

10 best foodie spots in Tampa/St. Petersburg

Bob Jenkins, Special for USA TODAY 1:58 p.m. EDT March 12, 2014

Tampa Bay in the past 15 years has added eclectic restaurants to a handful of traditional, can't-miss places. Our recommendations blend those two elements and a pinch of geographic dispersal. Ranked in order:

10. Taco Bus – Everyone from college students to Guy Fieri has "discovered" the Taco Bus chain, which originated in a refurbished school bus. Now the five brick-and-mortar locations plus buses offer a range of Mexican hand-held wrappers that you can stuff with diced or shredded beef, beer-battered fish, even fermented soybeans. Also recommended: the butternut squash tostada. taco-bus.com

9. Pane Rustica — This busy dining room offers flatbread pizzas, spectacular burgers, entrees such as acorn squash stuffed with chicken salad, and imaginative sandwiches on a choice of nine breads, all baked here. A changing mystery lunch entrée is the "Shut up and eat, don't ask." Save room for the bakery's delish desserts. panerusticabakery.com

8. Rococo Steak -- No funeral home-turned-YWCA ever looked lovelier. Dating to the 1920s this building was recently converted into a steakhouse – the name refers to elaborate ornamentation – and a brewpub. The third-generation chef turns out both corn-fed and grass-fed steak options starting at 7 ounces, climbing to 22 ounces for a bone-in ribeye. The menu also offers Texas venison, Pacific oysters, creamed corn, and even quinoa and kale chips. rococosteak.com

7. Maritana Grille — Not all beach restaurants are dive bars with sandy walkways. This dressy restaurant is the grand pink wedding cake that is a Florida Gulf coast landmark, Loews Don CeSar Hotel. The menu is big on fresh snapper and grouper with accents of the Med or the Floribbean (island and mainland). A solid wine list – with fine views from the bar, too. loewshotels.com/doncesar

6. Bella Brava – If it's good enough for author Dennis LeHane, isn't it good enough for us commoners? This trattoria and its horseshoe-shaped bar are just an open-collared shirt this side of fancy. The menu is to drool for: wood-fired oven flatbreads and pizzas, penne pasta with wood-grilled chicken, cotto ham, peas, roasted mushrooms and Asiago cream sauce. LeHane? The mystery writer lives about half the year within a mile of this downtown St. Petersburg restaurant. bellabrava.com

5. The Refinery – Arguably serving Tampa Bay's consistently best meals (Zagat named it the area's best in 2012 and 2013), executive chef/co-owner Greg Baker – with three James Beard nominations – shuffles his menu every Thursday night, emphasizing locally sourced ingredients. He adds a French twist to Southern traditions, leavened with his 20 years in kitchens across America. thetamparefinery.com

4. Bern's — Founder Bern Laxer's restaurant offers the best aged beef, organically grown veggies and a superb wine list numbering more than 6,800 selections, many by the glass. It is arguably Florida's No. 1 steakhouse. Insider tip: Sample all of this for less than \$30 by sitting at the bar and ordering the steak sandwich and a glass of the house wine. bernssteakhouse.com

3. Z Grille — Named for ebullient founder and James Beard-nominated chef Zack Gross, this downtown room is usually crowded and can be loud, but sitting at the bar facing the show kitchen is fun. The menu includes Mexican-influenced staples; trademarks are the deviled eggs (emphasis on deviled: the core includes some avocado, while the egg is lightly topped with hot sauce, bacon and jalapeno) and Dr. Pepper-sauced fried ribs. zgrille.net

2. SideBern's – Created to relieve crowding at Bern's, SideBern's has taken off: Chef Chad Johnson was a 2012 semifinalist in the James Beard awards, while general manager Dean Hurst is considered "a superstar in national bartending competitions," according to the *Tampa Bay Times*. Johnson's menu is "modern Mediterranean" themed: starters such as oysters with a smoked shallot and oak mignonette, entrees including sweet and sour duck breast.

1. Mise en Place – Opened in 1986, it's still ahead of most of the competition. Check the menu and consider the cornmeal-crust oysters with green tomato chutney as a starter, followed by venison loin with rabbit chorizo palla risotto. Do get the favored side: lobster Manchego mac 'n' cheese. miseonline.com