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Top 10 Restaurant Dishes of 2011

F&W editors are united in our love for eating out, but when it comes to our favorite restaurant dishes, our choices are extremely diverse. One of us adored a sea urchin-coconut risotto from a \$185 tasting menu, another, \$7 pig-ear wraps. And two editors swooned over two very different duck recipes.

By Dana Cowin, Kristin Donnelly, Tina Ujlaki, Kate Heddings, Kate Krader, Ray Isle

foie gras-banana bread terrine: seasons at the ocean house; watch hill, r



© Courtesy of Seasons

As more and more people chase down nose-to-tail dining experiences, I'd like to pause for a moment to celebrate food that's more cerebral and beautiful. I wasn't expecting to find that kind of refined cooking at Seasons, a hotel restaurant in the preppy beach town of Watch Hill. The updated New England seaside, so when chef Eric Haugen began setting his dishes in front of me, I was surprised: Each was precisely a well-thought-out balance of color, form, flavor, texture and temperature. My favorite course involved Moulard duck foie gras. Haugen cooks it au vide, so that it melts, then refrigerates it to firm it up; the result is exceptionally smooth. Layered with banana-walnut bread and a crimsor—the most luxurious comfort food imaginable—creamy duck liver sandwiched between sweet bread and tart jelly, with painterly garnishes of watercress leaves and red watercress. It's supremely gratifying to know that a 26-year-old South Korean chef adopted by parents from Illinois could flourish on the England coast with such universally delicious dishes.—*Dana Cowin*



Courtesy of Warren Jagger

Insider's Tip At Seasons, the best place to sample chef Eric Haugen's multicourse tasting menu is at the front of the restaurant's open kitchen.

artichoke agnolotti: mica, philadelphia



© Jason Varney



© Jason Varney

Chip Roman (*left*), chef-owner of this 10-month-old New American restaurant, is an expert at restrained Euro. Cichonski, Mica's opening chef, loves unexpected combinations. Together they created these exceptional at The centers are molten (made by wrapping pasta around the frozen filling), and the chefs amp up the intens flavor by adding a touch of miso.—*Kristin Donnelly*

bourbon-and-cornhusk cocktail: **the office**, chicago



© Christian Seel

I spend enough time in bars (it's research for the **F&W cocktail book!**) to know how serious drink-making is these days. But executive che attention to detail is on a whole other level, as I discovered when I visited The Office, the speakeasy-style bar masterminded by **Grant Ac Next**. I am now obsessed with Schoettler's bourbon concoction (Office drinks have no names). Since bourbon is made from at least 51 p aged in charred oak barrels, Schoettler ingeniously mixes in a burnt-cornhusk syrup. An infusion of *guajillo* chile adds subtle spice and h so mind-blowing.—*Kate Krader*

wild salmon with sea beans & buckwheat: **salt of the earth**, pittsburgh



© Laura Petrilla

"We're not going to make crab cakes or give people a basket of bread and butter just because that's what everyone expects restaurants to do," says chef Michael Sousa, the irreverent chef and co-owner of Salt of the Earth. What Sousa *will* do is change his chalkboard menu daily and use everything he can get his hands on to make his food good (not to mention crazy adventurous, especially for Pittsburgh). He blends that fermented tamarind to make a complex sauce—sweet, salty, funky—for wild salmon. He garnishes the plate with smoked-avocado cream and kernel buckwheat and tops the fish with pumpernickel bread and sea beans. The mix of flavors and textures makes each bite so interesting that the whole thing. With food like this, who needs crab cakes?—*KD*

Insider's Tip Salt of the Earth posts its menu on one big chalkboard. If the sightline isn't good, waiters advise diners to download the menu on their smartphones.

beef with winter treasures: **benu**, san francisco



© Ai Sugano

I might have overlooked this generic-sounding dish altogether. But I'd opted for **Corey Lee's** tasting menu, and his Korean-inspired beef is one of my favorite courses. Marinating, braising and grilling the well-marbled meat makes it deeply tasty and tender; and Lee serves it with the silky ginkgo nut, a truffle cube, balls of Asian pear and a flicker of gold leaf—no ordinary stew.—*Tina Ujlaki*

jar jar duck: **uchiko**, austin



© Marshall Wright

Jar Jar Duck is more than a dish with a funny name inspired by *Star Wars*. It's an elegant and completely delicious combination of smoke super-crunchy duck cracklings, sweet kumquat confit and pickled endives. The dish is the brainchild of executive chef Paul Qui; like Uch Cole (an F&W Best New Chef 2005), Qui likes to create small worlds on a plate—or, in this case, in a jar. What's magical is the rosemary when the lid is opened. "I love running the dish to tables, just to catch the reaction," says Cole.—*Kate Heddings*



Insider's Tip The chefs at Uchiko use a **smoking gun** to create the rosemary smoke for Jar Jar Duck. Home gun at williams-sonoma.com.

© Marshall Wright

beer can chicken: **a-frame**, los angeles

"It's a poem to the Korean-pub fried chicken called *tong dak* that I ate during college," says Roy Choi, an F&W Best New Chef 2010 and Kogi Korean taco. At his second L.A. brick-and-mortar restaurant, Choi marinates the bird in beer, the way Korean traditionalists do. "The fantasy land, adding herbs, spices and citrus to the marinade," he says. He air-dries the chicken for four hours, rotisserie-cooks it for six, it's ice cold. Then comes frying time. "Shock waves," says Choi.—*KK*

crispy pig ear wraps: **husk**; charleston, south carolina



© Peter Frank Edwards

Sean Brock's cracklingly crisp pig ears vaguely resemble a dish at my local Chinese place, #17 Chicken in Lettuce Taco. But if #17 taster Brock's dish, I'd be ordering it every night. Instead I have to go to Charleston for the deep-fried pig-ear strips, tossed with a diabolically s Husk's own aged-for-a-year hot sauce and served with lettuce wraps.—*Ray Isle*

japanese snapper with sea urchin and coconut risotto: chef's table at **bro** brooklyn, new york



© Courtesy of Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare

César Ramirez, chef of the 18-seat Brooklyn Fare, believes "recipes are meant to be broken." He likes to work without writing things down explain his strict no-note-taking rule for customers; no photos, either). One recipe he cares enough about to record is his risotto. He makes it with Japanese rice and unlikely ingredients like sea urchin, coconut, a little truffle, mascarpone, tomato water and Parmigiano-Reggiano. Quickly seared *madai* (a delicate Japanese red snapper, normally served raw), the risotto is gorgeously creamy, savory and sweet; it might be an example of *umami*.—*KK*

peking duck: **wp24**, los angeles



© Courtesy of Peden & Munk

I know my Peking duck. I have ordered it in restaurants around the world. I've only interrupted a Peking duck dinner once, to rush to the hospital to my son. So trust me when I say that the best Peking duck can be found at Wolfgang Puck's WP24. The room is super-glamorous, with a view of Los Angeles. The tableside service is fabulous. But what stands out is the perfectly plump duck and its crisp, not-at-all fatty skin, ready to be eaten with magnificently puffy *bao* buns. There's nothing brand-new about Puck's duck—he's been serving some version of it for 28 years—but its execution is exceptional.—DC

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Rhode Island chef Eric Haugen serves one of the best restaurant dishes of 2011. Photo courtesy McKendree.

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