

Blue Hound Kitchen & Cocktails

2 E. Jefferson St., Phoenix (Hotel Palomar)
602-258-0231, bluehoundkitchen.com

Call off the dogs; the hunt is over. Phoenix finally has a meta-metropolitan Downtown eatery. The hotel-restaurant stigma melts away in this glassy, Guinness-tinted gastro-lounge carbonated with a cool, convivial clientele. Savor the second-story views of skyscrapers as you read through the drinks list – a novella of inspired combinations of rarefied liqueurs – then go simple with the Brown Derby, which catapults bourbon into the realm of refreshment. The cuisine is – déjà vu – comfort food given an upscale makeover, but with flashes of tongue-in-cheek brilliance like glee-worthy baby zucchini corn dogs dipped in green goddess dressing; Kentucky-fried quail (the spice recipe allegedly pilfered from the Colonel himself) over foie gras cornbread doused with sausage, beany gravy; and tater tots matured into sublime distillations of twice-baked potatoes, dunked in fresh French onion dip with a fillip of chives. Staving off hotel-genericness, the chef splashes locavorism throughout the menu, like the Arizona citrus in a chunky ceviche and Four Peaks Hop Knot IPA-soused mussels worthy of a sea shanty. As of press time, the spanking-new kitchen was still working out kinks, but assuming they do, Blue Hound may become the dining destination that lures Phoenicians Downtown in droves.

Opened: June 2012

Cuisine: Contemporary American

Price: \$\$-\$\$\$\$

Hours: Breakfast 6:30 a.m.-11 a.m. M-F; brunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Sa-Su; lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. M-F; happy hour 3-6 p.m. M-F; dinner 5-10 p.m. Su-Th, 5-11 p.m. F-Sa

Order this: It's not yet on the menu, but ask the bartender to concoct the unnamed cocktail with Amaro Italian bitters and artichoke liqueur Cynar; you'll be instantly beamed to a bohemian European bar.

Campfire Bistro

9393 E. Bell Rd., Scottsdale
(Tom's Thumb Fresh Market)
480-513-8186, tomsthumbfreshmarket.com

Are we above giving a Best New Restaurant nod to a gas station? It would seem not. In this Hollywood-emulating year of the restaurant remake/sequel/spinoff, this eatery in Tom's Thumb gas station/car wash/gourmet market is the equivalent of *The Artist*, an out-of-left-field entry notable for its sheer ballsiness. It's not pushing epicurean envelopes, but its well-executed menu items are as merit-worthy as its moxie. Tudie Frank-Johnson, formerly of D'licious Dishes, is an award-winning whiz with barbecue, and nothing pairs better with her pulled pork sandwich than the Barbecue Sauce Bar, featuring five finger-licking selections. (The star of the bunch is Low Country, which bottles the sunny tang of a Southern summer.) The barbecue taco trio (beef, pork, chicken) combines the husky, smoky twang of Texas with a zingy Mexican accent. The Caprese sandwich is generously mozzarella'd, tomatoed

and arugula'd. Sit at the chess board-topped table in the locavore market or in the windowed dining area, which has slightly more atmosphere than the typical car wash waiting room, thanks to a delightfully ironic centerpiece chandelier.

Opened: May 2012

Cuisine: American/Barbecue

Price: \$

Hours: 7 a.m.-7 p.m. M-W, 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Th-Sa, 7 a.m.-3 p.m. Su

Support local: Shop the on-site market for local brands like Tracy Dempsey's Originals, Crow's Dairy, Desert Smoke BBQ, North Scottsdale Organics, Queen Creek Olive Mill and Pickled Perfection.

Heirloom

20775 N. Pima Road, Scottsdale (Market Street at DC Ranch)

480-515-2575, mculinary.com/heirloom

Cuisine: American

Price: \$\$\$

Atmosphere: Your friendly neighborhood bistro: burgundy- and butter-colored walls, wine racks galore, gorgeous stonework and breadstick bouquets. The jeans-clad waitstaff and hip soundtrack de-emphasize the white tablecloth aesthetic.

Outdoor Seating: No

Key Players: Chef/owner Michael DeMaria of Michael's at the Citadel and M Catering; Chef de Cuisine Taylor Domet

Why we love it: DeMaria and Domet breathe life into American cuisine, creating imaginative dishes that intrigue without seeming contrived. They've forged relationships with local farmers to serve up fresh, seasonal fare, and the menu changes monthly, highlighting the current harvest and even giving a sneak preview of the following month's crop to whet our appetites. The fish is sustainable, the beef is Arizonan or Nebraskan, and all the items (with the exception of a few international wines) are American. But all that would mean nothing if the food weren't so fabulous.

Must-try menu items: Start with the swoonworthy handmade cavatelli with calamari and white bean-tomato-shrimp ragu (\$14). The butterfish is a must – crisp on the outside, buttery inside and drizzled with a pitch-perfect tarragon pistou (\$18). Diver scallops (\$22) are wrapped in a wisp of bacon and served on a crab bolognese that jets you to the Jersey shore with its sea-meets-Sopranos flavors (the recipe comes courtesy of DeMaria's New Jersey Italian Uncle Ray). Plump, juicy grilled prawns share a plate with a silky zucchini-eggplant-red pepper terrine stuffed with lashings of Parmesan. In the playful "Pork and Beans" (\$19), melt-in-your-mouth, no-knife-necessary Kurobuta pork cheek replaces the humble hot dog. And if the mark of a great dessert is its addictiveness, we defy you to take "just a

bite” of the compulsively yummy custard-filled donuts on sublime lemon chiffon (\$7).

Drink to die for: Their by-the-glass selection includes Silver Oak, recently named the country’s most popular cabernet by Wine & Spirits magazine and typically sold only by the bottle.

Secret of the house: Reserve the intimate chef’s table for a view of the kitchen; seatings are at 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. in winter, anytime in summer.

Hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: No

Takes reservations: Yes

The Parlor

1916 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
602-248-2480
theparlor.us

Cuisine: Pizza/Italian

Price: \$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Airy, bustling and always abuzz, The Parlor is better for friends and family than first dates. Blond wood tables, scored cement floors, chalkboard menus, an open kitchen and full windows shaded by star-shaped cement blocks add up to a casual-chic vibe befitting its CenPho setting. The space was previously the Salon de Venus beauty parlor (hence the name) and retains a few touches like retro paintings of coiffed women and a salon chair with blow dryer. In fact, much of Parlor is reclaimed or recycled: The table wood is from the roof, the wine rack is a repurposed sprinkler system, and some of the building materials came from nearby houses. (In addition to the eco-deco, the water is heated by solar power, and the bar reduces its glass waste by not serving bottled beers.)

Outdoor Seating: Yes, in a shaded, plant-filled patio complete with fireplace.

Key Players: Aric Mei, whose parents own Nello’s Pizza in Ahwatukee

Why we love it: Numerous elements go into making a pizza restaurant, but let’s face it, only one thing matters: the crust. At Parlor, it’s perfect – crispy, bubbly and slightly blackened on the outside, chewy-soft within, and not soggy in the center. We also appreciate the make-your-own pizza menu, where you can choose everything from the cheese to the sprinkling of herbs (we’re partial to homemade mozzarella, olives, fresh arugula and dried oregano). Even the “set” menu is hardly that: Salads, pastas and pizzas all can be ordered in different sizes – perfect for mixing and matching courses.

Must-try menu items: Though the menu has a fairly extensive selection of pastas, salads and sandwiches, it's really about pizza. The Yukon Gold potato pizza (\$10/\$14) is the dark horse here: exquisitely flavored, with not too much starch despite the potatoes, and a subtle mélange of Gorgonzola, pancetta and leeks. Ask them to put an egg on top and you'll be in breakfast-meets-dinner bliss. Mushroom lovers will go wild over the funghi pizza (\$10/\$14), topped with earthy truffle oil and tart goat cheese.

Drink to die for: Start with a Garden Mojito (\$9), which gets Italianized with basil and cucumber. And nothing pairs better with your pizza than a glass of the Cannonball cabernet (\$8).

Secret of the house: Sit at the pizza bar and you might be served some complimentary pizza-related appetizers.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to midnight, Friday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Monday through Saturday, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., all beers \$3; wines \$2 off.

Takes reservations: No

PastaBar

705 N. First St., Ste. 110, Phoenix
602-687-8704, pastabaraz.com

Cuisine: Italian

Price: \$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: After holding court at multimillion-dollar Tuscan villa-slash-restaurant Sassi, Wade Moises and Nick Gentry wanted this Downtown venture to have an approachable, urban feel – like a hip Milanese enoteca. The skinny red-and-white space is lit by bare lights and dosed with deviance in the form of a portrait lineup of controversial characters including Jim Jones, Rasputin and David Koresh. (Gentry insists they're not trying to make a statement; it's just some art their painter friend Luigi Venditti had lying around the house.)

Outdoor Seating: No

Key Players: Chefs Wade Moises and Nick Gentry, formerly of Sassi

Why we love it: Two words: handmade pasta. Once you've tasted these eggy, velvety noodles, you'll never look at dried the same way again. This is the type of food that makes eating out worthwhile – because seriously, do you really want to

source Italian flour and local, farm-fresh eggs, form it into a dough, roll it out over a classic Italian chitarra pasta-maker or form it into pillowy gnocchi and stamp it with a wooden pasta comb, then combine it with the most exquisite of Italian and local ingredients like homemade sausage, farmers' market produce and Italian butter, when you can get it here for reasonable prices? We didn't think so.

Must-try menu items: This is Italian Italian food, not American Italian, so you may see a few unfamiliar ingredients, but the tastes are pure comfort. Everybody's favorites are orecchiette con salciccia (\$15), ear-shaped pasta rich with homemade sausage, greens and Pecorino; and feather-light ricotta gnocchi alla lupa (\$15) in sweet and spicy fennel sausage ragu. Bavette al cedro (\$11), with lemon, Italian butter and Parmigiano Reggiano, is an ode to simplicity. And fettuccini e finocchio (\$12) will send vegetarians to pasta nirvana.

Drink to die for: Jack Goes to Mulberry Street (\$12) is a mix of bright, deep, sweet and sour: Gentleman Jack whiskey journeys to Manhattan's Little Italy with the flavors of Carpano sweet vermouth, blood orange bitters and Amarena cherries.

Secret of the house: There are no secrets when it comes to the menu, Gentry says. Ask for the recipes and they'll give them to you. A bigger mystery is the \$100,000 bottle of Scotch above the bar, which Gentry inherited after it was found in the basement of an Arkansas mansion.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 12 a.m., Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 2 a.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Reverse happy hour 10 p.m. to close daily: \$10 for a pasta and appetizer, \$5 martinis.

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of six or more

Posh

7167 E. Rancho Vista Drive, Ste. 111, Scottsdale (Optima Camelview Village)
480-663-7674, poshscottsdale.com

Cuisine: Modern American

Price: Four courses \$45, eight-plus courses \$105

Atmosphere: Chef/owner Joshua Hebert modeled Posh after his favorite bars and restaurants in Tokyo. Think a bustling version of the movie *Lost in Translation* – sleek steel, grays, blacks and wraparound glass. Sit at the exhibition kitchen to watch the gastronomic theater or at the petite black tables looking out on the foliage-fringed modern architecture of the Optima Camelview Village condos.

Outdoor Seating: No

Key Players: Chef/owner Joshua Hebert, formerly of Dual in Gilbert

Why we love it: Posh is the blind date of the restaurant world: an adventurous exercise in trust. This is “improvisational cuisine,” so there’s no menu; you just tell the chef what you like and don’t like, and he conjures up dishes so inventive they should be patented. “It’s great to be surprised,” Hebert says. “There’s a mystique about it, and people have fun.” We love the spontaneity, and the mystery doesn’t feel risky because the results are so reliably sensational. However, Hebert cautions people not to fall in love with any of the dishes, because they probably won’t see them again.

Must-try menu items: With no set menu it’s anybody’s guess, but here’s a sampling from a recent visit: uni panna cotta – a sublimely creamy incarnation of sea urchin; pheasant pseudo-lasagna with homemade pasta and favas – reminiscent of a swanky, Italian chicken noodle soup; kangaroo with meaty mushrooms and glazed broccoli stems; and the “Posh Twinkie,” a charming lemon cake filled with green tea mousse paired with a nest of spun sugar.

Drink to die for: With cuisine this innovative it’s no wonder the cocktails are eye-openers. The Manhattan Transplant (\$12) starts off sweet and bourbon-y from Maker’s Mark and vermouth, but what’s that subtle sting at the finish? Chili pepper syrup. Feeling bold? Up the ante with a love-it-or-hate-it red curry mint julep (\$8).

Secret of the house: If you splurge on the eight-course dinner with wine pairings (\$165), you’ll be rewarded with samples of 14 or 15 different wines. “It’s a three-and-a-half-hour experience,” Hebert says, “and we pour some pretty ridiculous wines.”

Hours: 5 p.m. to close, Tuesday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: Every night from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m., four courses go for \$35 (regularly \$45).

Takes reservations: Yes

Prado

4949 E. Lincoln Drive, Paradise Valley (InterContinental Montelucia Resort & Spa)
480-627-3004, pradolife.com

Cuisine: Spanish-inspired

Price: \$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: From the maroon- and mahogany-colored couches and sexy paintings in the Moroccan-inspired Mbar to the graceful Spanish arches and open fireplace in the main dining room to the colorful tiles and flowers in the fountainside patio, Prado’s sumptuous Mediterranean décor wows. Luxurious yet comfortable enough to linger in, this resort restaurant is a destination in and of itself.

Outdoor Seating: Yes, with stunning views of the Alhambra-inspired pool area and Camelback Mountain

Key Players: Chef Claudio Urciuoli, formerly of Different Pointe of View

Why we love it: While most hotel restaurants wade in the culinary shallow end, at Prado we can't pronounce the menu items. And we love to be challenged, especially by easy-on-the-taste-buds selections like an antipasto of La Quercia culaccia, manchego, Castelvetrano and Empeltre olives, doce de tomate and Valenciano crackers. (Take *that*, spellchecker.) Where else in the Valley can you order black squid ink fideua (spaghetti-esque noodles cooked like a paella) with red snapper, I'itoni onions and corona beans? Even a safe bet like lamb T-bone gets gussied up by merguez (spicy north African sausage), Taggiasche olives and nepitella (a Tuscan mint).

Must-try menu items: The menu says the paella feeds two, but we assume they mean two sumo wrestlers. It's cooked in the traditional flat skillet, studded with a daily changing smorgasbord of meats such as chicken, scallops, prawns, bacon or possibly all of the above. The Caprese "salad" (\$15) is reinvented as a stack of olive oil-drenched bread, creamy burrata cheese, slow-roasted tomatoes and, seasonally, sautéed radicchio. For dessert, feel like a Madrileño as you dunk cinnamon churros into pudding-like chocolate (\$8). Another tip: The daily specials are often the stars of the show.

Drink to die for: The Spanish Mojito (\$12) redefines the ubiquitous Cuban drink with the flavors of Spain and Morocco. Bartenders simmer figs, fennel seeds, star anise and sugar into a syrup, then muddle it with fresh mint and lime juices, anoint the mixture with Flor de Cana rum, and garnish it with star anise and a mint sprig.

Secret of the house: Ferdinand's Wine Cellar is available for private dining and features more than 300 reserve wines and 17th century doors from the medieval town of Sos del Rey Catolico, birthplace of King Ferdinand of Aragon.

Hours: Breakfast 7 to 11 a.m., daily; lunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., daily; dinner 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Happy hour/specials: 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday at Mbar; \$5 house wines, house cocktails, beers and tapas

Takes reservations: Yes

Tuck Shop

2245 N. 12th St., Phoenix
602-354-2980, tuckinphx.com

Cuisine: Contemporary American

Price: \$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: Most converted-house restaurants consist of a warren of tiny rooms, but open the chile-colored door of this pistachio-painted home and you'll enter a single, airy space. The effect is immediately soothing, enhanced by mellow music and the sight of the couch in the "reading room" nook in the corner. From that cozy perch, you can sip a glass of wine and admire how the subtle modern art blends seamlessly with the retro décor and the vaguely Swedish wood paneling that climbs up two walls and across the ceiling. Add a sleek, minimalist bar, and you have your new neighborhood hangout (even if this isn't your neighborhood).

Outdoor seating: No

Key Players: Architect-turned-restaurateur DJ Fernandes

Why we love it: Almost everyone who enters Tuck Shop wants to move in. One woman was apparently upset that she had only seen the place *after* renovating her loft, because she would have carbon-copied the design. The low decibels and high cozy-hip factor make it ideal for catching up with friends, and the inventive, shareable food further enhances conversation. We were skeptical of the menu concept – international comfort food tapas and larger "sharing plates" with a Southern bent, sort of. But we were happily won over by the clever execution and the surprisingly deft use of spices.

Must-try menu items: The Medjool dates stuffed with local Schreiner's chorizo and melted Gruyère (\$9) are calorie bombs, but are they worth it? Oh, yes. The spiciness of the sausage perfectly cuts through the dates' sweetness, and the stellar arugula salad underneath is a memorable garnish. Panko walnut-crusting Fontina cheese sticks (\$6) – a far cry from the stringy, boring mozzarella usual – pose a tasty dilemma: Which dipping sauce is better, cinnamon pear or smoky red pepper? Ultra-creamy New York Times mac and cheese (\$9) gets sophisticated with prosciutto and herbed breadcrumbs. And the crostini duo (\$9) features a delicious, imaginative pairing: tarragon-and-pink-peppercorn-flecked cucumber ribbons atop rye slices smeared with fennel cream cheese; and rosemary-balsamic roasted grapes on brie and multigrain bread.

Drink to die for: The unique gin and tonic owes its ginger color and pleasant bitterness to the bark-based quinine in the house-made tonic. The lemonade, ginger ale and sours are also homemade.

Secret of the house: Owner DJ Fernandes called his restaurant Tuck Shop (the term for a mom-and-pop convenience store in England, Australia and South Africa) because it was the name of his New England boarding school cafeteria. Once a month, the owner hosts a four-course prix fixe Sunday supper (\$35 plus \$14 for wine pairings); reservations only.

Hours: 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday

Happy hour/specials: All day Tuesday through Thursday a select wine is \$5 a glass or \$20 a bottle.

Takes reservations: Yes, for parties of six or more