarely venture past their favorite dim-sum places. They don't expect much of anything in the South Side neighborhood of Bridgeport beyond a decent bar after a White Sox game. Three new Chicago restaurants defy expectations.

—JOHN KESSLER

Momotaro
One story evokes a midcentury Japanese work space, while the basement gives off the glow of the Yokohama entertainment district. Meanwhile, chef Mark Hellyar's talent has wrought a tartare from dehydrated and rehydrated tomatoes that's a ringer for beef, and rollmops of binchotan-grilled wagyu beef and foie gras. *820 West Lake Street; 312-733-4818*

Dolo Restaurant and Bar
Neon decor, more reminiscent of a scene in *Cocktail* than its staid neighbors, doesn't prepare you for the Cantonese kitchen's flamboyant agility with seafood: Dungeness crabs are plucked from a tank within eyeshot and arrive minutes later. Get the short rib, which servers flambé with brandy at the table. *2222 South Archer Avenue; 312-877-5117*

The Duck Inn
For nearly a century, the Gem-Bar Lounge served a neighborhood of cops and South Side politicos. Chef Kevin Hickey grew up nearby and traveled the world before buying and renaming the tavern. The back patio is where you want to be, with the rotisserie duck. For two, heaped on a platter with duck-fat potatoes. *2701 South Eleanor Street; 312-724-8811*

MOST HEDONISTIC MEAL PLAN

BANG BANG BANG

THREE DINNERS, TWO WOMEN, ONE NIGHT OF GLUTTONY

BY JESSIE KISSINGER AND ANNA PEELE

Bang! We arrive at Andrew Carmellini's seasonal American restaurant in Tribeca, Little Park, determined to best the "bang bang"—Louis C.K.'s term for two full meals eaten back-to-back—at three of the Best New Restaurants in New York. Our combined weight is probably less than Louis's, and we're going to outeat him. This will be fun.

Here we are, carefree as a butterfly in a Lunesta ad, all snug in our circular booth at 5:30 with the early birds. Bread? Why not? Cured salmon, beet risotto, rosé. Get the last bite of the duck, because what are we, sultans? We're going to leave food this good on our plates? Strawberry shortcake before the walk to Shuko. By the time we get there, we might even be hungry again!

Bang. We are not hungry. But we are also not full. Good, because we are about to embark upon twenty-five courses at Shuko, Nick Kim and Jimmy Lau's tiny Japanese restaurant in the Village. We sip sake and make eyes at a sous who looks like *Speed*-era Keanu Reeves. A perfect cut of wagyu comes out, so marbled that when we hold it up to the light, it's translucent, like a chapel window in a gingerbread house.

Okay, not quite, but the sake's kicking in, and by the rabbit course—our tenth? eleventh? of the night—things are unraveling. Keanu looks concerned. Are we not enjoying our toro and caviar?

"Finish your sushi. You're insulting the chef."

"I can't. I'm too full."

"Put the Tums away! If you're going to vomit, do it outside so they don't hear you."

"I just need some water."

"No! It dilutes stomach acid and makes it harder to digest. Can she get a rosé, please?"

See, Keanu, we love the tuna. Don't look so reproachful with those bedroom eyes.

Finally, apple pie, deeply unwanted but delightful. Time to go. Goodbye, Keanu.

Bang? We stagger across town for a meal at Santina, Mario Carbone and Rich Torrisi's Italian restaurant in the Meatpacking District. Our stomachs distended with pounds of food and liters of alcohol, we tumble into the restaurant at 11:30, losers.

The dining room feels like a hallucination, like a room in Willy Wonka's factory where the smackheads from *Trainspotting* get rolled by Oompa-Loompas for deflation after eating magical blow-up bonbons. The candy-colored lighting fixtures shine down on us as we drink candy-colored rosé and the waiter comes up in a candy-colored shirt and asks if we want to eat. Do we want to eat? Do we want fried artichokes and grapes, incongruous and perfect? The whole porgy, ready to melt at the touch of a fork? Lime meringue, outer crunch concealing a tender egg-white belly?

No.

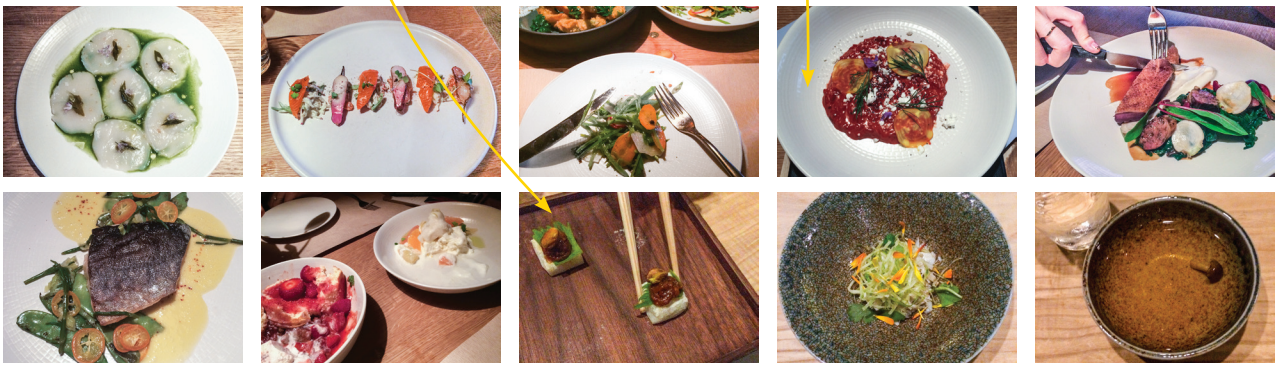
We are a living parable of gluttony, like women who died from too much cake. We learn what it feels like when the quest for pleasure submits to the limitations of the body, that appetite doesn't just need desire but also literal, physical hunger. It's what the diner brings to the table. The chef brings the food. And when they're in harmony, *that* is true pleasure.

We drink our rosé and moan about how full we are and wonder if it would have been unprofessional to slip Keanu a number as we listen to fireworks exploding out of sight, and we enjoy being miserable together.

And when we go back to Santina a few nights later, we don't balk when the waiter in his candy-colored shirt suggests the avocado cecina, a buttery chickpea crepe with Italian guacamole.

Instead, we respond with the most important, most exhilarating, most underrated words ever spoken in a restaurant: "Yes, please."

Little Park: Smyth Hotel, 85 West Broadway; 212-220-4110 • Shuko: 47 East Twelfth Street; 212-228-6088 • Santina: 820 Washington Street; 212-254-3000



BEST REBORN RESTAURANT

Mountain Bird

A MIRACLE IN HARLEM

BY MARK WARREN

"That potato is perfect," he said. "A restaurant is only as good as its sides. This place does the small things very well."

The marble table—a delicate piece of furniture for a big man like Josh Ozersky—was stacked with plates and brimming with food: cassoulet, crispy chicken schnitzel, goulash, a turkey burger stuffed with Mornay sauce, fried cockscomb, black-truffle wing ball, ostrich tartare, a warm pumpernickel baguette, vanilla butter. There was no place to put the bottle of rosé just arriving. A ridiculous array of food and Ozersky was still ordering and talking, mostly about his father the painter, the Victorian writer Thomas Babington Macaulay, Atlantic City, music, and meat. Meat not as food, really, but meat as energy, inspiration, and life. The late-evening light had faded to darkness, and this restaurant—Mountain Bird—was just about the only light on the block, an uninviting stretch of 145th Street, in Harlem. Many of the commercial spaces in the neighborhood have been turned into storefront churches, but the storefront churches were all dark and devoid of the spirit on a Thursday night in late spring 2014. The church was here, in this tiny, glowing bistro, the Reverend Ozersky officiating.

"The cassoulet here is better than any I have had in Paris," he said. And he also talked about how the goodness in that little room—French lanterns and delicate bone-china plates embossed with "MB" and white honeycomb tiles spelling out MOUNTAIN BIRD on the black floor—was just as important to the neighborhood as the food that came out of its kitchen. On this dark block, Mountain Bird, with its loving attention to every part of every bird, abided. That evening became one of those five-hour dinners, one of those exalted evenings in which big thoughts are thunk and you cherish the new friends who inspired you to think them and make solemn oaths to do it again soon. Maybe next Thursday? An evening that would have been spoiled if the eating hadn't been good but was made absolutely historic because it was. Why, they'll write books about this evening! Walk that stretch of 145th Street now and you can still look through the lace curtains and almost see Ozersky bowing theatrically in gratitude before the chef, Kenichi Tajima, and his wife, Keiko, who created Mountain Bird. The nineteen-seat restaurant, he declared over dessert, would make his list of the Best New Restaurants in America for 2014.

But before he would get the chance, Mountain Bird was gone. And so was Josh Ozersky.

A restaurant becomes a hit and sometimes the landlord thinks, Great, let's hike the rent. That sent Mountain Bird in search of another kitchen-ready spot uptown and infuriated Josh. He saw the situation as calamitous not just because Tajima's food was lost to the world but also because a block in Central Harlem had lost its center of gravity.

And so it was with great joy that he greeted the news that Kenichi and Keiko had found a new spot, on another block uptown that needed a little love, and Mountain Bird would live on. When it reopened in April, ten months after leaving the spot on 145th Street, he took it as a sign, and solemn oaths were made for another beautiful Thursday evening.

He was there, of course, in a fashion. Glasses were raised, remembrances made, and where two or more gather with meat on the table, the spirit of Ozersky is never far away.

Josh would have loved the new tiny, glowing Mountain Bird on 110th and Second Avenue, with its new full bar and head-to-toe bird menu, the very same one that he had so fully embraced that night in Harlem. "This potato!" you can hear him say. "These gizzards! Who has ever thought to do this with duck? This isn't a restaurant. This is art."

251 East 110th Street; 212-744-4422, ext. 1

OTHER THINGS BORN IN HARLEM

James Baldwin
•
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar
•
Moby