

The 25 Essential Dishes to Eat in New York City

We asked six chefs and food experts to create a list of the most delicious and memorable plates in town.

By Dan Piepenbring, Kurt Soller, Amiel Stanek and Korsha Wilson Photographs by Daniel Terna
Dec. 17, 2021

Last month, I crowded into a wooden booth at NoLiTa's Thai Diner with the chefs Kia Damon, Andrés Tonatiuh Galindo Maria, Chintan Pandya and Missy Robbins; the pastry chef Melissa Weller; and the T writer-at-large Ligaya Mishan for a languorous weekday lunch. Between slurps of fantastic khao soi and tom yum soup, we compiled a list — similar to others T has done on architecture, interiors and art — of the 25 essential things to eat in New York City right now. By that, we meant dishes served outside the home, whether at restaurants, food trucks, storefronts or other independent establishments, in all five boroughs. Our intent was to be as catholic and creative in our selections as possible, highlighting items both rarefied and workaday that represent the city's innumerable styles of international cuisine.

Before our meeting, I asked each of the panelists to nominate 10 or so dishes, which we'd all debate in person; in an unexpected twist — proving that each of our experts came with their own distinctly attuned palate — there wasn't a single duplicate. Two restaurants, however, were nominated twice — Fat Choy, a newish vegan Chinese place on Manhattan's Lower East Side; and Lucali, the iconic pizzeria in the Carroll Gardens section of Brooklyn — which practically ensured their inclusion. But which dish from each should we highlight? That was one of the many questions that drove hours of intense, mouthwatering argument as we went around the table (thank God we had food in front of us), debating the merits of this or that burger joint, Vietnamese cafe, sushi counter or stalwart fine-dining institution. In the process, we decided that none of the restaurants run by the chefs present could be chosen — nothing from Galindo Maria's Nenes Deli Taquerias; Pandya's Dhamaka, Adda Indian Canteen or Semma; or Robbins's Misi or Lilia — and nor could our host restaurant (though by the end of our meal, everyone would have selected Thai Diner's famously towering coconut sundae if we could have).



From left: Missy Robbins, Chintan Pandya, Kia Damon, Melissa Weller, Andrés Tonatiuh Galindo Maria and Ligaya Mishan, photographed on Nov. 9, 2021, outside of Thai Diner in Manhattan. Daniel Terna

The final list, which appears in unranked, alphabetical order below, is nothing like what any of us expected going into this challenge. Pizza and tacos aside, almost none of the classics commonly associated with New York are represented, whether bagels, dirty-water hot dogs, xiao long bao or emblematic sweets like rainbow cookies or cronuts. In their place is a creamy, pungent sauce, from a recently opened Middle Eastern restaurant, meant for smearing on anything in sight, and a rotating spread from a two-table Indonesian place in Elmhurst, Queens, that can only be described as “weekly lunch.” Our choices span many neighborhoods and every borough except Staten Island, though there was lots of discussion about what we might include from there, even if our panelists ultimately decided that nothing quite made the cut. (We also spent lots of time talking about the pizza from Razza in Jersey City, which surely would have earned a spot had it not been a river away.) Ultimately, though, conversations like this are always subjective — a different menu of worthy picks would have emerged from a different panel, or even from this same group on a different day. The list should, nonetheless, get you excited to try new flavors around town as New York’s ever-changing culinary scene comes (carefully) back to life post-lockdown — or at least make you very hungry. — Kurt Soller

The interview portion has been edited and condensed. The dish summaries are by Dan Piepenbring, Amiel Stanek and Korsha Wilson.

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1. The Albondigas at La Morada



Daniel Terna

A shallow bowl of albondigas, golf-ball-size spheres of beef, crowned with a sprig of cilantro and luxuriating in a tomato-chile sauce the color of sun-baked clay — in many ways, this modest dish, which is only sometimes on the menu at La Morada, is an apt metaphor for the restaurant itself. Just as each supple orb splits open to reveal the pimienta-stuffed green cocktail olive buried in its center, this casual spot represents so much more than its unassuming storefront might suggest. The chef, Natalia Mendez, and her family, who opened La Morada in 2009, serve Mexican food, sure. But look beyond the tacos and burritos and you'll find the menu's true standouts: complex, idiosyncratic dishes from their native Oaxaca such as elaborately spiced moles and those perfect little albondigas. Still, to focus too tightly on the food, excellent though it is, is to elide the larger significance of the restaurant as a bastion of local activism. Mendez and many of her family members who own and work at La Morada are openly undocumented, and the day-to-day operations of the restaurant run parallel to their fierce advocacy work with and for the city's immigrant community, as well as to their vigorous mutual-aid efforts to support those most affected by the ongoing pandemic. To eat a humble plate of meatballs here is to be reminded not just of what a great restaurant is but of what a great restaurant can do. — *Amiel Stanek*

308 Willis Avenue, South Bronx

Ligaya Mishan: La Morada is one of the few places in the city serving Oaxacan food, which is still an underrepresented cuisine. The restaurant is also a center of activism and has a lending library that supports the owners' commitment to the community. [Its shelves had to be cleared recently to hold containers for their mutual-aid food deliveries — up to 500 meals per day.] The meatballs are also delicious.

2. The Ancient Vegan Bowl at Teranga



Daniel Terna

Teranga sits on the ground floor of the Africa Center in Harlem, a museum and cultural hub with an arresting facade. Its vast, welcoming dining room has West African flourishes (elaborate murals and stately yellow armchairs with a kind of outsize craquelure pattern, upholstered with mud cloth from the Ivory Coast) and trapezoidal windows that offer views of Central Park; a brightly painted fishing boat guards the entrance. Pierre Thiam, Teranga's Senegalese chef and owner, translates the restaurant's name as "good hospitality," and has emphasized that it's a way of life. He sources some of his ingredients from African smallholder farmers, and none is more essential than jollof rice, or jasmine rice parboiled in a broth of tomatoes, onions and spices that lends it a distinctive brown-red hue, which is one of the staples of West African cuisine. Piquant and nourishing, it's the foundation of Teranga's Ancient Vegan Bowl, which includes efo riro (a stew of kale, okra and dawadawa, or fermented locust beans), ndambe (another stew, with black-eyed peas and sweet potato), spicy roasted plantains, mafe peanut sauce and more. Additional bowls include tender chicken, steak or salmon and hot sauces made from Scotch bonnet peppers. The portions are generous, and the sweetness of the plantains, especially, brings out the richness of the rice. The restaurant shares a space with the Africa Center's Reading Room, so if you visit alone, settle in with a book while you eat. — *Dan Piepenbring*

1280 Fifth Avenue, Harlem; 157 East 53rd Street, Midtown East

Kia Damon: This place has a really cool cafeteria-line setup that has all kinds of different African dishes and sides. When they think of vegan or vegetable-forward food, a lot of people don't think of African cuisine, but that's a mistake. I like finding the connections between West African and Southern food, like black-eyed peas and jollof rice, which is similar to red rice. If you've never had jollof, Teranga's a good place to try it. It's also in the educational center, so I feel like I'm gaining something every time I go.

3. The Birria Taco at Birria-Landia



Birria de res is a beef stew that was popularized in Tijuana, Mexico, and the dish's litany of spices and guajillo chiles, as well as its requisite long, slow simmer, can turn brisket into an otherworldly pleasure. It was only a matter of time before someone thought to put this concoction in a taco. José and Jesús Moreno, brothers from Coatzingo, have opened a series of food trucks — one in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and one in Jackson Heights, Queens, with a third coming sometime next year to the Bronx — to give the birria taco, long celebrated on the West Coast, its due in New York. The pair dip the tortillas in the stew's layer of beef fat before tossing them on the griddle, which gives them a vibrant color somewhere between a camel overcoat and an orange traffic cone: the mark of the genuine article. Topped with cilantro,

onion, a spicy red sauce and a wedge of lime, the fully assembled taco is subtly complex. Each bite reveals new flavors as the many forms of umami jostle for primacy. Try one with a cup of Birria-Landia's beef consommé. Ideal for additional dipping, it gives ecstatic new meaning to the phrase "saturated fat." — *D.P.*

77-99 Roosevelt Avenue, Jackson Heights, Queens; 491 Metropolitan Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Andrés Tonatiuh Galindo Maria: The Moreno brothers are the reason I opened my own taco shop. They're pioneers who brought the true taste of birria to New York City. There's a reason Pete Wells gave them two stars — he usually doesn't give food trucks raves, but it's a delicious bite.

4. The Blueberry Buttermilk Doughnut at Peter Pan Donut & Pastry Shop

Daniel Terna

This bakery, run by the same family since 1993, has been a neighborhood fixture for more than 60 years, and precious little about the place has changed in that time. The storefront, like the pastries displayed in its inviting plate-glass window, which features a decal of an enormous cup of coffee, seems glazed in nostalgia, and the shop's prices are almost suspiciously inflation-proof. Inside, Covid-19 has only slightly dampened the mood: Social-distancing protocol has forced the bakery to remove the stools from its inviting S-shaped luncheonette counter during the morning rush, but their metal poles remain, jutting out like tree trunks in a denuded forest. Fortunately, you'd hardly notice on a busy morning, as the line of customers snakes out the door, and the servers, clad in their distinctive green-and-pink uniforms, bustle before the wall of doughnuts with graceful efficiency. Ask for the blueberry buttermilk doughnut, a

longtime best seller, and you'll discover the American answer to Proust's madeleine: tangy and cakey, with a fruitiness that expands as it dissolves on the tongue. It tastes like a memory of some long-forgotten cereal from an impossibly sugary past. — *D.P.*

727 Manhattan Avenue, Greenpoint, Brooklyn

Mishan: We all agree on Peter Pan. Any doughnut, really.

Melissa Weller: They come out at different times, and you go for the one that's the warmest and freshest.

Damon: I love doughnuts, but specifically cake doughnuts because I like poundcake. I like dense. Peter Pan's blueberry buttermilk doughnut is my pride and joy. The buttermilk makes it tangy. It's just so good. It's not overly sweet. And blueberry and buttermilk are pretty complementary.

5. **The Braised Duck Necks at Falansai**

Daniel Terna

There was a time when diners would look askance at any mention of off-cuts on a restaurant menu, but the past decade or so has seen the Overton window of acceptable animal parts shift dramatically. For reasons at once economic, environmental and gustatory, ambitious chefs of all stripes have come to embrace nose-to-tail cooking — pig heads! Fish collars! Chicken livers! — and the city's open-minded eaters have followed suit. The latest and greatest addition to the roster of covetable dishes crafted from castaways has to be the braised duck necks — a part of the bird enthusiastically eaten in other parts of the world but less often in this country — served at Falansai. Confited until the flavorful meat threatens to fall off the (many) bones and coated with a sticky sauce kissed with five spice, they are no

fork-and-knife affair; this is intimate food, the sort that rewards eating with both hands and slurping lustily. The dish is the brainchild of chef Eric Tran, who earned his low-waste stars at Blue Hill at Stone Barns — Dan Barber’s temple of farm-to-table cooking in Tarrytown, N.Y. — before taking Falansai over from an acquaintance late last year and making it his own. The rest of the menu is full of winners, but those duck necks are required eating, the kind of eye-opening dish that turns a new experience into a new craving. — A.S.

112 Harrison Place, Bushwick, Brooklyn

Damon: I love duck. It’s right at the top of my food pyramid. And these duck necks, I don’t know what he braises them in, but you can’t stop eating them. At first you feel weird because you’re like, “It’s a neck.” But the meat comes off really nice, and it’s a little bit sweet and then it builds in spice and then you just can’t stop. By the time you’re done, everyone at the table’s like, “Well, damn. You didn’t leave any of these for anyone else.”

6. The Burrata Pizza Slice at L’industrie

Daniel Terna

Just as fashion labels crowd the market with elevated basics, New York is suddenly teeming with hole-in-the-wall slice spots boasting about their refined pedigrees and top-shelf ingredients — about as far from humble as you can get while still serving your food on paper plates. Williamsburg, Brooklyn’s L’industrie, which expanded this spring to accommodate ever larger crowds, wears its bona fides lightly, impressive though they are. Its owners, Massimo Laveglia and Nick Baglivo, approach pizza as equal parts art and science. Laveglia, who hails from Pistoia, Italy, near Florence, makes his sauce from Bianco DiNapoli tomatoes and cold ferments his dough for days, which makes his crusts light and airy. The bottom of a L’industrie pie — wafer thin but still somehow pliable — is a miracle of

engineering. As for toppings, the shop's most popular option is a classic New York slice, adorned, or maybe artfully vandalized, with basil leaves and two substantial dollops of burrata. The cheese's cool, creamy density is the perfect complement to the acidity of the tomato sauce and the crispiness and warmth of the crust. — *D.P.*

254 South Second Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Galindo Maria: L'industrie is one of the trendiest pizzerias right now. They're doing great stuff out there. It's nice and crispy, it's creamy, it's fresh. And then they top it off with burrata.

Weller: I've ordered the burrata pizza a ton of times. They top it on after the pizza's already made, I believe, and the residual heat from the pizza causes the burrata to melt a bit.

Pandya: Personally I feel that Razza [in Jersey City, N.J.] is the best pizza. But because it's not in New York City, it can't be on the list.

7. The Calzone at Lucali

Daniel Terna

"New York line behavior," wrote Calvin Trillin in his 1974 culinary essay collection, "American Fried: Adventures of a Happy Eater," "can be explained only by assuming that just about everyone in the line believes himself to be in possession of what the Wall Street people call inside information." To wit: the hordes of expectant diners who wait for hours outside Lucali, chef Mark Iacono's 15-year-old Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, pizza joint, just to put their names on the list for the evening — the 30-seat restaurant takes no reservations — and be called back perhaps many hours later to eat. Even though Iacono's pizza-making aplomb has been widely recognized by critics and A-listers alike, Lucali still somehow feels like a secret, if an aggressively open one. But the real inside scoop? His calzones may be even better

than his not-quite-Neapolitan-style pies and are almost certainly the best in the city. It's a discovery that defies all logic. The calzones are made from the same superlative dough — folded around a dense mixture of milky ricotta, mozzarella and other cheeses — baked to the same crisp-chewy perfection and served with a sidecar of the same rich tomato sauce as the pizza, and yet: magic, alchemy, a thing far exceeding the sum of its parts. — A.S.

575 Henry Street, Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn

Robbins: When I go to Lucali, I always finish with the calzone. It's genius. Great cheese, great crust and amazing dipping sauce.

Weller: Everyone goes there for the pizza, but do they know about the calzone? It feels like an underground secret. It has just the right balance of crust and cheese and sauce.

8. The Celery and Date Salad at the Four Horsemen

Daniel Terna

The Four Horsemen, open since 2015, has made a name for itself with its extensive natural wine list; its cozy, acoustically impeccable space with sound-absorbing cedar slats and a vintage McIntosh amplifier; and the fact that it's co-owned by the musician James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem. But the food, by the chef Nick Curtola, is increasingly the most talked-about aspect of the restaurant. Curtola's ever-evolving menu comprises farm-to-table fare with unusual ingredients, such as 'nduja (a fermented, easy-to-spread pork salumi) and Rodolphe Le Meunier butter from Normandy. The celery salad, unexpectedly pulse-quickening in its simplicity, embodies his attention to detail.

Alongside walnuts and plump Medjool dates, the celery is beguiling, with a clean, fresh bite that contrasts with the dates' chewiness. The salad is blanketed in long, thin shavings of piave vecchio, a Northern Italian alpine cheese with a mild bitterness that complements the walnuts. And yes, it goes well with a glass of wine. — *D.P.*

295 Grand Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Weller: We all love the Four Horsemen. Everybody needs to go there now.

Robbins: I crave the celery salad. I want it tonight, as a matter of fact. It has everything that you want in a salad. It's got crunch, it's got sweet, it's got acid, it's got salt. Celery, dates, cheese: It's perfect. When you get a bite of everything together, you have a moment.

9. The Cheong Fun at Joe's Steam Rice Roll

Daniel Terna

Thank the Guangdong-born chef Joe Rong for turning the Cantonese breakfast staple cheong fun into a heavily Instagrammed New York lunchtime craze. No sooner did he move to the city 10 years ago than he began to pine for the one dish he'd grown up eating nearly every day, and so in 2017 Rong opened his own business, Joe's Steam Rice Roll, in Flushing, Queens, in an effort to recapture his mother's version. The rolls are made out of a batter of milled rice and water that is poured into sheet pans, combined with ingredients like egg, pork and scallions and steamed into one vast, thin ribbon of noodle that is then rolled and sliced into discrete little crepes. The result, delicious on its own, is also a supreme sponge for sauce, and prepandemic, the jostling at the condiment counter of any Joe's outpost for the soy, sriracha and peanut sauces could be fierce. — *Korsha Wilson*

136-21 Roosevelt Avenue, Flushing, Queens; 261 Canal Street, Chinatown, Manhattan; 422 Amsterdam Avenue, Upper West Side, Manhattan

Mishan: Joe started out at this little counter in a mini mall in Queens, and now he's on the Upper West Side and at the Canal Street Market. His cheong fun is very classic and done extremely well, just like the way you might get it in Hong Kong. He mills all of the rice for the noodles with these special machines from China.

10. The Chicken Chicharrón Sandwich at Bolivian Llama Party

Daniel Terna

That Bolivian food remains something of a rarity in New York is all the more reason to seek out Bolivian Llama Party. When the brothers Alex, David and Patrick Oropeza opened their first location in 2016, they were literally underground: Their stall was part of a food court just off the Columbus Circle subway stop. It was aimed so squarely at passing commuters that a poster demonstrated how to eat salteñas — meat-filled pastries that hover between empanadas and soup dumplings — standing up without staining your work outfit. Last year, the party came to Sunnyside, Queens, which offers such niceties as outdoor seating and natural light. Salteñas are still at the heart of the menu, but the fried chicken sandwich is not to be missed. The brothers marinate their chicken thighs in Paceaña, a Bolivian beer, and serve them with a llajua mayo (made with quilquiña, sometimes called Bolivian coriander, an herb with a distinct flavor somewhere on the cilantro spectrum). Topped with lettuce, tomato and bread-and-butter pickles, this rendition sits well above the fray of the increasingly hyperbolic Chicken Sandwich Wars. — *D.P.*

44-14 48th Avenue, Sunnyside, Queens

Damon: I've eaten quite a few chicken sandwiches, and I feel like they're all pretty much the same, but this one knocks the others out of the water. It's the right ratio of chicken to bread — with a lot of chicken sandwiches you get this massive piece of supercrispy chicken with a little bit of bread, and you're basically just eating chicken. Also, the sauce is great — I get mine with the cilantro sauce. And the boxes it comes in have holes so that if you're traveling, the heat comes out, which most people don't do. They just take hot fried food and shove it in the box, and then it gets to me and it's soggy and I'm like, "What the hell?"

II. The Chile Chicken at Spice Symphony

Daniel Terna

Walter D'Rozario, Anil D'Silva and Luv Koli, the chefs at Spice Symphony, combine Chinese and Indian cuisines in an unpretentious mélange via what D'Rozario has described as "grandmotherly cooking." With its eclectic tiles and modern globe lights, the restaurant's 50th Street location — one of two in Midtown — is far from matronly. But its flavors do indeed seem laced with a care that verges on the familial. The menu is full of standard curries and paneers, but the chefs are able to breathe new life into them, and the chile chicken especially shines. An Indo-Chinese mainstay born in Kolkata, India, the dish is prepared with red chiles, green peppers and Vidalia onions; each of the juicy cubes of chicken absorbs elements of the vegetables and the chile sauce, which has surprising dimension despite its surpassing spiciness. A bit of soy sauce, far from overwhelming the palate, functions almost as a binding agent, bringing out a latent sweetness. Another marvel of the dish is its texture, which feels carefully orchestrated: The chicken is crispy and chewy, its pieces so large that they force you to slow down and savor every bite. — *D.P.*

150 East 50th Street, Midtown East, Manhattan; 182 Lexington Avenue, Murray Hill, Manhattan

Pandya: In Kolkata there is an area called Tangra where a lot of Chinese Indians live. They've been there for over 200 years and have developed their own cuisine, and now it's booming everywhere. And I think these guys do the best job. Indians will always pay for good Indian Chinese food. I live in Jersey, and my wife makes me drive an hour and a half just to eat an Indian Chinese dish. For our friendsgiving dinner this year for the entire team of all our restaurants, one of the dishes on the menu was chile chicken.

12. The Cuatro Leches Cake at Tres Leches Café

Daniel Terna

Tres Leches Café has a slogan — “Por la gracia de Dios” — that goes some way toward explaining its confection-focused perfectionism: The team takes its cues, in other words, from a higher power. The spouses Ronaldo and Luisa Felipe opened their first location, on 112th Street in East Harlem, more than a decade ago, and a second shop arrived on the Lower East Side earlier this year. Growing up in the Dominican Republic, Ronaldo would help his grandmother make cakes and sweets, so it was only natural that eventually he'd want to try his hand at tres leches cake, a favored dessert throughout Latin America. Some classic versions call for condensed milk, evaporated milk and regular milk or cream. At the risk of gilding the lily, the cafe's cuatro leches cake dares to add a fourth “milk” in the form of dulce de leche icing, with transcendent results; you'll wonder why the caramel wasn't always there. It's one of many cakes that Tres Leches sells whole or by the square slice, each one of which comes swimming, inside its plastic to-go container, in a pool of cream, just as God intended. — *D.P.*

160 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan; 356 East 112th Street, East Harlem, Manhattan

Galindo Maria: It's not very common to add another milk. So it threw me off. It was pretty dope.

13. The Dr. Walter Delph at Amy Ruth's

Daniel Terna

Perusing a menu that doubles as a roll call of African American luminaries — the Rev. Al Sharpton (chicken and waffles), the Al Roker (beef short ribs), the President Barack Obama (barbecued, baked, fried or smothered chicken) — one might be tempted to gloss over the Dr. Walter Delph at Amy Ruth's, Harlem's soul-food mecca, owing to its namesake's seeming obscurity, but that would be a grave error. Otherwise known as the fisherman's platter, the Delph stands out from the justly famous pork-and-poultry-centric offerings with its seafood trio: catfish fried golden brown, juicy shrimp and a plump crab cake. Factor in the two included sides (anything from okra to grits to black-eyed peas) and a glass of the Kool-Aid of the day, and you have a meal that's both deeply comforting and a testament to the food traditions Black southerners brought to the area during the Great Migration. And for the record: Dr. Delph was no slouch, having been the first Black financier and builder in New York State to be backed by a Federal Housing Administration mortgage, in 1948; he used the money to construct the Ivey Delph apartments in Harlem's Hamilton Heights, now on the National Register of Historic Places. — *K.W.*

113 West 116th Street, Harlem, Manhattan

Damon: I'm from the South, and I don't get a lot of really good Southern food up here. People take me to a lot of places and they're like, "Oh, Kia, you will love this. It's Southern." I'm just like, "We can't be friends no more, man. This is the nastiest stuff I've ever had in my life. What do you think of me?" But then someone told me about Amy Ruth's. You get a lot of food for the price, which is always nice. Everything is fried and seasoned to perfection. The sides are phenomenal. By the time I'm done, I'm ready to go to sleep on the train home.

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14. The Fried Eggs With Preserved Turnip at Mama Lee

Daniel Terna

Mei Lee became Mama Lee in 2013, when, having spotted a vacant storefront in Bayside, she decided to open a restaurant that serves Taiwanese food of confident, pared-back utility. Tucked away on an unassuming block in Bayside, Queens, her place is too small to allow for indoor dining during the pandemic, but while you wait for your takeout, Lee herself will offer you a warming cup of roasted-corn tea — you'll smell it as soon as you enter. Inside, you'll also find ginger and lemon plants, neat stacks of Chinese newspapers, a serene photo of Lee's favorite vacation spot in Austria and flyers for a friend's local business. The quiet star of the menu is the fried egg with preserved turnip: a fluffy, golden-brown omelet large enough to feed a small family. Slightly sweet, with a hint of brine, the preserved turnip is subtle. Its main effect is textural, as its toothsome crunch brings out the flavor of the eggs and scallions. And the dish pairs nicely with Lee's purple rice, which has a nuttiness and depth of flavor akin to farro. — *D.P.*

213-12 48th Avenue, Bayside, Queens

Mishan: You might have to take a subway and a bus to get to Mama Lee, but it's worth it. It's this little Taiwanese restaurant run by this wonderful lady who only opens when she feels like it, so it's always good to call ahead. This dish's simplicity is what makes it great. The preserved turnip is a totally magical ingredient that gives you a taste of salt, but filtered through the earth somehow.

15. The Gaspé Nova Smoked Salmon at Russ & Daughters

Daniel Terna

Whole dissertations could be — and in all likelihood have been — written on the recondite vocabulary that surrounds Jewish bagelry. Neophytes should approach the counter with reverence, having learned to distinguish between the delicatessen and the appetizing store, the lox and the gravlax, the cured and the smoked. At Russ & Daughters (an appetizing store, distinctly *not* a delicatessen), though, even the untutored can feel in the know by remembering four easy syllables: Gaspé Nova. This is the smoked salmon against which all others must be measured; bagels dream of it. The fish is salt cured and then cold smoked in an oven whose temperature hovers at just under 83 degrees Fahrenheit, which preserves its mild flavor. And its marbled fat gives the fish a luscious texture that's rightly, if invariably, described as silky. Niki Russ Federman, the great-granddaughter of the store's founder, Joel Russ, has a simple litmus test for the quality of the salmon: It's only good enough if you can slice it so thin that you can read *The Times* through it. Though it's best ordered right from the counter on East Houston Street, Gaspé Nova is also available for delivery in the city, and Russ & Daughters ships it nationwide. — *D.P.*

179 East Houston Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan; 127 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan; 141 Flushing Avenue, Brooklyn Navy Yard

Robbins: To me, this place is just New York. It defines New York eating to me. It's excellent fish and excellent flavor, but I think part of the reason I love it is the tradition of going to the store and watching them slice it. They've got people who've worked for them for more than 40 years. There's such passion and integrity behind what they do, and I love that they've never really veered from what they started as. They've enhanced it a little bit, but you walk into that store and it still feels like it could be a hundred years ago. They're not trying to reinvent the wheel. They're just trying to do what they do well.

Weller: They have such skilled slicers. When you slice it that thin, it has a different mouthfeel; it melts in your mouth. And that craftsmanship is hard to find in the city.

16. The Goat Jhol Momo at Nepali Bhanchha Ghar

Daniel Terna

The Tibetan- and Nepali-style dumplings known as momo have garnered such a loyal New York fan base that every autumn for the past ten years (2020 excepted), hordes have descended on Jackson Heights, Queens, so-called momo maps in hand, for the annual Momo Crawl. But just as Joey Chestnut's dominance has reduced the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest to something of a formality in recent years, Nepali Bhanchha Ghar has worn the crawl crown so often — having recently won for a fourth consecutive year — as to dispel all suspense. Its success owes not a little to its goat jhol momo, which consists of pillowy pockets of the underappreciated meat bathed in a spicy chicken-and-tomato soup and garnished with cooling cilantro. While the dumplings can be stuffed any of seven different ways, there's something about the gamy but slightly sweet taste of goat that pairs particularly well with the chutney-like broth. — *K.W.*

74-15 Roosevelt Avenue, Jackson Heights, Queens

Pandya: Momo is basically a dumpling or dim sum, and it's a dry dish, but jhol is a liquid. So there's this soup in which they put the momo, and they make different versions of it. They have chicken, they have everything, but I love the one with goat, I love the flavor of it. And the best place to eat that is Nepali Bhanchha Ghar. The jhol, the soup, is also outstanding. Nobody's able to do it better.

17. The Grilled Blowfish Tails With Espelette Butter at Dame

Daniel Terna

To the nimblest go the spoils. This was the lesson learned by many of the chefs and restaurateurs who have navigated the uncertain landscape of the past two years, and few absorbed it to as great effect as the chef Ed Szymanski and Patricia Howard, the co-owners of Dame. The restaurant began in early March 2020 as a pop-up, run out of a coffee shop, that served the kind of British-inflected, meat-centric fare Szymanski had become known for as the chef at Cherry Point in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. When the pandemic hit, the pair deftly pivoted to a takeaway-fish-and-chips concept, which quickly gained a cultlike following. Finally, this past summer, came a dedicated brick-and-mortar space on MacDougal Street and a more expansive seafood-focused menu that established Dame as not just an elevated chippie but a paragon of inventive fish cookery as well. Now, however, that fried hake — which is still on the menu and no less wonderful — stands to be overshadowed by Szymanski's more elegant piscine creations, like an unassuming plate of plump blowfish tails. Meaty and mild, lolling about in a buttery ocher emulsion that prickles with the gentle heat of piment d'Espelette, a fruity chile from the Pyrénées, and topped with a bright red pepper relish, they taste of a stunning marriage of sea and land, yes, but also of successes hard won. — A.S.

87 MacDougal Street, Greenwich Village, Manhattan

Pandya: Of all the exciting restaurants that opened this year, Dame is my favorite. They're known for their fish and chips, which are very good, but what blew me away were the blowfish tails.

Robbins: He's another person who's cooking with a really particular point of view and doing fish differently. He works out of this tiny, tiny kitchen and is doing some really bold, beautiful food.

18. The Kaya Butter Toast at Kopitiam

Daniel Terna

Kyo Pang built Kopitiam on East Broadway as a tribute to the unfussy, unhurried coffeehouses of Malaysia, where she grew up steeped in Baba Nyonya culture, which is known for its synthesis of Malaysian and Chinese traditions. Sure enough, her cafe feels like the ideal place to linger over a hot beverage and breakfast, which she serves all day. Of the menu's many pleasures — including nasi lemak, Malaysia's unofficial national dish, made here with grassy-tasting banana leaf and fragrant coconut rice — the kaya butter toast is a standout. Kaya ("rich" in Malay) is a jam made with coconut milk, eggs, palm sugar and pandan leaves that has the consistency of custard, a chartreuse color and a sweet flavor that defies categorization. At Kopitiam, it's spread liberally with butter over thick flagstones of crustless white bread that's been delicately browned. Taken with a cup of tea, the toast becomes the Platonic comfort food, capable of lowering your blood pressure in real time. For those who wish to relive the experience at home, Kopitiam sells kaya by the jar. — *D.P.*

151 East Broadway, Lower East Side, Manhattan

Pandya: I used to live in Singapore, which is where I got hold of this dish. I could never find good kaya butter toast in America; this was the first place. The chef is a phenomenal lady, very passionate. She follows a traditional Malaysian recipe. Everybody should go and try it at least once in their life.

Mishan: It's these big slabs of bread. There's something about the size — it's the perfect proportion to balance the sweetness of the spread.

Damon: That's my favorite thing to eat. If I'm in the area, I go get kaya butter toast and rose tea and sit in the little window and watch people.

19. The Mushroom Sloppy at Fat Choy

Daniel Terna

Chef Justin Lee is not vegan, but Fat Choy, the diminutive “kind of Chinese” (as he describes it) restaurant he and co-owner Katie Lee opened in September 2020, most certainly is — even if they’re likely to tuck the word “vegan” between parentheses. That coyness is one of the reasons Lee’s food stands out in a city newly awash with restaurants all too eager to shout their plant-based bona fides from the rooftops: This is food for *everyone*, not just virtue signalers and wellness influencers. Eschewing venture-capitalist-funded meat substitutes in favor of farmers’ market and Manhattan Chinatown produce (sweet corn, crisp cucumbers) and an umami-packed multicultural pantry (fermented tofu, pickled garlic), Lee has designed an animal-free menu that is ingenious and eminently craveable. The Mushroom Sloppy, evocative of both classic canned Manwich and the beloved stuffed sesame pancakes from the Chinatown stalwart Vanessa’s Dumpling House a few blocks away, is a case in point. Composed of a saucy, sweet-savory braised shiitake and smoked tofu ragout loosely ensconced within a crispy-chewy sesame-studded homemade roll, it’s messy, rich and satisfying, all id and no superego. A triumph of a dish, it makes a more sustainable future feel not only possible but also desirable. — A.S.

250 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan

Galindo Maria: It’s mind-blowing — it doesn’t even taste like mushrooms.

Pandya: I eat at Fat Choy once or twice a week. Everything is so tasty. The sloppy joe is the most famous one, but the bok choy is phenomenal, too.

20. The Roast Pork Over Rice at Wah Fung No. 1 Fast Food

Daniel Terna

The perpetual line under the red awning on Chrystie Street near Canal is the giveaway that you've arrived at Wah Fung No. 1, the exceedingly affordable and exceedingly delicious Chinatown takeout institution. Once you make your way to the front, you'll see serried ranks of perfectly caramelized roasted ducks hanging in the window above a steam table piled high with equally lacquered hunks of assorted proteins. Meat over rice is the name of the game here, but of all the unctuously roasted options, the pork is the best. Tender but with a crackling skin, it's carved into thick slices and heaped atop enough rice to soak up all the juices and enough cabbage for the dish to qualify as a well-balanced meal. And at \$6 for a large portion (\$4.50 for a small), it's one of the city's best street-food bargains. — *K.W.*

79 Chrystie Street, Chinatown, Manhattan

Galindo Maria: When I was a minimum-wage cook at Jean-Georges, all the cooks used to go to Wah Fung after the lunch shift.

21. The Savarin at Nita's European Bakery

Daniel Terna

Though the number of Romanian restaurants in Sunnyside, Queens, has never achieved the sort of critical mass necessary for the neighborhood to be rechristened Little Transylvania, a few old-country stalwarts, such as Romanian Garden and Danubius, dot the landscape. (The most illustrious Manhattan Romanian representative, the wonderfully schmaltzy shrine to Jewish comfort food Sammy's Roumanian Steakhouse, closed earlier this year, alas.) And then there's Nita's European Bakery, which opened in 1982 and is still going strong on a nondescript stretch of Greenpoint Avenue, now cheek by jowl with a Papa John's. In its glass cases packed with cakes and cookies of a more generic provenance you're bound to spot what looks like a sort of cream-filled butterflied crumpet wallowing in something viscous and topped with a splotch of red — the savarin, named after the early 19th-century food wit and bon vivant Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin ("Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are"). Basically, it's a Romanian baba au rhum, a tiny cake baked in a muffin tin, soaked in rum syrup, filled with whipped cream and anointed with jam. Spongy, creamy, fruity, boozy, the tiny savarin covers most all of the dessert food groups. — K.W.

40-10 Greenpoint Avenue, Sunnyside, Queens

Pandya: The cakes are outstanding, but the other desserts are also insane. I like the savarin most of all.

22. The Spaghetti Cacio e Pepe at I Sodi

Daniel Terna

Though the menu at I Sodi trumpets chef Rita Sodi's Tuscan credentials — she grew up just north of Florence — it's her way with a traditionally Roman dish, spaghetti cacio e pepe, that's arguably her finest achievement. For if it's true that the fewer ingredients in a recipe, the more exacting the technique required, cacio e pepe, consisting of only pasta, pecorino and pepper, might be the ultimate test of virtuosity. Here, the cheese isn't merely grated on top of the finished product as a sort of gracious afterthought but is emulsified into a sauce made with the water used to cook the pasta, then tossed with the spaghetti until creamy but still clingy, the end result spiked only with the pepper's fragrant heat. (Cacio e pepe sauce does double duty at I Sodi, also pairing with lasagna to make a lasagna bianca, the tomatoey version's less famous sibling.) And given how hard it can be to get a reservation at I Sodi, a satisfyingly casual meal of cacio e pepe and a *bicchiere* of Nebbiolo is the perfect order for those lucky enough to steal a seat at the bar. — *K.W.*

105 Christopher Street, West Village, Manhattan

Robbins: I Sodi is my happy place. It transports me to Italy; you feel you're in this little trattoria. Rita frosted the windows at street level so all you see are trees; you don't even know you're on Christopher Street. I love to sit at a particular seat at the bar and have a Negroni. Her cacio e pepe is one of my comfort foods. It's about as simple as you can get, but so many people screw it up. Rita's is spot-on every time.

23. The Toum at Shukette

Daniel Terna

A well-ordered meal at Shukette, chef Ayesha Nurdjaja's vibey Middle Eastern restaurant, can feel as gleefully disorienting as a street festival: a riot of boldly flavored dips, elaborately festooned local vegetables and Levantine breads (for sopping and swiping) that test the spatial limits of a table. Amid this spirited free-for-all of small plates, one unassuming condiment sings loudest: cloudlike, shock-white toum, a bracing Lebanese garlic sauce that's often served with shawarma and shish tawook (chicken skewers). Simultaneously fluffy and dense, arrestingly allium-forward, this delicate emulsion of garlic, oil and lemon manages to excite without overwhelming, steadying a palate ping-ponging between sweet-tart pomegranate, pickled chiles and musky saffron. Two orders of the stuff right off the bat is a pro move; run out of toum halfway through dinner and you'll find yourself pausing awkwardly while awaiting more. In a way, situating such a majestic condiment at the bottom of the menu under the Accessories 2 heading, as Nurdjaja has done, seems like a slight. But taken a different way, it makes all the sense in the world: In food as in fashion, the right accessory can have a profound effect indeed. — A.S.

230 Ninth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan

Robbins: Ayesha worked with me at A Voce as one of the sous-chefs many years ago. She's half-Italian, half-Indonesian and a fantastic Italian cook, but she's gone on to Middle Eastern and really made it her own. This garlic sauce is incredible. It's just garlic and lemon emulsified with oil, but in this way I've never had before. I want to eat it on everything — there's nothing it wouldn't be good on.

24. The Weekly Lunch at Warung Selasa at Indo Java

Daniel Terna

To put oneself in a chef's hands, to eat whatever they have determined to be the absolute best that day, can be a revelatory experience. It can also, in the case of many of the city's tasting-menu institutions, be costly and tedious. Blissfully, an afternoon meal at Warung Selasa, a pop-up that takes place once a week at Indo Java, a diminutive Indonesian grocery in Elmhurst, Queens, is all of the former and none of the latter. Every Tuesday, Anastasia Dewi Tjahjadi, who co-opened the store with two other women in 2007, serves one dish and one dish only, and each time it is a flavorful and heartfelt culinary tribute to the country she left in 1999. One week, it might be soto betawi, a slow-simmered beef and coconut milk soup fragrant with lemongrass, galangal and makrut lime and shot through with tender bits of tripe and tendon. The next, it might be nasi pecel, a platter of rice ringed with steamed vegetables and crowned with an impossibly aromatic peanut sauce. Could a prospective diner call ahead or sneak a peek at the pop-up's Instagram page to discover this week's offering? Sure. But to walk in unawares, knowing only that \$12 will get you a taste of something beautiful and transporting, the generous fruits of Tjahjadi's openhearted labor, is at least half the fun. — A.S.

85-12 Queens Boulevard, Elmhurst, Queens

Mishan: This is one of the best dining experiences in New York City. It's a different dish every time. There are just a couple of tables wedged among all of the shelves, so if someone else is there already, you might have to wait.

25. **The Zucchini Pizza at Sullivan Street Bakery**

Daniel Terna

Jim Lahey may have had his work cut out for him when he tried to persuade pizza-proud New Yorkers of the virtues of the Roman style back in the mid-aughts, but that battle's long since been won — his Sullivan Street Bakery now has three Manhattan outposts, as well as one in Miami. Then again, there's always been room for variants of the gooey, cheesy glory that is the classic New York slice, and his ultrathin, focaccia-like option is the perfect foil. Among the simple toppings that are a hallmark of the style — thinly shaved potato, finely minced mushrooms — zucchini is perhaps the least expected and most successful. It's salted and pressed to remove excess water, mixed with Gruyère and spread onto the dough. The result is a light, airy slice that somehow transforms a vegetable that so often ends up sodden, limp and tasteless into a crisp and flavorful pizza protagonist. — *K.W.*

533 West 47th Street, Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan; 236 Ninth Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan; 103 Sullivan Street, SoHo, Manhattan

Weller: The potato pizza is maybe the best known, but I love all of his Roman-style slices. They're great as snacks. Essentially they're just delicious bread with vegetables on top. It's not focaccia, exactly, but it's this really nice, superthin dough.

Robbins: I think Jim was doing Roman-style pizza before anyone else in New York City? Part of it's that he's an amazing dough maker, but when he grates the zucchini and mixes it with the cheese, you get this really unified, savory deliciousness.

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