



In 2007, Frenchman Yannick Anton took over the reins

as executive chef of Le Cordon Bleu's restaurant, Signatures. That same year the CAA/AAA recognized it as a five-diamond restaurant — the highest and most coveted symbol of excellence for fine dining in North America. Just one year later the Sandy Hill crown jewel shut down for what was billed as a mini-facelift. And, like the secretive French woman who returns from her weekend getaway looking decades younger, the acclaimed culinary classroom emerged with little fanfare in November 2009 with new radiance, a new attitude and, judging by the new clientele, fewer wrinkles. It had a newfangled name as well: Le Cordon Bleu Bistro @ Signatures. With its sunny yellow walls, contemporary tableware sans tablecloth, and servers empowered to make wine suggestions as well as small talk, Signatures bid adieu to its seven-course marathon meal; its dark, sombre dining room; its sommelier and 40-page wine list; and the decadent white-glove and silver-bell service. Gone is the \$45 main course, and in its place, there's a three-course prix fixe lunch menu for \$25.

Le Cordon Bleu's decision to forgo five-diamond status in favour of a bistro concept reflects something more powerful and enduring than an economic trend. The fine-dining finishing school isn't alone in recognizing a growing appetite for upscale food experiences that can be satiated with more regularity, with less stuffiness, and at more palatable prices. The death knell for haute cuisine has

been sounded around the world, most famously in France, where it was documented in *Au Revoir to All That: Food, Wine, and the End of France* by American journalist Michael Steinberger. On a recent trip to Paris, I noticed that the most buzzed-about restaurants were no longer temples of gastronomy, but postage-stamp casual spots with simple menus that changed according to the chef's whims. Among the hottest reservations in town was the 20-seat Le Comptoir, a bustling, casual brasserie by day that offers an ultra-gastronomic 50-euro (\$67) bargain of a fixed menu by night. There, famed chef Yves Camdeborde treats customers to food worthy of Michelin stars — but at a fraction of the price. Next door he now also runs L'Avant Comptoir, a blissfully inexpensive takeout crepe and sandwich counter with a tiny standing-room-only tapas bar tucked behind it. I stood shoulder to shoulder at the zinc bar chatting with my neighbours while dipping steamed Camus artichokes in olive oil, popping back addictive croquettes filled with Ibañona ham, and passing the communal bread basket, a slab of fine French butter, and jars of pickles. It was the most fun I've had eating fabulous food in a long time. And it was there that I began to reflect on Ottawa's restaurants, the ones that are working to close the gap between good eating and feeling good. If I had to sum up the gustatory zeitgeist, I'd say we're seeking culinary excitement in the form of emotional connection.

WHERE TO EAT RIGHT NOW

CASTLEGARTH

90 Burnstown Rd., White Lake
613-623-3472 www.castlegarth.ca

TOWN

296 Elgin St., 613-695-8696
www.townlovesyou.ca

THE WELLINGTON GASTROPUB

1325 Wellington St. W., 613-729-1315
www.thewellingtongastropub.com

FRASER CAFÉ

7 Springfield Rd., 613-749-1444
www.frasercafe.ca

THE WHALESBONE OYSTER HOUSE

430 Bank St., 613-231-8569
www.thewhalesbone.com

ATELIER

540 Rochester St., 613-321-3537
www.atelierrestaurant.ca

PLAY FOOD & WINE

1 York St., 613-667-9207
www.playfood.ca

BISTRO ST. JACQUES

51, rue St. Jacques, 819-420-0189
www.bistrostjacques.ca

ABSINTHE

1208 Wellington St. W., 613-761-1138
www.absinthecafe.ca

TAYLOR'S GENUINE FOOD & WINE BAR

1091 Bank St., 613-730-5672

In a way, chef Anton is our equivalent of chef Camdeborde, a man who famously rejected Michelin-star mania in 1992 in order to run what is being called a “gastro bistro” or “Bis-tronomique” — a place where cuisine remains haute, but no one need sport a tie or fear speaking above a whisper. This may not be Paris — and Canada’s capital has had a more modest platform from which to fall (rest in peace, Café Henry Burger) — but Anton can now count himself among those chefs in Ottawa who are pioneering a brave new wave of fine dining.

For most of us, the Baccaras and Bechtas of our dining world have long been, and will remain, the stuff of special occasions: inking the big deal, surviving another decade, wooing your intended. I believe these places still have a role to play, but there is a new breed of upscale restaurant taking top tier in our minds and mouths. These are the places serving up the kind of thoughtful, richly flavourful, top-quality fare once reserved for those who could afford to be chauffeured there. And Cordon Bleu aside, I believe much of the best food today comes courtesy of wait staff who are wearing T-shirts and jeans. We’re swapping foie gras for chicken livers, austerity for conviviality. After all, Ottawa is nothing if not unassuming and low-key; it’s no place for food snobs. This new fine dining reflects what many of us have come to appreciate most in a restaurant, anyway: hospitality and human connection. I’d even say Ottawa has been ahead of the curve when it comes to a kind of collective distrust for snooty-pants haute dining. Why else would we see so many local chef-owners outfitting their upscale eateries with mismatched chairs and serving designer hamburgers and bowls of homemade ice cream while bathing their dining rooms in indie pop? The owners’ presence and passion, dedicated wait staff, and ambitious chefs who channel cutting-edge inspirations into familiar, more affordable food served in a relaxed atmosphere — that just might constitute fine dining in the 21st century.

As we witness the birth of this new era in eating, prepare for some awkward moments: it seems even the restaurant owners are confusing the concepts. Is Genuine really a wine bar? Is The Welly really a gastropub? Is Fraser’s a café? The words are starting to mean less and less, but as the old saying goes, it’s what’s inside that counts. No matter what a restaurant calls itself, I believe the best ones understand that the feeling of connection starts with a truly welcoming reception at the door and a server who genuinely seems to care. It then trickles down to the recognizable sources of ingredients on our plates and in our glasses. Nearby farms, local food artisans, homespun breweries, and small-scale vineyards play a starring role in the new restaurant realm. After all, the heart of haute cuisine has always been about sourcing excellent products. And that’s another reason why Ottawa’s burgeoning restaurant scene is perfectly situated to thrive. Not surprisingly, most of the restaurants on my list of favourites have owners who are also chefs, the kind you might spot inspecting bunches of organic heirloom beets and boxes of mushrooms at the local farmers’ market or — better yet — growing their own veggies and herbs out in the backyard. Chef-owners can’t help infusing their restaurants with their personalities, passions, and values: it’s that illusive X factor that seems to translate directly onto the plate.

So, is fine dining dead? I will leave the final decision to you. I can only offer you my picks for the best places to eat right now. No two are alike, but all of them satisfy a craving for upscale dining as we are coming to know it.



CASTLEGARTH

Matthew and Jennifer Brearley **THE DISH:** Donegal Farms pork chop with crackling. Served with swiss chard, grilled puffball, and sweet corn sauce

For me, everything you need to know about Castlegarth is in a bowl of its *pappa al pomodoro*. This classic Italian comfort dish is nothing more than simmered tomatoes and stale country bread with a healthy glug of extra-virgin olive oil and torn basil. It's peasant food of the highest order. Nothing could more readily transport you to the hills of the Tuscan countryside. Chef-owner Matthew Brearley is almost embarrassed to describe the recipe, it's so simple. What makes it so good? First of all, it's the heirloom tomatoes grown in astonishing variety up the road on his family's farm (all told, Castlegarth has 500 acres of gardens, grain fields, pastures, and woodlands), the source of the lion's share of the restaurant's ingredients. Still warm from the sun, those tomatoes never knew the inside of a refrigerator. Farm-fresh ingredients are one thing, but what Castlegarth offers is the increasingly rare opportunity to taste familiar ingredients as if for the first time. Perhaps that is what entices Ottawa diners to make the hour-long drive to White Lake to eat in a simple converted post office off the high-

way; there is nothing quite like it. Matt's wife, Jennifer, a fellow Stratford-trained chef, runs the front of house with charm and genuine graciousness. The night of the life-affirming soup she later emerged from the kitchen with a basket brimful of funky fresh mushrooms — cauliflower, lobster, and puffballs — that Matt had foraged that afternoon. "It's what you get from an only child who had the run of hundreds of acres during his childhood," she remarks. Sautéed with a bit of cream and piled high on a thick wedge of grilled bread, the fungi flanked a Flintstonesque wild boar chop bursting with rich, meaty flavour teetering atop a mound of silky sweet roasted pumpkin (the very first of the season) and garlicky swiss chard. Matthew purrs when he talks about pork belly; he pores over books to learn the art of making prosciutto. He waxes poetic about the time he travelled to Tuscany and picked lemons from a tree, stuffing them inside a fresh chicken along with handfuls of rosemary that cascaded off the plant. This is what you can taste in a bowl of *pappa al pomodoro* at Castlegarth.



TOWN

Steve Wall (left) and Marc Doiron **THE DISH:** Chicken liver crostini

This might be the happiest place in town. Don't believe me? Just look at the front of the menu. It's written there: Town loves you and wants you to be happy. It's not a marketing gimmick; this room actually hums with fuzzy, feel-good vibes. It's so palpable, you'll wish you could bottle it and sprinkle it around. The food is big-hearted and generous too. And the service? Charming and attentive in a way that puts customers totally at ease. Rumour has it that the couple who own the place, Marc Doiron, a pastry chef, and his wife, Lori Wojcik, a former art gallery manager, scrimped for years — even living with their parents — to help save money to realize this dream. It's the old story that if you work really hard and pay your dues, the reward is so much sweeter than if someone handed it to you on a silver platter. When I chatted with Wojcik one night after stuffing myself silly with rich ricotta gnudi (think naked ravioli) and a decadent combo of cod fritters

and smoked pork ragout, I learned that the decor is a reflection of the things the couple love to be surrounded by at home. Ah-ha! Another lesson in how to create cozy atmosphere. The couple's wisest move was to convince chef Steve Wall, formerly of The Whalesbone, not to flee to New York but, instead, stay and feed us. We need him so much more than Manhattan does. What is so lovely about chef Wall's style of cooking is the way it manages to be controlled without feeling repressed and delicate while somehow beckoning us into the world of decadence. Every dish has hits of pleasure — zingy lemon confit; tons of bright, fresh herbs; really good balsamic; or toasted baby pine nuts — select flavours and textural elements that layer and combine to make a dish sing. The ability to keep things simple to dramatic effect is a skill that cannot be underestimated. Ditto for the fact that Town happens to be a really great place to hang out.

THE WELLINGTON GASTROPUB

Not only does my server know that my steak is a lime-marinated flat iron when I ask why the cut is so remarkably tender and flavourful, but he shows me that it comes from the shoulder with a tap on his own arm. Call David Letterman; this guy knows his cuts of meat. He is equally adept at recommending an ideal glass of wine for my mood and then keeps an eye on me from a distance to make sure I am always looked after without ever having the sense of being looked over. The food is delicious, always made with love, perfectly cooked, and served piping hot. Invariably some items work better than others, a natural consequence of a menu that changes twice daily. With less time for rehearsal, each dish practically debuts upon its creation. For me, the Gastropub is a perfect example of what the French are calling bistronomy. This place buzzes with the requisite amount of good-natured gabbing complemented by a rotation of indie music beloved by the T-shirt- and jeans-wearing staff — tunes that are likely unrecognizable to the majority of its well-heeled clientele. Some of them have been known to complain about noise levels, yet the roster of regulars keeps this place constantly hopping. The Welly is really a cosmic meeting of great mojo between its co-owners: chef Chris Deraiche, who works wonders with pots and pans, while Shane Waldron orchestrates nothing short of a waltz in the front of house. They must be good guys to work for, since it seems there has been relatively little staff turnover in their five years of business. I've also noticed that on almost every visit, I find myself seated next to a couple on a first date — with so much wooing going on, it's not just the owners who must be feeling lucky.



THE DISH: Bison meatballs. Served with broccoli and cheddar ravioli and local vegetables

FRASER CAFÉ



THE DISH: Fish tacos with beer-battered haddock. Served with black bean and corn salad and greens with buttermilk dressing

It's not enough that the Fraser brothers, Ross and Simon, constantly change the menus at their Rockcliffe hangout to reflect the seasons and the locally grown produce at their favourite ByWard Market stalls. They also offer their customers the option of throwing culinary caution to the wind by ordering the so-called Kitchen's Choice, a spontaneously created dish featuring items that are not already on the menu. It has become so popular, Simon tells me, that nearly half of all orders are requests for the surprise. Depending on what's on the menu, it could be anything — duck, lamb, quail, or octopus. I can't decide whether this is a greater reflection of the kitchen's bravado or of the level of trust and adventurousness that seems to define the Frasers' legion of loyal fans. "It's the bragging rights," explains Simon, who has come to understand the psychology of his regular clientele very well. Many of the neighbours have come to expect constant variety, personalized attention, and the chance to tell friends what their chef made for them last night. The siblings, who each toil beneath the hanging row of stainless-steel utensils just four days a week, would seem to have an enviable work schedule, but they are not above washing dishes and can usually be found on-site. Still, it takes tremendous stamina to run a kitchen that's in a constant state of spontaneity. Above all, it's the sanely priced, generously portioned, comforting fare that packs this place to the gills. It's the food we all wish we could eat every day at home. And for those of us who can't have a personal chef (and even for those who can), at least we can all have the Frasers.



THE WHALESBONE OYSTER HOUSE

Charlotte Langley **THE DISH:** Bigeye tuna. Served with aged cheddar, watermelon, local vegetables, and in-house crème fraîche

When it comes to Ottawa restaurants, it has always seemed as though the Whalesbone operates in some kind of alternative universe. How else to explain the hip, quirky atmosphere of a cutting-edge Montreal bistro crossed with the casual feel of the seashore? That's a lot of personality to stuff like a sardine into tiny digs on perhaps the ugliest stretch of Bank Street. I marvel at how the rest of the world, let alone the city, seems to disappear as I cross the threshold and enter the Whale, where the retro vinyl spins and further blurs the space-time continuum. It's best to try to snag a coveted seat at the bar overlooking the pristine oysters and related live entertainment. The menu here changes often, and recently the style of menu changed as well, though the jury is still out as to whether it's for the better. Items are organized into two sizes — not exactly appetizers and mains, but rather big appetite or small. While the list is

short, it feels as if each plate is getting more ambitious (though I, for one, would advocate for the less-is-more approach: fewer deconstructed dishes and fewer embellishments to things that are perfect as they are — I'm talking about you, fish tacos, and you, corn chowder with blue cheese. One thing the Whalesbone does consistently well is play the ethical foodie card without a hint of earnestness. In their hands, it feels utterly cool to want to consume only seafood options that have been recommended as sustainable and ocean-friendly, especially if that means the chef finds ways to make us fall in love with sea creatures that have been deemed less sexy — think Newfoundland sardines and pungent mackerel. We'll soon be hearing a lot about another rare species in the Whalesbone kitchen: its executive chef, Charlotte Langley, who is among a very small handful of women who run restaurant kitchens in Ottawa.

ATELIER

Oh, the long-lingering multi-course meal! Didn't we just say those days are over? Sitting in the comfort of the comically massive dining chairs, it's hard to know where the irony begins and the formal French dining backlash ends. The 12-course gastronomic experience features a familiar dose of the trendy small-plates dining concept with a presentation style worthy of Broadway — or at least a high school theatre performance. With all that drama and wonderful, flattering lighting in one room, I half expect the makeup crew to sweep in between courses to powder my nose. We are, after all, a part of the show. The diner's engagement is paramount, and I believe that's why this restaurant resonates with so many of us. We've all heard by now about the innovative young chef-owner Marc Lepine, who masterminds elaborate dishes through the brain-bending concepts gleaned from Spain's culinary avant-garde: molecular gastronomy, which I can insufficiently sum up as the application of science to culinary practices. Whether it be inspiration from Lepine's favourite movie, *The Matrix*, or the use of dry ice or a smouldering cinnamon stick, I don't doubt that this kitchen aims to push boundaries. However, what I find interesting is that, for the most part, Atelier serves what amounts to familiar food that just happens, in many cases, to be more delicious than similar dishes served elsewhere. The crispy walleye and duck confit were standouts for me. Charm and charisma are on the plate and in the service in equal measure, but it all treads a fine line and risks feeling staged. No matter. An evening spent at Atelier invites diners to be more engaged with dinner and taps into the need for a little more whimsy in the way we eat today.



THE DISH: Beet, orange, and walnut salad with lemon verbena sauce

PLAY FOOD & WINE



THE DISH: Grilled romaine with beets, watermelon, cashew spread, and chèvre

If Play were a person, it would be Beckta's younger, cooler cousin. Still, not exactly the hippest kid in town. But this fresh, animated, inviting spot does a fabulous job of turning out attractive small plates with big yum factor — a welcome addition to the Market area. But make no mistake, this is not frivolous food. In fact, the idea of "play" might have less to do with the dining experience than with the stuff that goes on in the kitchen, where a young, talented brigade is on display whipping up modest portions of refined dishes with cool cachet, like mini-burgers topped with lobster butter and served on a biscuit. Customers can kick back and enjoy the freedom of not having to commit to a single main dish and, instead, choose two or three, mixing and matching and adding side dishes such as crispy halloumi cheese or mayo-smothered green beans. There's also the option of popping in early or late with a group of friends and sharing plates of charcuterie or sampling from the superb cheese selection and wonderful wines by the glass. So while a buttoned-up vibe prevails, it does feel rather rebellious to treat ourselves more often to the Beckta magic (after all, executive chef Mike Moffatt runs both kitchens, and the standards for stellar service, too, are at play) without the heavy devotion or sticker shock. Surprisingly, Play's lunch, which may well be the best deal in town, is still a tough sell. The midday crowd can't seem to loosen their ties so early in the day, even at 20 bucks for any two plates.



BISTRO ST. JACQUES

Christopher Mulder **THE DISH:** Filet mignon. Served with charred tomatoes, green beans, chimichurri sauce, and garlic chips

It takes everything I have to resist calling this a little gem. But, oh, the clichés are so tempting when talking about my new secret crush. I openly confess, it's a sentimental pick based on how much this place reminds me of a neighbourhood bistro in Paris. Squinting (and wine) is required to play out this fantasy, but it helps that it is located on a residential side street in the heart of Old Hull, surrounded by the sounds of the French language. But it is the overall attitude that gives it a delightful, elegant European feel. Good-quality seasonal ingredients are a given, and like most bistro dining in France, nothing about it attempts to be hip or cutting edge. But what it lacks in innovation, it makes up for in spades with its calm, relaxed attitude and generous French classic fare that, in expert hands, will always feel special. In an era

when chef egos run large and service is likely to be either aloof or saccharine, Bistro St. Jacques is a breath of fresh air. Here you can experience the French tradition of being taken care of as if you were a guest in someone's home. On a recent visit, I watched a woman at the next table struggling to remove her jacket, and within seconds, the server rushed over to lend a hand. A child dining with her mother at lunchtime was hoisted upon a phone book in lieu of a booster seat, to the great delight of all involved. White tablecloths, *mais bien sur*, feel right here. But don't expect micro-portions. And don't miss out on some of the best frites you'll find on either side of the river. Confident cooking combined with a dedication to the primacy of pleasure — it's like being in France without the cost of the flight.

ABSINTHE

In late August, I discovered a back-door entrance to Absinthe from its parking lot, whereupon I passed two wooden planters filled with micro-greens, fragrant basil, and fresh green onions basking in the sun. It's what the staff affectionately call their "ghetto garden." When my niçoise salad arrived, there were all those lovely leaves again, this time gently dressed and placed alongside sweet cherry tomatoes, boiled potatoes, green beans, hand-pitted olives, and a generous slab of lightly seared fish from The Whalesbone Sustainable Oyster and Fish Supply. For Absinthe, the personal connection to ingredients is everything. Its menu uses an elaborate system of symbols to pay homage to a small army of local farmers. At a glance, customers can see that eggs are from Bekings, tomatoes are from Rideau View, broccoli is from Rodney Knox, arugula from a guy named Spicoli (meet him, and you'll know why) — and on it goes. Once you become acquainted with the provenance of each dish, there are wine-pairing suggestions to consider, be it for individual items or packaged as a three-course pairing. The appetizers, mids (soup or salad), and mains can also be ordered à la carte or combined into a table d'hôte. As decision-making goes, it can be a bit intense. So, too, is the cooking itself. Chef-owner Patrick Garland favours big, bold flavours. His food yells, Life is short, eat up! A walleye pogo has chipotle pop; smoky ribs are basted with sweetened heat. Even vegetarian ravioli have a wicked kick. And then, once you're braced for the one-two punch, Garland reminds us that life can be as sweet and delicate as the perfect profiterole.



THE DISH: Ontario lamb three ways — braised shank in duck fat sablé; belly roulade stuffed with creamed kale and chanterelles; roasted rack with brioche and herb crust, carrot and caraway puree, and Malivoire reduction

TAYLOR'S GENUINE FOOD & WINE BAR

THE DISH: Pork chop. Served with raisin and onion compote; warm cauliflower, apple, and parmesan salad; and seasonal vegetables



When Ottawa chef-icon John Taylor announced that he was opening a casual, seasonally inspired gourmet wine bar in a converted corner coffee shop in Old Ottawa South, foodies rejoiced. We couldn't help thinking of it as "Domus Lite." But when Genuine opened, the tenor soon turned heavy. There was a time when fine dining meant a night away from the kids, but the saga of the breastfeeding mother's right to include her baby in an evening reservation revealed tension about whether we're comfortable saying some places aren't for everyone. For me, this episode points to a less political issue as well. It highlights the increased importance we're placing on hospitality. And in spite of its name, Genuine gets demerit points on that front — the service and attitude in the room run rather cool. Still, it squeezed itself onto the 10 Best list based on other factors, including the genuine deliciousness of the food. You will be hard pressed to find a better burger than the one served at lunchtime, topped with smoked cheddar, pancetta, and zingy sweet-and-sour homemade ketchup. The kitchen seems to have a way with silky puréed soups and lovely desserts too. If we could just convince the folks at Town to give Genuine a lesson in the laws of neighbourliness, Taylor would have a serious winner.

END