

# The Top 10

BY MIA STAINSBY, VANCOUVER SUN    JANUARY 1, 2011



**Photograph by:** Bill Keay,  
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Sun

These are the top 10 new restaurants that opened this year in the Vancouver area. They're tops not only for the food but they're my personal preferences in the here and now. They have buzz and personality. I avoided deep, critical analysis and went instead with my gut. These are places that my gut would choose in the order that I present them.

## L'Abattoir

217 Carrall St., 604-568-1701

L'Abattoir joins Boneta and Chambar in balancing on a tightrope of finely crafted food at reasonable prices. Chef Lee Cooper has worked at Market at Shangri-La Hotel and Fat Duck in England (oft called one of the best restaurants in the world) and that kind of top-layer experience shows in the dishes he's offering for about \$25. There's whimsy on the plate and menu, which is welcome when a restaurant has solid footing on food, service and ambience. Example: a modestly titled Salad of Chicken belied the elegance of cubes of chicken mousse with paper-thin sliced cauliflower, pickled cauliflower, foie gras mayonnaise and shrimp crackers. Poached halibut was decked out in "scales" of zucchini and served with mussels, spinach dumplings and a ragout of vegetables and garlic sabayon - - amazing value for a laboriously crafted dish.

At the bar, Shaun Layton, a talented mixologist enralls with his yummy cocktails. The Don Draper cocktail seduces as deftly as the character it's named after. In the new year, the menu will have a third category -- mid-courses which are priced and portioned midway between entree and appetizer. "Post fine dining era" is where L'Abattoir is at, says co-owner Paul Grunberg.

## Ba oBei

163 Keefer St., 604-688-0876

There are going to be other modern Chinese restaurants (how can there not, in this city?) but Bao Bei has done it with funk and flair. To me, this place is like a Chinese restaurant transformer, a reshaped old, classic Chinatown restaurant in brand new form. I love the seamless warp and weft of modern

and retro -- familiar Chinese dishes are lighter, smaller and styled, the outdoor neon sign is convincingly 1960s, the cocktails rock as does the funky decor. The sesame flatbread with braised pork butt, Asian pear, pickled onions and mustard greens (shao bing) kicked you-know-what.

Corner Suite Bistro Deluxe owners Andre McGillivray (front) and Steve Da Cruz (back), with chef Jason Liezert in Vancouver.

Corner Suite Bistro Deluxe

850 Thurlow St., 604-569-3415

It had a rocky start with the chef departing just before opening in time for the 2010 Olympics but second-in-command, Jason Liezert, stepped up and is doing a great job. It's a French bistro and it really rings true. The 48-hour cassoulet is a hit but won't be available for long. It will be off the menu when warm weather returns. There's an edge to the menu, especially in the specials offerings -- sometimes a code word for offal. If you'd like to acquaint yourself with pig's ear, tongue, kidney, and the like, you'll find it here. In the new year, Liezert will be featuring more wild game, like Saltspring Island fallow deer. Co-owner/bartender Steve Da Cruz rocks the cocktail menu. His Amaretto Royal Sour (egg, Amaretto and meyer lemon) could sub as dessert and for me, it's countdown to vacation time as I write this -- could I ever use one right about now!

Judas Goat

27 Blood Alley, 604-681-5090

Uh oh, I thought when opening chef Lee Humphries departed (to take on the chef de cuisine position at C restaurant). The food, at this teeny tiny Spanish tapas joint off Blood Alley, was delicious despite the teeny tiny kitchen. But all's well. With Rob Belcham (of Refuel and Campagnolo) advising and Alvin Pillay (previously Campagnolo chef), Judas Goat is still a sure-footed one. The only dishes remaining on the menu from my visits last spring are the quartet of beef brisket meatballs with pulled (not ground) meat and the pancetta and fried quail's egg en crouete. Newcomers include pork and swiss chard empanada and braised lamb collar with radish and mint. Especially attractive are the prices for the delectable bites (true tapas sizes) -- from \$3 to \$8.

Oru

Fairmont Pacific Rim Hotel

1038 Canada Place, 604-695-5500

Named for the dramatic 180-foot Joseph Wu origami lantern sailing across the ceiling, Oru tastes of Vancouver with its pan-Asian spectrum of flavours. Chef David Wong is a "from-scratch" kind of chef, making his own noodles, baguettes for Vietnamese banh mi, charcuterie meats, tofu, sambal, XO sauce and so on. Here, you enjoy the luxury feel of a high-end room yet the food's affordable. The best deal is the Four Set, a lunchtime combo of two appies, main course and dessert, with choices.

Such a lunch might consist of albacore tuna salad, scallop motoyaki, Vietnamese caramel pork and lychee cheesecake. Price? \$25. "We do a 100 of those every lunch," says Wong. Since opening in early 2010, he's moved from the small plates concept to larger portions. The sable fish kasu with sweet miso sauce and gingered tomato has been a bestseller from the start. (Kasu, by the way, is the solids left from making sake.)

#### Aura at Nita Lake Lodge

2131 Lake Placid Rd.

Whistler, 604-966-5795

When Nita Lake Lodge changed hands (sold to Ram Tumurluri, owner of some 50 spas in India) the food became radiant. Rebranded, renamed and "recheffed" from its days as Jordon's Crossing, Aura is an exciting new addition to Whistler. Chef Tim Cuff was previously sous chef at West and has worked under Michael Allemeier at Mission Hill and Teatro (Calgary). When I visited last summer, I fell under the spell of his cooking -- succulent sous vide lamb loin wrapped in merguez served with pine nuts, rosemary radishes and sun-choke gratin; pan-roasted Fraser Valley duck (sous vide), which had been dried in the fridge for two days to concentrate flavour; lime-injected watermelon served with scallop, spot prawn and cuttlefish; quail, duck and liver parfait with pearl onion and mushroom saute and nettles. I didn't try the Quebec foie gras with Vidal ice wine, fresh brioche, olive oil, cocoa butter and amarena cherries but it should have been one of the rare occasions when I ordered foie gras. The lodge has a rooftop garden and some 40 to 60 per cent of the vegetables came from there last summer. They hope to increase the yield to 80 per cent with a greenhouse.

#### Cafeteria

2702 Main St., 778-317-3783

Familiar theme this year. It's another good-value spot. This one's run by Andrey Durbach and Chris Stewart, the duo who run two other successful spots -- La Buca and Pied a Terre. Chef Jefferey Siemens runs the kitchen and he does an admirable job changing up the menu daily while keeping the dishes lively and delicious. Mains are all under \$20 and has recently featured dishes such as pumpkin ravioli with crispy sage and walnuts; prosciutto-wrapped scallops with sweet corn and carrot jus; Arctic char with chanterelles and brown butter.

#### Kitsilano Daily Kitchen

1809 West First Ave., 604-569-2741

Brian Fowke didn't fare so well when he helmed Metro in downtown Vancouver; it closed earlier this year and he resurfaced at Kitsilano Daily Kitchen, a neighbourhood spot where the 'hood stretches as far as Portland (his food made a top-10 list south of the border). He plays with fire in more than the usual way. He's got to be at the top of his game with a menu that changes completely every day and which is based on what he comes back with from the markets. He tweets that day's menu out in the

afternoon. Diners have a choice of a la carte or two tasting menus (\$39 for four tapas-sized courses or \$65 for six course). Bavette of Pemberton beef with truffle mashed potatoes, Haida Gwaii venison with pot barley and napa slaw; Peace Country lamb ragout with rosti potato and organic veg stew made me very happy.

### La Ghianda

2083 Alma St., 604-566-955

It's a very casual deli with seriously good food from Trentino. And that would be Trentino, Italy, near the Austrian border. The principals are also the owners of La Quercia and that'll give you a sense of their allegiance to authentic, regional Italian food. The menu features panini made with absolutely delicious bread. The fillings usually are plucked from the cheese and cured meats counter. There's usually a pasta or two and a couple of rustic mains. Between 5 and 6 p.m., you can pick up a supper dish to go or you can hurry up and eat before the place closes at 6 (so the chef can walk over to La Quercia a block away, and start his second shift there).

### Meat & Bread

370 Cambie St., 604-566-9003

This no-nonsense sandwich line (and you bet there are lineups) has edited operations down to the basics, which are the ciabatta panini. But oh, what sandwiches. The ciabatta, the condiments (even the mustard is made in-house) and the meaty fillings are good. This is panini of the succulent sort with just-roasted meats, still glistening from cooking. My marinated beef sandwich had deep flavour; my partner's porchetta sandwich featured pork loin that had been rubbed down with fennel, garlic and chili salt, then rolled in pork belly rubbed with rosemary, parsley and a salt rub. I like the eccentric room, the music and buzz in this one-track cafe.

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