

The Tasty Twenty

The depth of the local culinary scene has never been stronger—as evidenced by our food editor's list of the 20 restaurants that, right now, set the fine-dining standard in and around Boca.

By Bill Citara

This used to be easy. In the bad old days, which really weren't all that long ago, picking the best restaurants in Boca Raton and Delray Beach was a snap. That's because there were only a handful of restaurants that legitimately deserved to be called the "best" of anything. In the good new days, which is to say right now, there are so many quality restaurants that choosing the inaugural "Tasty Twenty" is damn hard work. It comes down to getting really picky about nits, the fine points of food, service, decor and that difficult-to-pin-down magic that happens when all the elements of a restaurant meal come together to create an experience that's somehow greater than the sum of its parts.

These 20 restaurants (including one Boynton Beach spot) are the ones that have created that experience for me. That's not to say there aren't 10 or 20 or 30 more great restaurants out there, but in this snapshot in this time, these 20 deserve all the plaudits we can lay on them.



PAPPHOTO

Twice-cooked "Jurgielewicz Farms" duckling from La Nouvelle Maison in Boca



Squash blossom quesadillas

EDUARDO SCHNEIDER

Vic & Angelo's

BACKSTORY: It was already famous in Palm Beach Gardens for excellent Italian and sublime pizza—but when it opened in Delray, locating to the Dead Restaurant location once home to Hoot Toot & Whistle, among others, the legend spread south and spawned another hit, The Office, just across the street.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: If all Vic's served was "John's mom's meatball," that would be enough, but the Sunday gravy is also a signature favorite, as are the piz-zass, brick chicken, fresh fish dishes, garlic bread. Not to mention arguably the best outdoor bar downtown.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Fried calamari

CONTACT: 290 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach 561/278-9570



AARON BRISTOL

The Grove

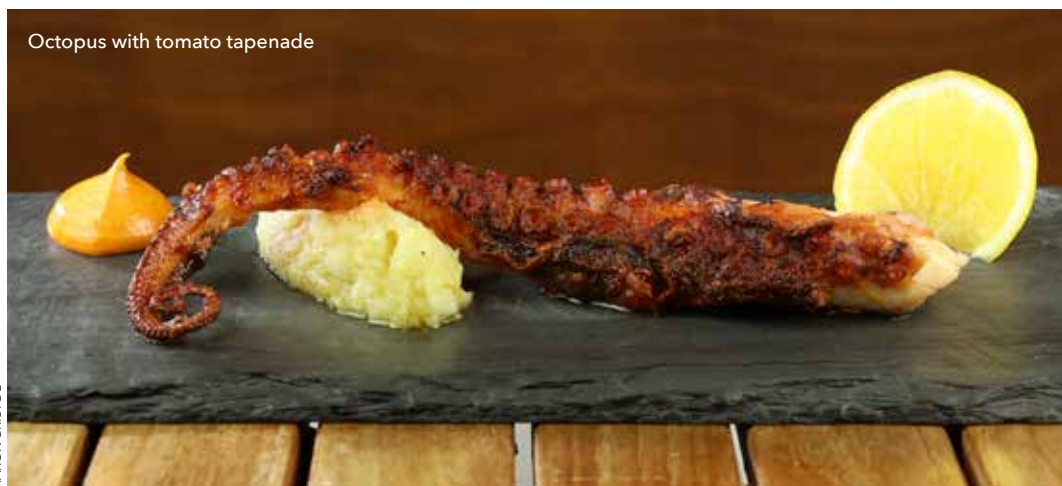
BACKSTORY: The most exciting restaurants in any city are almost always the small, unpretentious places driven by the market, the season, and a chef-owner's burning passion and unique culinary vision. That pretty much sums up The Grove.

Partners Paul Strike and Michael Haycock have created a restaurant whose calm, soothing, almost Zen-like simplicity allows exec chef Haycock's food to shine with clear, pure light. That he turns out food of such quality and creativity from a kitchen likely smaller than your broom closet makes it even more impressive.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: The sophisticated chef- and ingredient-driven cuisine served here would be right at home in the Napa Valley.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Octopus with sun-dried tomato tapenade, parsley and chorizo

CONTACT: 187 N.E. Second Ave., Delray Beach, 561/266-3750



Octopus with tomato tapenade

AARON BRISTOL

La Nouvelle Maison

BACKSTORY: Arturo Gismondi reprises one of Boca's most storied "maisons," La Vieille Maison, with this elegant, contemporary French restaurant that serves the kind of sophisticated haute cuisine that's becoming more and more rare in a world of gastropubs and "fast casual" outlets.

The white-glove pampering begins when the valet takes your car from under the porte cochère at the restaurant's entrance and continues throughout your meal, meticulously prepared and presented by chef-partner Gregory Howell and supremely talented pastry chef Stephanie Steliga. For an evening, at least, you're a member of the One Percent.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Few restaurants combine exquisite service and sumptuous haute cuisine in a posh setting with contem-



Roasted rack of lamb

PAPPHOTO

porary flair; La Nouvelle Maison does it all, with style to spare.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Hudson Valley foie gras with caramelized plum and crumbled marcona almonds

CONTACT: 455 E. Palmetto Park Road, Boca Raton, 561/338-3003



Chef Eric Baker at Max's Harvest

AARON BRISTOL

Max's Harvest

BACKSTORY: Dennis Max has been ahead of the culinary curve since he and partner Burt Rapoport opened their first restaurant in Miami in 1979. Ups and downs worthy of a Netflix original series followed, but Max's passion to bring South Florida the fresh, local, seasonal cookery he first experienced in California never faltered.

Now the market has caught up to him, and Max's Harvest makes full use of its bounty. The menu features the products of local farmers, ranchers, fishermen and artisans in dishes that allow their best qualities to shine through.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Celebrating the best of the season and region, this stylishly rustic eatery puts its money where its "farm-to-fork" mouth is.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Florida Wagyu hanger steak with black garlic, summer truffles and marrow butter

CONTACT: 169 N.E. Second Ave., Delray Beach, 561/381-9970

Max's Grille

BACKSTORY: If there's a single restaurant that reflects both the Boca vibe and desires of Boca diners, it has to be this modern American bistro, which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary in Mizner Park.

The look is classic and timeless, from the always-packed bar to the cozy dining rooms under barrel and coffered ceilings to the spacious outdoor patio. Executive chef Patrick Broadhead's menu is classic and timeless too. No need to reinvent the culinary wheel, just turn out hundreds of finely conceived and executed dishes to Boca's hungry hordes every day.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: One of a handful of iconic restaurants in Palm Beach County, Max's Grille actually has gained a step in its 20-plus years.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Crème brûlée pie



Classic crème brûlée pie at Max's Grille

The Classics

Restaurants come and go in Boca, but these venerable establishments continue to show the newbies how it's done.

• **KATHY'S GAZEBO CAFÉ:** An ode to fine dining since its opening in 1981, this throwback to white-tablecloth service and deliciously prepared French cuisine continues to stand the test of time. (4199 N. Federal Highway, 561/395-6033)

• **NEW YORK PRIME:** In a highly competitive steak-house market, Prime remains the USDA hub of choice for many in Boca thanks to its supper-club ambience, impeccable table-side service, monstrous portions, stellar beef selections. (2350 Executive Center Drive, 561/998-3881)

• **UNCLE TAI'S:** A Boca institution for three decades, this mainstay of the Shops at Boca Center continues to set the bar impossibly high when it comes to the art of Hunan-style cuisine and classic Chinese dishes. (5250 Town Center Circle, 561/368-8806)



Elisa Gismondi-Tufano

Arturo's

BACKSTORY: In an increasingly casual T-shirts and flip-flops world—especially here in South Florida—Arturo's Old World courtliness and measured formality make the Gismondi family's handsome Italian ristorante a calm and classy refuge.

Touchees like whole fish deboned tableside and everything from antipasti to pastry chef Elisa Gismondi-Tufano's luscious, hand-made desserts served from carts rolled around the dining room are rarely seen in restaurants nowadays. Pastas and breads are made in-house too, and the globe-trotting wine list virtually defines the term "encyclopedic." Some things never go out of style.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Sometimes, it's worth dressing up a little for dinner—especially when the evening includes classic Italian fare, outstanding wine selections and impeccable service; this is a restaurant for grown-ups.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Any of the Italian entrées are worth the price of admission, but do yourself a favor and try the tiramisu.

CONTACT: 6750 N. Federal Highway, Boca Raton, 561/997-7373

13 American Table

BACKSTORY: With one acclaimed restaurant under his belt, Tucci's, Albert Aletto decided to open another, a postage stamp-sized spot on a once-neglected stretch of Palmetto Park Road. In doing so, he made two very smart moves. One, he hired Anthony Fiorini, an alum of 32 East, as executive chef. Two, he installed a Jospier oven in the kitchen. The Jospier is a wood-fired grill/oven hybrid, and in Fiorini's talented hands it lends its character to everything from chicken to fish to steak, all juicy and succulent and lightly kissed with smoke.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: This modern American gastropub features food that's as flavorful and finely crafted as the restaurant itself is unpretentious.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Roasted half-chicken with fried green tomatoes, wilted greens and bacon mustard vinaigrette.

CONTACT: 451 E. Palmetto Park Road, Boca Raton, 561/409-2061

Roasted half chicken at 13 American Table



AARON BRISTOL



A slice of chocolate heaven at 32 East

CRISTINA MORGADO

32 East

BACKSTORY: When 32 East opened in 1996 you could roll a bowling ball down Atlantic Avenue and not hit anyone except the occasional wandering pedestrian. Even then, the restaurant earned a reputation for pushing the local culinary envelope.

But it was when Nick Morfogen—fresh from cooking with celebrated chefs like Daniel Boulud and Michael Chiarello—took over the kitchen two years later that the restaurant really went to the head of the South Florida culinary class. Morfogen is still in charge of the kitchen today, his creativity still boundless and 32 East's food better than ever.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Nick Morfogen is a master at combining different flavors and textures; in his hands even the simplest dish becomes culinary art.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Wood-fired figs wrapped in prosciutto with barbecue pecans, goat cheese and spiced gastrique.

CONTACT: 32 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach, 561/276-7868

Apeiro Kitchen & Bar

BACKSTORY: "Mediterranean" restaurants in these parts are typically Italian with a side order of feta. Not Apeiro. At Burt Rapoport's bright, airy west Delray restaurant, culinary influences from Spain, Morocco, Greece, the Middle East and, yes, Italy, all make their way onto the eclectic menu of chef David Blonsky, an alum of such high-profile Chicago spots as Tru and Siena Tavern.

And Rapoport and Blonsky aren't letting any arugula grow under their feet. Last year the duo opened a second Apeiro in midtown Miami, which may only be the harbinger of more to come.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Chef-partner David Blonsky artfully infuses Mediterranean flavors into his dishes to create exciting new tastes.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Moroccan-spiced lamb ribs with rosemary-fig barbecue sauce and pistachio yogurt.

CONTACT: 14917 Lyons Road, Delray Beach, 561/501-4443



Moroccan-spiced lamb ribs at Apeiro

AARON BRISTOL

Racks Fish House & Oyster Bar

BACKSTORY: It's a puzzle that an area with such an abundance of fresh, locally caught fish and shellfish has such a paucity of really good seafood restaurants. Luckily, we have Gary Rack's updated and gently upscale take on the classic American seafood shack. If it lives in the water, there's a good chance executive chef Matthew Danaher has found a way to work it onto the menu, whether in such quintessentially American preparations as oyster stew or Low-country seafood boil or more eclectic offerings like conch ceviche or grilled octopus.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: It's the place for impeccably fresh seafood dishes inspired by regions from New England and the Carolinas to New Orleans and California.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Oyster stew
CONTACT: 5 S.E. Second Ave., Delray Beach, 561/450-6718

The shellfish platter at Racks



Casa D'Angelo

BACKSTORY: When Angelo Elia opened his first Casa in 1998, things like carpaccio, burrata and rapini were as foreign to most local diners as Bashar al-Assad. It's a lot different today, and the Italian-born chef and restaurateur now has diners lining up for his signature blend of classic Italian dishes supplemented with his own modern Italian-inspired creations.

Whether traditional or contemporary, however, Elia's fare always reflects the highly evolved simplicity that lies at the soul of true Italian cookery. It's that innate soulfulness that makes even the most basic pasta something truly special.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: It's a place to experience the look, feel and flavors of an authentic ristorante, courtesy of one of South Florida's most skilled chefs.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Porcini mushroom risotto

CONTACT: 171 E. Palmetto Park Road, Boca Raton, 561/996-1234



The cuts of meat are just as good as the Italian fare at Casa D'Angelo

Scuola Vecchia

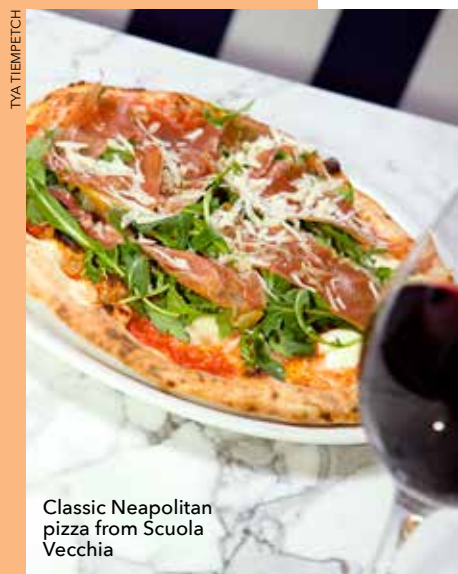
BACKSTORY: Neapolitans take their pies very seriously. And this wickedly stylish downtown pizzeria does too.

Adhering to the strict standards of the Associazione Pizzaiuoli Napoletani, the kitchen here uses only 00 Caputo flour in its dough, San Marzano tomatoes in its sauce and imported Italian curds in its house-made mozzarella, finishing its pizzas in a wood-fired oven imported from Italy that heats to a ferocious 1,000 degrees and can cook a pie in 90 seconds. The result is as close to a Neapolitan pizza as you can get outside of Naples.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Pizza here is so perfectly realized in every respect that even Neapolitans may travel to Delray for a slice.

QUINTESSENTIAL DISH: Pizza margherita
CONTACT: 522 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach, 561/865-5923

TYA TIEMPECH



Classic Neapolitan pizza from Scuola Vecchia



TVA TEMPECH

Buddha Sky Bar

BACKSTORY: Think of Buddha Sky Bar as the minnow that swallowed the whale. When it opened four years ago, the tiny, wickedly stylish third-floor space with panoramic Delray views was little brother to the larger, grander Atlantic Ocean Club downstairs. The Club quickly flopped, as did a succession of other restaurants.

But the Sky Bar's mix of first-rate sushi, dim sum and Asian fusion dishes, washed down with mixological cocktails, got more and more popular until its menu ate up the ground floor spot too, which was rechristened Buddha Garden. Now, that's a fish story.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: In an area where quality Asian restaurants are notably lacking, this sleek fusion spot soars above the rest.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Vegetable fried rice

CONTACT: 217 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach, 561/450-7557

Sushi Simon

BACKSTORY: Hard-core sushi-

holics are a pretty picky lot, as well they should be, given the fragility and delicacy of the objects of their affection. And the first place those picky folks go to feed their raw fish jones is a narrow, cramped space in an unassuming shopping mall, where the fish is so fresh it practically swims onto your plate and the signature rolls are as fanciful and elaborate as they are plentiful. As good as those rolls are, pay attention to the specials, which set new standards of creativity and refinement.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: This postage stamp-sized spot may be known for its rolls but its exquisite sushi, sashimi and daily specials are unmatched in the area.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Sushi and sashimi

CONTACT: 1614 S. Federal Highway, Boynton Beach, 561/731-1819

Cut 432

BACKSTORY: As they contemplated opening their first restaurant together, Brian Albe, Brandon Belluscio and Anthony Pizzo asked a simple question: Why does a steak house have to be a dark, ponderous space with the fusty ambience of a men's club and the sex appeal of a DMV office?

Not coming up with a good answer, they opened Cut 432. Now USDA Prime, corn-fed Nebraska steaks are served in a sleek contemporary setting with the rollicking energy of a South Beach nightclub. Along the way, its owners have answered their initial question: It doesn't.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: This new-fashioned steak house combines prime beef with modern style and a side order of Millennial chic.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Bone-in rib-eye

CONTACT: 432 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach, 561/272-9898



Truffled mac-n-cheese at Cut 432



AARON BRISTOL

Carpaccio di Manzo

over the years, has become a standout on brutally competitive Atlantic Avenue.

The diverse menu travels up and down the Italian peninsula, from hearty Neapolitan-style braciolo to spaghetti in cartoccio that's typical of central Italy to delicate veal Milanese from the north. But wherever it takes you, it's a journey well worth savoring.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: An extensive menu here celebrates Italy's glorious gastronomic diversity, from classic to contemporary.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Spiedini di mozzarella Romana

CONTACT: 119 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach, 561/272-1944

Tramonti

BACKSTORY: There are restaurants that are trendier than Tramonti. There are restaurants that are sexier than Tramonti, with higher-concept design and more cutting-edge cuisine. But there are few restaurants better than

this purveyor of lusty, soulful Italian cookery that,

Twenty-Twenty Grille

BACKSTORY: If you've ever walked down the sidewalk and stumbled over a \$100 bill, you know the feeling of dining at Ron and Rhonda Weisheit's impossibly tiny restaurant at Royal Palm Place. From first bite to last, you'll scarcely be able to believe your good fortune, that a restaurant this ambitious and fully realized exists in your own backyard.

The menu changes with the market and season, but what doesn't change is food that's as artful and inventive as it is deeply, soul-stirringly flavorful. Dining here is good fortune indeed.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: The mix of creativity, contemporary flourishes and international classics is something you'd expect at a sophisticated restaurant in New York or Los Angeles, but the Grille is in quaint little spot in Boca.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Tuna tartare with watermelon/cucumber kimchi, potato crisp and truffle avocado emulsion

CONTACT: 141 Via Naranjas, Boca Raton, 561/990-7969



A slab of ribs and other goodies at Smoke

EDUARDO SCHNEIDER

Smoke BBQ

BACKSTORY: Authentic barbecue—cooked low-n-slow, tender, succulent, lightly kissed with smoke—is as much art as science. And nowhere in South Florida is the artful science of fine 'cue as much on display as it is in this nouveau rustic joint in the heart of Delray's restaurant row.

Pit-master Bryan Tyrell turns out the kind of highly accomplished competition-style barbecue that won championships for his team of barbecue professionals in national cook-offs. Ribs, brisket, pork butt and chicken are the best you'll find.

Even the house-made potato chips are killer.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: Locally speaking, you

won't find another spot with competition-style 'cue that rivals the best of such barbecue destinations as Memphis, Austin and Kansas City.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Pork spareribs

CONTACT: 8 E. Atlantic Ave, Delray Beach, 561/330-4236



The Sorana Sunrise is a popular cocktail at Trattoria Romana

Trattoria Romana

BACKSTORY: Let's face it—Italian restaurants are as common as summer thunderstorms in South Florida. Italian restaurants of the caliber of this handsome, rustic-elegant spot ... well, not so much.

Now entering its third decade, Trattoria Romana has solidified its reputation as one of Boca's premier fine-dining establishments, a place where local movers and shakers gather to dine on classic Italian dishes, prepared and served with scrupulous attention to detail and washed down with wines from an admirably deep and broad list. This is one Italian restaurant that will not rain on your parade.

WHY IT'S ON THE LIST: This is one of Boca's premier power dining spots, with Italian cuisine as we know it and love, done better than anywhere else.

QUINTESENTIAL DISH: Jumbo shrimp saltimbocca

CONTACT: 499 E. Palmetto Park Road, Boca Raton, 561/393-6715



Staff Picks

The Boca Raton team weighs in with some of its favorite dishes in Boca and Delray.

PENNE BOLOGNESE at Trattoria Romana

Who: Margaret Shuff, Publisher

Why: "It's a meaty, rich and hearty sauce full of carrots and onions cooked forever. Delicious!"

Where: 499 E. Palmetto Park Road, Boca Raton, 561/393-6715

CRISPY BEEF at Kapow! Noodle Bar

Who: Kevin Kaminski, Editor

Why: "The combination of fried skirt steak tossed in a five-spice citrus glaze (and served with sticky rice) is perfect for someone like me—a carnivore with a sweet tooth."

Where: 431 Plaza Real, Mizner Park, Boca Raton, 561/347-7322

VEAL CANNELLONI IN A RICH BÉCHAMEL SAUCE at Arturo's

Who: John Shuff, "My Turn" author

Why: "This is a simple yet delicious pasta dish that I order as an appetizer or main dish every time I'm there. It's simply addictive."

Where: 6750 N. Federal Highway, Boca Raton, 561/997-7373

GRILLED SHRIMP AT 13 AMERICAN TABLE

Who: Georgette Evans, Senior Advertising Account Manager

Why: Calling the dish simply grilled shrimp—given that it comes with fried rice, pork belly, egg, scallion—doesn't do it justice!"

Where: 451 E. Palmetto Park Road, Boca Raton, 561/409-2061

STEAMED MUSSELS WITH BLEU CHEESE at J&J Seafood Bar & Grill

Who: Marie Speed, Group Editor

Why: "You sit at the bar and order these mussels swimming in a briny buttery sauce and sprinkled with bleu cheese. Then you dip with large chunks of homemade sourdough bread. There is no shame in this kind of good."

Where: 634 E. Atlantic Ave., Delray Beach, 561/272-3390

WHITE CHOCOLATE BREAD PUDDING at Piñon Grill

Who: Taryn Tacher, Web Editor

Why: "It's the best dessert I've ever tasted."

Where: 6000 Glades Road, #1390, Boca Raton, 561/391-7770

19TH STREET SHORT RIB TACOS at Farmer's Table

Who: Lori Pierino, Art Director

Why: "These are grass-fed, barbecue-braised and deadly good."

Where: 1901 N. Military Trail, Boca Raton, 561/417-5836