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The 50 New Jersey dishes you need to eat in 2023

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A Cheesesteak from Piccolo's in Hoboken. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

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By Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media For NJ.com, Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, Karim Shamsi-Basha | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and Stephanie Rizzolo | For NJ Advance Media

The NJ.com food team was everywhere in 2022, tasting just about everything. The list of cuisines seemed endless, from more established Italian, Indian, Chinese and Mexican to the rarer but no less delicious Cuban, Filipino, Pakastani, Syrian and beyond. Cheesesteaks, wings, pizza, barbecue, fried chicken, falafel, gelato, chili, tacos, seafood, steaks, sushi, soul food ... and that's barely the tip of the food iceberg.

Coming up with our favorite dishes of 2022 — the ones you must try in 2023 — may be the hardest thing we did all year, but here it is. The restaurants are not ranked but listed in alphabetical order by town.

Time to dig in!



Banh mi burger, Juniper Hill Restaurant and Bar, Annandale (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Banh mi burger, Juniper Hill Restaurant and Bar, Annandale

Juniper Hill was once a PNC Bank; you can even dine in the vault. You can take this to the you-know-where: The banh mi beef burger, with Happy Valley beef, spicy mayo, pickles, mango, mixed herbs and thick Kennebec potato fries, is outstanding. If I made a new list of the state's best burgers, it would be in the top 10. (PG)



The blueberry skillet cake from Cardinal Provisions in Asbury Park (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Seasonal skillet cake, Cardinal Provisions, Asbury Park

The ever-seasonal menu at Cardinal is constantly changing. But one staple is their skillet cake, a massive pancake — emphasis on cake. The current version of the dish features stewed apples and spiced streusel. (JS)



Sticky toffee pudding at Gordon Ramsay Hell's Kitchen at Caesars Atlantic City, Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2022. Tim Hawk | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

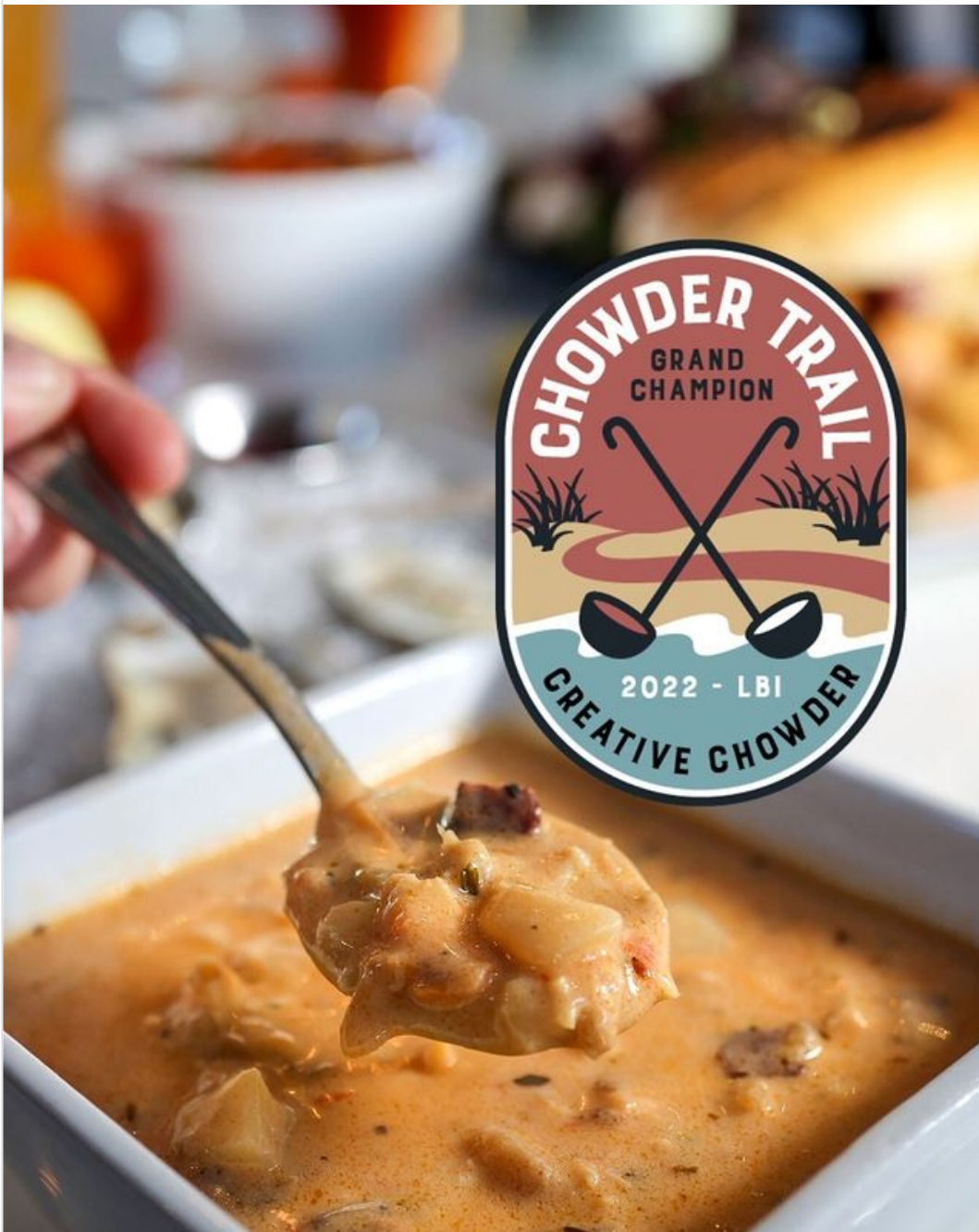
Toffee pudding, Hell's Kitchen, Atlantic City

Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's take on the classic British dessert was my favorite end to a meal this year, with its extremely moist center and caramel drizzle that wasn't overpowering with sweetness. It was topped with a cold vanilla ice cream that added a nice chill as it melted throughout the pudding. (LM)



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It's feeling like soup weather. Maybe it's time for a big bowl of Grand Champion Chowder? 😊

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Jersey clam chowder, Delaware Avenue Oyster House, Beach Haven Terrace

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The Jersey clam chowder at Delaware Avenue, with Jersey tomatoes, Jersey clams, Jersey long hots and pork roll, is the best I've had anywhere along the shore. The fish tacos, with blackened mahi, pineapple mole, avocado cream slaw, pomegranate pickled onions and cilantro (no lifeless, dried out fish tacos, these) are highly recommended. (PG)



Ribs from Obal's Inn in Bloomfield. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Ribs, Obal's Inn, Bloomfield

Once on the precipice of closing because of COVID-19, this Essex County watering hole is thriving once again and there's no busier time at the bar than rib night. Every Thursday they crank out their sweet, tender baby back ribs until they sell out. And trust me, they sell out pretty quick. We called them the best ribs in New Jersey for a reason! (JS)



Pepper beef salad, Bamboo Leaf, Bradley Beach (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Pepper steak, Bamboo Leaf, Bradley Beach

Pepper beef — the spicier the better — may be my favorite Thai dish overall, and the pepper beef salad at [Bamboo Leaf](#) (photo) is amazing. Also recommended: the tom yum soup and the barbecue chicken gai yang (charcoal grilled, with an addictive sweet chili sauce). Bamboo Leaf is my favorite Thai restaurant down the Shore. (PG)



There is nothing like a steaming bowl of pho on a cold day. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Shrimp pho, Pho Tastic Vietnamese, Brick

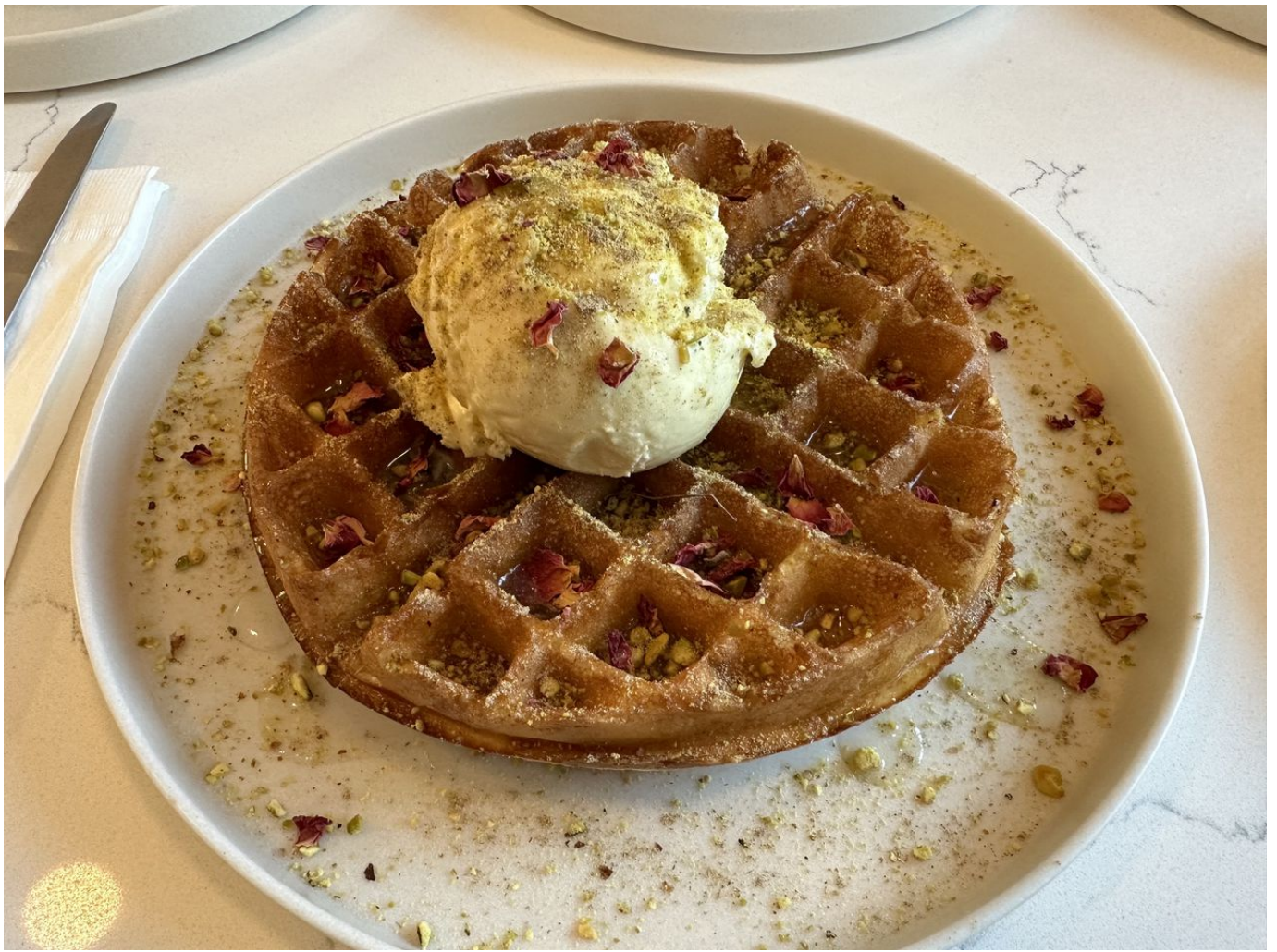
You gotta love the name of Pho Tastic. Was it fantastic? Pretty close. I had the shrimp pho bowl, which was steaming hot and very tasty. The shrimp was tender, the vegetables crisp, and the noodles — let's just say I could have eaten them alone and been happy. (KSB)



Pepper tuna, Jing's Sushi House, Burlington (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Pepper tuna, Jing's Sushi House, Burlington

The single best sashimi of the 50 or so I sampled during our search for the state's best sushi? It had to be the pepper tuna at [Jing's Sushi House](#). Rare, juicy, smoky, sensational. And if you've never had a hand roll (fish wrapped inside a rolled cone of seaweed), this is the place to try one. Both the spicy scallop and seaweed salad hand rolls are highly recommended. Jing's ranked No. 7 on our list of [New Jersey's best sushi restaurants](#). (PG)



Gulabi Waffle at Chashni in Chatham, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Gulabi waffle, Chashni, Chatham

Chashni's gulabi waffle merges the classic American breakfast with a Pakistani dessert typically consisting of fried dough balls dipped in a warm syrup. At Chashni, they top the Belgian waffle with pistachios, cardamom syrup, edible rose petals and kulfi ice cream (frozen dairy dessert from Pakistan). When you scoop everything in one bite, it melds together beautifully with the fluffy waffle, spicy and sweet notes of the cardamom, pistachios, and milkiness of the kulfi ice cream. (LM)



Chicken parm from The Pasta Shop in Denville. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Chicken Parmesan, The Pasta Shop, Denville

There are a million different takes on chicken parm in New Jersey. [The Pasta Shop's](#) version might be my favorite. The cutlet is paper-thin, and paired with spaghetti in garlic sauce that gives the dish a very unique flavor profile. (JS)



This Ecuadorian bread is flavorful with a deep yeast aroma. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Ecuadorian bread, Tony and Vinnie's Italian Bakery and Deli, Dover

The Ecuadorian bread at [Tony & Vinnie's](#) is a special addition to the bakery's mostly Italian offerings. It features mozzarella and feta cheese inside, and the essence of fresh yeast proliferated when you brought a roll to your face. (KSB)



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Disco fries, @thetopsdiner

Disco fries, Tops Diner, East Newark

There may be no food more synonymous with diners than disco fries, and there may be no better diner in New Jersey than Tops. So it should be no surprise their take on the dish is absolutely marvelous. A mountain of cheesy fries served with gravy on the side so you can theatrically top them with the delicious savory goodness yourself. (JS)



This falafel plate was loaded with the aroma and flavor of cardamom. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Falafel plate, Crazy 4 Falafel, Edison

The falafel plate at Crazy 4 Falafel came with falafel balls sitting on a bowl of humus. They were soft on the inside with a crispy shell, and the taste offered a strong flavor of cardamom. Manager Raman Singh added, “What I love the most about working here is seeing people from everywhere, Lebanon, America, India, Russia and Jordan. Food is what connects people.” (KSB)



Potatoes smothered with onions and olives make this winning dish. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Bacalhau at Bossa Fish, Elizabeth

The Portuguese bacalhau a casa at [Bossa Fish](#) is a cod filet surrounded by Spanish potatoes and topped with grilled onions. The cod was flaky, and the combination of potatoes and onions complimented the dish in a beautiful and understated way.

(KSB)



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Baklava is a Turkish dessert that is made with thin sheets of pastry and stuffed with nuts and so much more.

Legend has it that the Sultan who ruled the Ottoman Empire during the 17th century, followed a tradition at Istanbul's Topkapi Palace. Here, a baklava parade was arranged on the 15th day of Ramadan, where trays of freshly-prepared baklava were served to the soldiers who marched in a procession carrying them. This was done to appreciate the army and salute

Chocolate hazelnut baklava, The Baklava Lady, Englishtown

their strength. This baklava was usually soaked in rose syrup, filled with pistachios and cut into bite-sized squares, bearing huge resemblance to the Turkish baklava sold in Gaziantep today.

It was hard to not walk out of this international bakery with a bag full of pastries. The best of the bunch was the massive chocolate hazelnut baklava. It was stacked with beautifully golden, flaky layers of phyllo dough, hazelnuts and a smooth spread of chocolate. The baklava was nutty, sweet and decadent.



Swordfish, Oceanos, Fair Lawn

Swordfish, Oceanos, Fair Lawn

There are more heralded restaurants in Bergen County, but Oceanos was my pick to represent the county in our Greatest Restaurant in each of NJ's 21 Counties story. Much of the reason was due to the swordfish kebab, with onions and peppers, herbed olive oil and arborio rice pilaf, a near-perfect dish, the fish moist and tender. The seafood linguine, with sautéed shrimp, scallops, mussels and calamari in a fresh pomodoro sauce, is merely terrific. (PG)



Steamed Egg at Taste 1080 in Fort Lee, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Steamed egg, Taste 1080, Fort Lee

I love getting a side of steamed egg along with my Korean barbecue, but the dish at Taste 1080 was by far the prettiest side I've ever seen. At first glance, it was overflowing from its earthenware bowl, rising like a fluffy egg mountain. The taste was no different as it was rich, airy and so flavorful with hints of umami throughout. (LM)



Ora King salmon, The Circle, Fredon (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Ora King salmon, The Circle, Fredon

It may be in the middle of nowhere, but [The Circle](#), located in a restored 1720 farmhouse, has attracted loyal customers since its opening in 2021. The Ora King salmon rests on a pillow of addictive Ruthie's wheat berries. But I must mention two other dishes: the gnocchi, with purple potato, Gulf shrimp, white asparagus and parmigiano-reggiano, a terrific take on the usual red-sauce pasta dish; and the burrata, with Jersey Girl burrata, Castelvetrano olives, arugula and toasted focaccia. It may be the best appetizer you'll eat all year. (PG)



Akiko chicken katsu curry from Blue Spice Kitchen in Hamburg. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Akiko chicken katsu curry, Blue Spice Kitchen, Hamburg

Sussex County might not be known as a hotbed of Asian cuisine, but [Blue Spice Kitchen](#) is a hidden gem on Route 94 with Korean and Japanese fusion dishes. The Akiko chicken katsu curry is flavorful and fulling, with delightfully crisp chicken and a hearty sauce. (JS)



A Cheesesteak from Piccolo's in Hoboken. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Cheesesteak, Piccolo's, Hoboken

There are plenty of amazing cheesesteaks in New Jersey. The one at Piccolo's is rather unique, constructed more like a sliced steak sandwich than a typical Philly cheesesteak — a giant hunk of steak on bread, basically served open-faced, with melted cheese on top. This spot has been open in Hoboken since 1955 for good reason — a sandwich here is an incredible indulgence.(JS)



Chilaquiles from El Rancho Taqueria in Jersey City. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Chilaquiles, El Rancho Taqueria, Jersey City

Taqueria Downtown has long been the gold standard in Jersey City taco spots. [El Rancho](#) is starting to change that. Everything I've sampled here has been excellent, but the chilaquiles reach another craving level entirely. Crispy tortilla chips drenched in red or green sauce and topped with sour cream, eggs and your meat of choice. I always go with al pastor, but you can even throw birria on top. It's delicious, satisfying and so hearty you'll struggle to finish the whole thing. (JS)



A Vodka parm sub from Veloce in Jersey City. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Vodka parm sub, Veloce Specialty Sandwiches, Jersey City

Vodka sauce in general is overdone in New Jersey. It seems like every sandwich shop has a vodka parm. But none are as good as Veloce's take on the sub. An absolutely monstrous sandwich that can easily feed two, the sauce has the right balance of creaminess and bite, the cutlets are crisp yet juicy and the bread is fresh. (JS)

Mugnaia, Il Nido, Marlboro

Il Nido is an exceptional restaurant, strip mall location aside. Their use of real, imported, Italian ingredients is obvious in their dishes and shine particularly bright among their house-made pastas. Their unicorn dish that's extremely rarely seen on menus in the U.S., let alone N.J., is the Mugnaia — an Abruzzese pasta consisting of an eight-foot-long, hand-pulled noodle that's coiled into a nest and served in an olive oil based, complex sauce of cruschi peppers, garlic and extra virgin olive oil. It's an explosion of flavor and a little awkward to eat. Have a knife handy and you're in for a unique experience. (SR)



French onion soup from Arthur's Tavern, Morris Plains. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

French onion soup, Arthur's Tavern, Morris Plains

I went to [Arthur's](#) to try their chili (which was great!) but their French onion soup impressed me even more. The cheese atop the crock is blistered beautifully, and once you get through that cheesy layer a soothing and flavorful broth is awaiting you. Perfect for a cold January day! (JS)



The Burger from Grand Tavern in Neptune. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Burger, The Grand Tavern, Neptune

I had a lot of great burgers this year, but none quite like this one. [The Grand Tavern's](#) burger is massive, meaty, served with melty gruyère and bacon onion jus. While thin and crispy smash burgers are all the rage right now, Grand Tavern prepares a thick, juicy steakhouse-style burger to perfection. (JS)



A pastrami sandwich from Hobby's Delicatessen in Newark. Hobby's was named one of the best Jewish delis in the United States by TastingTable.com in 2022. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Pastrami sandwich, Hobby's Deli, Newark

Man, it is good to have Hobby's back after more than two years. The interior of the Brick City institution may be more polished, but all their signature Jewish soul food tastes the same — which is to say, just about unparalleled. Their pastrami sandwich is a classic for a reason, a salty and savory treat. Admitted, I was never a huge pastrami guy. Hobby's converted me. (JS)



Truffle Butter Ramen at Ramen Nagomi in New Brunswick, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Truffle butter ramen, Ramen Nagomi, New Brunswick

This habit-forming bowl of goodness was ranked No. 1 on our recent [greatest bowls of ramen in New Jersey list](#). This ramen is only offered during the fall and winter, so get it while you can! When the dish gets to the table, you must mix the truffle compound butter into the broth, watch it melt and revel in the rich, nutty splendor. (LM)



Ube Soft Serve at Kubo Coffee and Creamery in Nutley, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Ube soft serve, Kubo, Nutley

Earlier this year, Yelp named Kubo as New Jersey's best ice cream shop. While we don't necessarily agree, given the many other amazing ice cream shops in New Jersey, their ube soft serve is a must-try. I had it with brown sugar boba, which added a subtle sweetness to the frozen treat. The gorgeous purple swirl and rich flavor reminded me of my childhood visits to the Philippines, where they used real ube instead of an artificial syrup. (LM)



Green Tea Strawberry Bingsoo from Cafe Leah in Palisades Park, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Green tea strawberry bingsoo, Cafe Leah, Palisades Park

This North Jersey café is the No.1 place to eat bingsoo, according to Yelp reviewers. And we'll agree that this place stands out. They have an array of flavors but my favorite is the green tea strawberry bingsoo. The portions are gigantic, meant to feed two or three people. Layers of matcha ice cream, cornflakes, shaved ice, cream and a matcha syrup drizzle are topped with fresh strawberries, matcha powder and two chocolate pirouline wafers. The finishing touch is a small cup of condensed milk to pour over the dessert. (LM)



The chicken was tender and tasty, but the tahini sauce was unmatched. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Chicken shawarma, Reem Al-Sham, Paterson

The chicken shawarma sandwich at [Reem Al-Sham](#) looked and smelled authentic, a true journey to the other side of the planet. The chicken was tender, the spices were on point, and the accoutrements of the tahini sauce and roasted onions in that wrapped piece of heaven melted in my mouth. (KSB)



Mix Mashawi at Al Basha in Paterson, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Mix mashawi, Al Basha, Paterson

I came here to get a taste of their crispy falafels, but also wanted to give their heavier proteins a try. It was hard to pick which meats to order as they all sounded incredibly tasty. Luckily, they offered their special mix mashawi that includes their signature char grilled kofta kebab, shish kebab, chicken kebab and shawarma. All the meat was mouthwatering and smoky. (LM)



Gnocchi, Di Paolo's, Penns Grove (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Ricotta gnocchi, DiPaolo's Italian Ristorante, Penns Grove

I have died and gone to gnocchi heaven. That was my reaction after my first taste of the chef's hand-cut ricotta gnocchi at [DiPaolo's](#). Plump cheese-filled dumplings in a near-perfect pomodoro sauce topped with sweet sausage — goodness gracious. DiPaolo's ranked No. 3 on our list of N.J.'s [50 best Italian restaurants](#). (PG)



This camel burger was the closest in taste to Wagyu beef. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Camel burger, Babbit's Sandwich & Grill, Pine Brook

Being from the Middle East, I naturally had to taste the camel burger at Babbit's Sandwich & Grill. It was a combination of the hump and the leaner leg, giving it the taste and texture of wagyu beef, a melt-in-your-mouth situation. The seasoning was simple salt, and the onions and cheese on top were the perfect addition. All in all, very tasty. (KSB)



Owner María Cecilia Mancía Hernández serving the 13-pound pupusa at Cecilia's Pupuseria in Plainfield, NJ. (Dwayne Uzoaru | NJ Advance Media)

13-pound pupusa, Cecilia's Pupuseria, Plainfield

If you don't have the appetite for a 13-pound pupusa, no worries. Cecilia's Pupuseria has varying sizes of their pupusas but all robust with the same amazing flavor. The pupusas are made from either corn or rice flour and packed with a variety of fillings, including pork, beans, zucchini, loroco (edible flower) — and of course, cheese. (LM)



Gelato, L'Arte della Pasticceria, Ramsey (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Sicilian ricotta gelato, L'Arte della Pasticceria, Ramsey

All four flavors sampled at L'Arte della Pasticceria were amazing; the Sicilian ricotta stood out for its light, luscious and lovely flavor. The dark chocolate is rich and sensuous, the peach fruity and fine, and the Neapolitan espresso strong and assertive. L'Arte ranked #1 on our list of the state's best gelato shops. (PG)



A bagel burger from Bagels n' Cream in Robbinsville. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Burger bagel, Bagels n' Cream, Robbinsville

Bagels n' Cream wasn't No. 1 on our best bagels list. But it was the only spot that served a burger on a bagel! It may seem like a lot, because it is a lot. But in a good way! I couldn't stop eating it. I never thought I'd find a great burger at a bagel shop, but Bagels n' Cream proved me wrong. (JS)



A Taylor ham, egg and cheese sandwich on two doughnuts from Top That! Doughnuts in Rutherford.
(Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Taylor ham doughnut sandwich, Top That! Doughnuts, Rutherford

Taylor ham on a roll is great. Taylor ham on a bagel is even better. What about Taylor ham on ... doughnuts? Top That! Doughnuts in Rutherford makes the sweet and salty combination, and it's a doozy. But it's a delicious one. The sweetness of the doughnuts contrasts with the savory Taylor ham delectably. (JS)



Skirt steak, The Arlington, Ship Bottom (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Skirt steak, The Arlington, Ship Bottom

The grilled skirt steak with sweet potatoes, roasted garlic aioli and chimichurri at [The Arlington](#) easily ranks among the best dishes I've had this year. The strips of steak were perfectly medium-rare, and the three cylindrical sweet potatoes should be enough to convince anyone that the white baked potato is pretty much the most boring food on earth. Also recommended: the housemade rigatoni, a pork bolognese topped with sheep's milk ricotta. (PG)



Assorted sushi, Ai Sushi, Somerville

Monkfish liver and silky escolar roll, [Ai Sushi](#), Somerville

I had the hardest time finding this place as it's located in a shared building with an office space and a retailer, but the rolls here were absolutely worth the journey. Their silky escolar roll, a type of snake mackerel, was buttery and silky. While on the other hand, the monkfish liver had a creamy texture added with slight sweetness. (LM)



Michelle Gadaleta adores serving the New Jersey specialty at her bar, Double Dyme Tavern. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Applejack, Double Dyme Tavern, South Amboy

Okay, this is a drink, but I had to include it. Down in South Amboy, there is a place — [Double Dyme Tavern](#) — that pays tribute to an almost forgotten New Jersey spirit. “Applejack just had to be on our menu,” Michelle Gadaleta said. “It tastes like home.” She serves cocktails made with the Garden State specialty such as Brandy Alexander and Jack Rose. (KSB)



Bone-in veal chop, Botto's Italian Line, Swedesboro (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Bone-in veal chop, Botto's Italian Line, Swedesboro

The best meat dish I had this year? The bone-in veal chop at [Botto's Italian Line](#). An immense, outrageously tender hunk of pan-roasted veal with fresh herbs, garlic and wine and topped with Italian salsa verde (garlic, basil, chile pepper, lemon, olive oil, anchovies and capers). I never even heard of Italian salsa verde until this assignment; I have so much to learn. (PG)



Lamb kashari, Spicy Affair, Swedesboro (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Lamb kahari, Spicy Affair, Swedesboro

I am in love with the lamb kahari at [Spicy Affair](#). Forget the familiar, formulaic lamb dishes — lamb vindaloo, lamb rogan josh — and order this peppery, oniony lamb stew, astoundingly fragrant. Spicy Affair, in a former bank, made our list of the [state's best Indian restaurants](#). (PG)



The cassava, ube, and leche flan drink from Ayala Coffee in Union, NJ. (Lauren Musni | NJ Advance Media)

Coffee, Ayala Coffee, Union

Another drink? Another drink. Ayala Coffee is New Jersey's first Filipino coffee shop and the flavors are nothing but authentic. My favorites were the cassava (a nutty flavored vegetable commonly used in Filipino desserts), ube (purple yam) and leche flan (the Filipino variation of the classic cr me caramel) drinks.



Tacos, El Capitan's Taco Shack, Lower (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Tacos, El Capitan's Taco Shack, Upper

El Capitan's really is a taco shack, albeit one in the middle of nowhere. It's a cute lime green eatery, with picnic tables. The tacos may seem pricey (\$12 to \$14 for two) but they are loaded. The Gringa (choose either chicken or ground beef) combines rojo, lime cream, lettuce and queso in a tasty package. The carne asada tacos feature hefty slabs of steak, and the carnitas tacos are highlighted by a perky salsa roja. (PG)



The Blado, Water Dog Smoke House, Ventnor (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

The Blado, Water Dog Smoke House, Ventnor

Twitter tipsters sang the praises of Water Dog's bagels, but here's my tip: Skip the bagels — they're perfectly fine — and go with the sandwiches. The Blado (top-round Angus beef on brioche with jack cheese, horseradish sauce and slaw), is gigantic (see photo) and near-great. The Dr. Dan (pastrami served warm on rye with Russian or mustard, and slaw) is merely first-rate. (PG)



Assorted Manchurian at Paheli Indian Cuisine in Wayne (Stephanie Rizzolo | for NJ Advance Media)

Assorted Manchurian, Paheli Indian Cuisine, Wayne

Wayne strip mall newcomer Paheli Indian Cuisine may be small, but the flavor and quality of their dishes are mighty. Their particularly memorable Assorted Manchurian, an Indo-Chinese dish from Tibet consisting of lightly battered and fried broccoli, cauliflower and mushrooms sounds simple, but it was confusingly addictive. Tossed in a moderately spicy chili, garlic, ginger and vinegar sauce, the vegetables maintained a seemingly impossible level of crispness and the garlic-heavy sauce was vinegary and bold, but wasn't identifiably Indian or Chinese. The mystery of this Manchurian remains just that, so we recommending popping by Paheli to experience this culture-straddling dish for yourself. (SR)



Pastries, Chez Michael, West Cape May (Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Pastries, Chez Michel, West Cape May

What's that you say — pastries aren't dishes? Well, they are now! The ones at [Chez Michel](#) might be the lightest and loveliest of any in the state, and trust me, I've eaten my share. Michel Gras has been baking for 40-plus years, first in Paris, since 1984 in Cape May and later West Cape May. Traditional French croissants, pastries and baguettes can be found here, along with American muffins, tea biscuits and sticky buns. Next door is Good Earth Organic Eatery, also recommended. (PG)



Basil pork belly at Maya Thai Eatery in Westfield (Stephanie Rizzolo | for NJ Advance Media)

Basil pork belly special, Maya Thai, Westfield

The basil pork belly special at [Maya Thai](#) is a bit elusive, but if you're there when it's on special, you'd be remiss to skip it. A mildly detectable yet lingering heat enrobes crispy chunks of expertly rendered pork belly that's sautéed with peppers, onions, scallion and crispy, fried Thai basil leaves. The sauce had a hint of sweetness that balanced everything out. Pro tip: send Maya Thai a message on Facebook to check when this one's available. It's worth planning your visit around. (SR)



A chicken salad club sandwich from Bagels by Jarrett in West Orange. (Jeremy Schneider | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Club box, Bagels by Jarrett, West Orange

Bagels by Jarrett started as a bagel shop but now makes just about everything. From pizzas to Mexican food, from pasta to chili, the ghost kitchen in Essex County has become a delicious culinary hodgepodge. The best thing I ate there? The club sandwich, made with some of the most incredible chicken salad I've ever tasted and incredibly crispy bacon. I could have eaten three of these. (JS)



The birria at Taco's in Life was tasty and seasoned to perfection. Karim Shamsi-Basha

Birria at Tacos is Life, Woodland Park

The birria at [Tacos is Life](#) was decadent with tender beef in a handmade soft taco. The beef was well-seasoned and the broth was rich with the right amount of spice, but when you dipped the beef taco into the broth, something of magical proportions took place. All of a sudden, four tacos were not enough. (KSB)

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