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GREG COUILLARD'S SPICE ROOM & CHUTNEY BAR ★★

Zigzagging banquettes line the walls of this small, grotto-like room, which feels decadent with its deep blue walls and gauzy curtains. Service begins smoothly, with thyme-accented hummus and soft coconut bread, but the gracious patina soon gives way to an almost frenetic vibe. When not busy confusing tables, servers work forcefully to up-sell from a wine list that, albeit superb, lingers largely in the \$80 to \$140 range. Still, apps arrive in good time. Two huge sea scallops are nicely seared to rare. In mains, a masterful but excessive hand is apparent, leading to oversized plates that overwhelm with competing flavours. Gorgeous beef tenderloin brings smoky, molasses-like Nyonyan seasoning on a sumptuous ginger demi-glace, but tandoori on an accompanying strip of foie gras is lost in the mix. A pakora of curried potato is nicely piquant, but its accompanying vegetables are in a goopy, sweet sauce that confuses the palate. Ironically, vidal icewine ice cream lacks flavour. Closed Sunday and Monday. Mains \$34-\$45.

Where: 55 Avenue Rd. (at Yorkville Ave.), 416-935-0000. ♿ 🍷 🍴

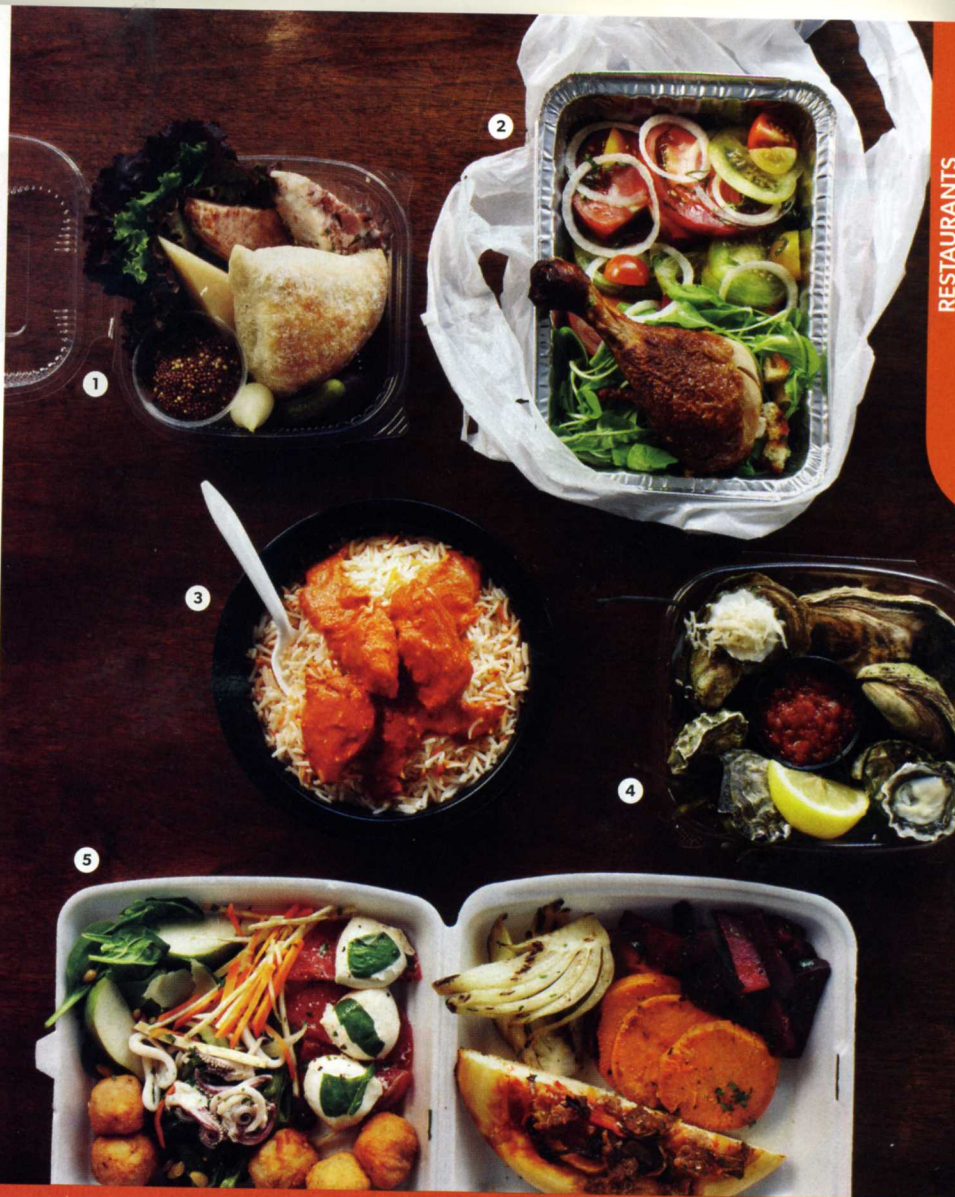
LEE ★★

Susur Lee's colourful, funky spot remains a popular destination, despite its founder's exodus to New York. Giant cockatiels painted onto copper scrims look down on pink Lucite tables. Friendly servers explain the menu, which has a bevy of appetizer-sized dishes for sharing that show off Lee's Asian-Western manifesto. Many dishes dazzle. Caramelized black cod—buttery petals of moist fish glossed with miso mustard sauce and sweet-tangy Cantonese preserves—is a triumphant harmony of flavours. Oddly, the most conventional dishes disappoint: the chewy texture of beef and pork satays, for example, distracts from their exemplary peanut, kung pao and mint chutney sauces. Slow-braised beef may be the signature: amazingly tender and rich meat mounted on a potato-leek purée. The mango panna cotta with sesame and black pepper crumble delights. A little international wine list has plenty by the glass. Closed Sunday. Mains \$6-\$18.

Where: 603 King St. W. (at Portland St.), 416-504-7867. 🍷 🍴

NYOOD ★★

The artsy feel of this former gallery space, now the latest hot spot from restaurateur-of-the-moment Hanif Harji, fits the trend of gentrification sweeping through bohemian QW. The remarkable interior of Nyood (hokily pronounced "nude") features a towering library of white-painted books, suspended black cables with tentacles tipped with lamps and a faux birchbark wall textured with staples. Where the room is refined, however, the service is not; every passing apron or suit finds reason to interrupt. Thankfully, some of those interruptions bring delights from chef Roger Mooking's menu, which offers some 22 tapas-style dishes showing primarily pan-Mediterranean and Asian influences. Olive oil-cured beef tenderloin, seared to rare, cooled and sliced thin, arrives in a ruby fan on a chopping block. Though it's gorgeously tender and well complemented by grilled radicchio and fennel salad, the beef desperately needs a



ROUNDUP

Good to Go

For no-cook dinner parties or upmarket meals on the couch, these takeout spots offer fine dining without the fuss

1 GILEAD CAFÉ

Jamie Kennedy's midday spot lets King Easters grab locavore lunches. The ploughman's plate (\$9) teams artisanal cheese and terrines with Kennedy's bread (the sourdough is to die for) and cornichons. Page 58.

2 ATELIER THUET

Marc Thuet's outpost in Liberty Village is a bistro-store combo offering such signature fare as Thuet's roasted Perth County capon and greens for two (\$32). In case of leftovers, crunchy house-baked

baguettes make yummy sandwiches. Page 8.

3 AMAYA EXPRESS

This takeout spinoff of Amaya (page 34) packs up butter chicken and ethereal gobble-on-the-go naaninis stuffed with such fillings as pulled lamb, chili beef and saag paneer (\$9.95). 1574 Bayview Ave., 416-322-0020.

4 RODNEY'S OYSTER HOUSE

Toronto's favourite oyster expert, Rodney Clark, has launched a front-of-house Wet Market, offering fresh

fish and seafood. While oysters are the main draw, special occasions might call for the lobster supper (\$50). Page 72.

5 GRANO

This uptown Italian stalwart has 30-odd rainbow-hued antipasti (\$15 for any three choices), including rapini with raisins and pine nuts, and eggplant parmigiano. And talk about service: dinner orders can be delivered to the car like an haute drive-in, minus the girls on roller skates. 2035 Yonge St., 416-440-1986.



NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

CHAKRA ★★½

Johnson Yohannan is a globetrotting entrepreneur who once attempted to open a Pizza Hut in India. In his latest venture, he takes cultural exchange in a much tastier direction, offering sophisticated Indian fare at Yonge and Eg. The mood here is welcoming: jovial chefs readying yogurt-coated chunks of chicken for the tandoor greet customers from the gleaming open kitchen. As with most dishes, the spicing in a chicken tikka masala is impeccably balanced—flavour before fire—and the meat is tender. Here “modern Indian” means high-quality ingredients and thoughtful execution of satisfying classic dishes. **Mains \$10–\$24. Where:** 2497 Yonge St. (at Castlefield Ave.), 416-928-7331. ☎ 🍷 🍴

sprinkling of sea salt. A grilled pork chop served on Israeli couscous comes with a sweet orange-honey glaze and a zippy sprinkling of jalapeño. Competent desserts—a chocolate soufflé and crème brûlée—are predictable. Drinks feature exotic teas, champagne cocktails and a smallish wine list that starts at \$45 and features many by the glass. Closed Sunday. Small plates \$9–\$18.

Where: 1096 Queen St. W. (at Dovercourt Rd.), 416-466-1888. ☎ 🍷

TOBA ★½

With a name like Toba, assumptions lead to Japan. But this menu spins around the atlas. While the pastas are firmly planted in Italy, there's a little Mexico and Morocco thrown in. The roasted eggplant soup is silken and rich, the flavour deep, garnished with a raft-like crostini floating in the creamy expanse. On this night, halibut fritters sparkle, thanks to a sweet and spicy Thai drizzle. In many restaurants, gnocchi starts to bore by the third bite, but Toba's flawless potato parcels are nestled beside house-made Italian sausage in an addictive fontina and tomato sauce. Mains don't disappoint: one might find a crispy-skinned Cornish hen, the juicy, sweet poultry accompanied by a good but overwrought harissa sauce. Fingerling potatoes are roasted with salsify, which chef Tony Barone transforms into a melting, nutty delight. A rich, creamy brûlée is served with a sidecar glass of soo jung gwa, a traditional Korean tea garnished with roasted pine nuts. The wine list offers unique non-LCBO bottles. Closed Monday. Mains \$16–\$27.

Where: 243 King St. E. (at Sherbourne), 416-367-8622. ☎ 🍷

TOMI-KRO ★★½

Rambling, busy and boisterous, this formerly diminutive room has swallowed the neighbouring dry cleaner and antique shop—all without the glitches usually associated with rapid expansion. This is the kind of place where patrons dress down, donning Hawaiian shirts, Topsiders and *cing à sept* smiles, while jeans-wearing servers saunter around three rooms of whitewashed brick. Chef Laura Prentice's menu is a clever fusion of Asian, American and Mediterranean tastes and techniques. Flavour-packed Miami ribs fall from the bone, and tempura lobster maki balls match a perfect crisp exterior with a soft, sweet centre. Wonderfully pink Cedar Valley organic duck breast goes well with cherries and vanilla-scented sweet potato, while ephemeral veal osso buco in an intense leek and mushroom sauce melts in the mouth. Sides are creative: brussels sprouts are treated like the tiny cabbages they are and turned into slaw. Desserts can be classic (dense flourless chocolate cake) or savoury (whipped brie with dried fruit compote and crostini). A long wine list offers only a few by the glass. Closed Sunday. Mains \$19–\$24.

Where: 1214 Queen St. E. (at Leslie St.), 416-463-6677. ☎ 🍷

UTOPIA 630

The cacophony of sound (generated by the boisterous crowd, kitchen clatter and a raucous Van Halen soundtrack) reverberates in the tiny room and amplifies as the evening progresses. Hungry 20-somethings waiting in line brush up against those sitting at closely arranged tables and con-

centrating on massive portions of starving-artist staples: burritos, burgers, quesadillas and sandwiches. Lamb merguez poutine is loaded with molten brie, spicy sausage and unremarkable gravy. A garlicky yet dull caesar arrives sans bacon. Dwarfed by a mountain of so-so fries, a house-made char-grilled bison burger delivers eight ounces of gamy, moist, well-flavoured meat on a fully loaded sesame seed bun. The beer list is satisfying, with its selection drawn from around the globe. Outsourced desserts, such as a fridge-fatigued raspberry tart, are unnecessary. Service is perfunctory. Sit on the back patio for the quintessential beer and burger experience.

Where: 586 College St. (at Clinton St.), 416-534-7751. ☎ 🍷

VERTICAL ★★

Packed at lunch, this King West spot also deserves a dedicated evening clientele—people who will appreciate the smart, comfortable room, the wine list filled with interesting Italian bottlings (and not one French wine), and Tawfik Shehata's cooking. Southern Italy is the menu's principal inspiration, but it's nuanced with a nudge and a wink from North Africa and the Mediterranean. Gorgeous grilled octopus is chicken tender, spiked with an intense combination of dill, paprika, arugula, preserved lemon and shallots. Mains might bring organic B.C. black cod with corn cakes, or a roasted Berkshire pork loin with pecorino, fresh herbs and green beans. Desserts need work. Exceptionally affable servers. Closed Saturday and Sunday. Mains \$20–\$52.

Where: First Canadian Place, 100 King St. W. (at Bay), 416-214-2252. ☎ 🍷 🍴

ITALIAN

ACQUA ★½

Venetian kitsch—glass baubles and gurgling fountains—creates a carnival atmosphere as tourists and suits dine on chef Robert Buchanan's Mediterranean menu, which offers more delights than duds. A crispy sweetbread dish turns out to be offal's answer to popcorn shrimp. Served with creamy tarragon dipping mayo, the battered and deep-fried bites are addictive but seem more like bar snacks than a fully realized appetizer. Mains deliver numerous sea creatures, such as a perfectly seared and seasoned sea bream served with poached fennel and grapefruit wedges in an unlikely broth of prune consommé and coffee oil. The sour, sweet and savoury elements complement the meaty fish. A luscious 16-ounce veal chop, seared to mahogany, receives too much support from over-salted olive polenta, crispy cumin onions and a delectable jus reduction. Desserts deliver an excellent chocolate-orange crème brûlée. Service is formal but lively. The wine list shows strong international selections in all price ranges. Closed Sunday. Mains \$26–\$38.

Where: 10 Front St. W. (at Yonge), 416-368-7171. ☎ 🍷 🍴

AL FOGOLÀR ★

Reminiscent of a medieval schnitzel house, the room's dark wood beams, plaster walls, wrought iron chandeliers and open hearth (or fogolar) create the feel of a traditional private club—the ideal spot to celebrate a 50th wedding anniversary.

