

# 10 Best New Bay Area Restaurants for Date Night

By Jackie Burrell, Jennifer Graue, Daniel Jimenez and Mary Orlin

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Bartender Mike Smith prepares drinks from the bar at Gan restaurant in Pleasanton, Calif., on Thursday, Dec. 17, 2015. (Dan Honda/Bay Area News Group) (Dan Honda)

We may scoff at Hallmark holidays, but deep down, we have a soft spot for roses and heart-shaped boxes of chocolate -- or any shaped boxes of chocolate. Thing is, Valentine's Day comes but once a year, and we unabashed romantics think date night should be celebrated all year long.

So here to provide inspiration are the 10 best new restaurants we visited over the past year. Consider it a celebration of the East Bay and South Bay's most delicious experiences, from the casual, but fab Drake's Dealership -- perfect for a first date -- to the bright, sophisticated Cetrella.

Bon appetit.

1 Roots + Rye



The full bar at Roots and Rye in Santana Row in San Jose, Calif., on Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2016. (Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group) (Nhat V. Meyer)

The vibe: Chic, sleek and trendy, Roots + Rye fits right into San Jose's tony Santana Row. After a day of boutique shopping with your bae, slip into one of the cozy couches in the lounge or gather round the warm glow of the fire pits on the patio to enjoy one of the many whiskey-based cocktails and a nosh. If you've worked up the appetite for a full meal or just want to escape the bar crowd, there's also a spacious dining room decorated with marquee lights that cast a vaguely romantic glow in the dimly lit space.

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Roots + Rye is the latest concept from chef and restaurateur Chris Yeo, the guy behind Straits and Sino. The focus here is on small plates such as the cocktail-friendly deviled eggs and crackling chicken skins, but there are a few main course-sized dishes, from a pork chop with butternut squash (\$24) to a pretty killer burger with bacon jam, served at lunch (\$18). Sure you're going to pay a little more for a meal here -- it is Santana Row, after all -- but the food's good enough to justify it.

The dish: The small plates menu is labeled "sharing is caring," but you'll probably want to keep the cola-braised pork belly sliders (\$12) all to yourself. The artfully composed scallops with kohlrabi puree (\$24) is a meal in miniature -- and a delicious one at that.

The details: 3055 Olin Ave., Suite 1005, Santana Row, San Jose; [www.rootsandrye.com](http://www.rootsandrye.com)

#### 2 Calavera

The vibe: This Oaxacan-inspired bistro from Oakland restaurateur Chris Pastena (Chop Bar, Lungomare) and his partners is a stylish, sophisticated, delicious affair. Set in a high-ceilinged industrial-chic space and adorned with Mexican folk art and calavera motifs, the place fairly fizzes with energy and boisterous noise. It's not a spot for a proposal (unless you'd like to shout your love), but it's a hot spot for a first date -- or a 20th. The cocktails are divine, the food is fantastic and besides, where else can you nosh on crunchy grasshoppers as you sip a Salt Air Margarita with Oaxacan salt foam?

The dish: Start with the decadent Queso Flameado (\$11), a small cast-iron pan filled with melty Chihuahua cheese, huitlacoche and, for \$4 more, housemade chorizo rojo, ready to be scooped into housemade blue nixtamal tortillas. Don't dither over taco choices (\$11-\$15 for three) -- which include a cochinita pibil, tinga

de pollo and a vegetarian-friendly option -- order them all. Then order another round.

The details: 2337 Broadway, Oakland; [www.calaveraoakland.com](http://www.calaveraoakland.com)

### 3 Orchard City Kitchen



The dining room at Orchard City Kitchen in Campbell, Calif., Wednesday, Mar. 12, 2015. OCK is located in the former Hobee's space, which they have totally remodeled. (Patrick Tehan/Bay Area News Group) ( Patrick Tehan )

The vibe: If there were such a thing, the award for best resurrection of an old Hobee's restaurant would most certainly go to chef Jeffrey Stout for Orchard City Kitchen, which opened at the tail end of 2014 in Campbell's Pruneyard Shopping Center. Gone is Hobee's signature pie case, replaced by a large bar that turns out a good selection of craft cocktails. The atmosphere is urban-agrarian chic with a whitewashed wood beam ceiling and a sliding barn door that blends seamlessly with the black and white subway tiles of the open kitchen.

Stout's menu of ever-changing, globally inspired small plates uses flavors from Japan (his famed Hamachi Shots, \$15, from Alexander's Steakhouse have found a new life here) and Peru to the American South (the Triple B -- biscuits, bacon and honey butter, \$7 -- should be required eating), and each dish seems better than the last.

OCK is ideal for more casual date nights, post-work drinks and dinner, and it can handle larger groups with aplomb.

The dish: The memory of both the succulent lobster dumplings (\$16) and the spicy-sweet, crisp morsels of KFC -- Korean Fried Chicken (\$7) -- induce sporadic pangs of craving. If only Stout would keep the marbled potatoes with bonito aioli on the menu year round, life would be complete.

The details: 1875 S. Bascom Ave., Campbell; [www.orchardcitykitchen.com](http://www.orchardcitykitchen.com)

### 4 La Marcha Tapas Bar

The vibe: The energy in this Berkeley neighborhood restaurant crackles as folks sip sherry-spiked sangria

and enjoy cod croquettes, meatballs and other tapas. As the evening progresses, pans brimming with saffron-tinged seafood and pork paella fly out of the kitchen. La Marcha, a collaboration between chefs Emily Sarlatte and Sergio Emilio Monleón, grew out of their Nora Cocina Española catering business. They opened the bricks-and-mortar tapas bar in October.

La Marcha is the Spanish word for late-night pub crawl, but here, you can stay put, noshing and drinking until 10 p.m. Happy hour with tapas (one complimentary per beverage) melds seamlessly into dinner, where more substantial tapas (\$4-\$12) and savory paellas (\$25-\$35) take center stage. La Marcha is a delectable dining experience, where you'll feel like you've taken a tasty trip to Spain.

The dish: The menu changes frequently, but expect goodies such as crisp, spicy Patatas Bravas (\$7) or garlicky Gambas a la Parilla (\$12 for five). Move on to crunchy and creamy Croquetas de Bacalao (\$9) or the buttery Pulpo y Garbanzos (\$10) octopus tapa. Paella is the main event, and the "three pigs" creation called Tres Cerditos (\$28) satisfies with chorizo and pork belly saffron rice, topped by a thick and juicy pork shoulder chop.

The details: 2026 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley; [www.lamarchaberkeley.com](http://www.lamarchaberkeley.com)

#### 5 Locanda Ravello

The vibe: Time your dinner for sunset on the expansive patio of this Danville delight, and the lighting will create such an unforgettable, romantic spectacle, you'll dream of the Amalfi Coast as you share a bottle of Chianti and sample an array of authentic Italian dishes. If it rains, you can cozy up inside. If you're lucky, the pizzaiolo may serenade you with a bit of opera.

Warmth really is the defining characteristic of Locanda Ravello, with its friendly service, Italian countryside vibe and, of course, plates that feed the soul, probably because many of the recipes came from co-owner Enzo Rosano's mother, Carmela. Pizzas (\$15-18) are sized for two to share, and there are plenty of salad, pasta and entree options.

The dish: Start with Mamma Carmela's Meatballs (\$10) -- hearty, flavorful and served in a tangy tomato sauce with crostini for dipping. A pair of pastas -- Strozzapreti (\$17) with Italian sausage, mushrooms, peas and cream sauce, and Panzarotti Ravello (\$19) with ricotta, spinach and butter sage sauce -- provide great flavor and richness without being too heavy. For a tart, sweet finish to the meal, the divine lemon tiramisu with raspberry sauce (\$8) is perfect.

The details: 172 E. Prospect Ave., Danville, [www.ravello-danville.com](http://www.ravello-danville.com)

#### 6 Bourbon Steak

The vibe: Whether you're wooing that special someone or out with an important client, a big night out calls for a big statement. And it doesn't get much bigger than Bourbon Steak at Levi's Stadium. First, there's the

element of surprise: Who'd expect to find a swanky steakhouse from a Michelin-recognized chef tucked beneath a sports behemoth? It feels like being ushered into a speak-easy when you enter the sleek, wood-paneled dining room with leather booths and big-screen TVs camouflaged as framed mirrors for nongame days.

As one might expect from a restaurant in Michael Mina's constantly expanding empire, this is the place expense accounts were made for. Big spenders can dine on Japanese Wagyu and a grand cru and spend, quite literally, thousands, while those of more modest means can still enjoy dinner for two for under two bills and get great service to boot.

The dish: Proving that sometimes the best things in life are free, the complimentary amuse bouche of duck fat fries is one of the many highlights here. Order the filet mignon (\$49) with a shareable side of truffled mac and cheese (\$9), and you'll dine like a king. End the night with some nips from the bourbon cart (\$30 for three) or the bourbon-laced butterscotch custard (\$11).

The details: 4900 Marie P. DeBartolo Way, Santa Clara; [www.michaelmina.net](http://www.michaelmina.net)

## 7 Advocate

The vibe: Tucked into Berkeley's Elmwood neighborhood, the stylish Advocate hails from the same team behind Comal, and there's a sibling similarity in the decor, the attention to detail, impeccable service and the same Meyer Sound acoustic system that makes conversation comfortable in an industrial-chic dining room. Murmur sweet nothings in this venue, a historic brick garage that dates back to 1918, and your sweetheart will not shout, "What?"

Chef John Griffiths' menu combines Moroccan and Mediterranean inspirations with Northern California ingredients to create dishes -- wood-grilled flatbreads, shrimp on the plancha, pappardelle with lamb sugo - that delight adventuresome and tentative diners alike.

The dish: Salads here are a work of art, and the Little Gems (\$13) with an egg, anchovy-tarragon vinaigrette and ciabatta croutons is particularly tasty. Do not miss the tender, succulent slow-roasted pork shoulder (\$25), served with a puntarelle salad, red kuri squash and a garum and ginger vinaigrette.

The details: 2635 Ashby Ave., Berkeley; [www.theadvocateberkeley.com](http://www.theadvocateberkeley.com)

## 8 Cetrella

The vibe: If you hear a buzz in downtown Los Altos, it's likely coming from Cetrella, where happy diners enjoy executive chef Michael Ellis' Mediterranean-inspired dishes and delicious homemade pastas. Owner M'hamed Bahet is a near-constant presence in the dining room of this new South Bay outpost of the popular Half Moon Bay establishment, pouring wine, chatting with diners and exuding Italian hospitality.

The dining room is light, bright and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows running the length of the space, but

be warned: Sound can really ricochet off the high ceilings, so it's not necessarily the place for a quiet, intimate dinner, especially on busy weekend nights. Still, for couples and friends looking for a convivial atmosphere where they can dine at a more leisurely pace, Cetrella fits the bill.

The dish: The uncommonly good fritto misto (\$14) is composed of succulent rock shrimp, instead of the usual calamari, along with fried green beans and olives. Tempted to skip the pasta course? Don't. Share the mustard pappardelle with lamb (\$26), and you'll still have room for a main course. The cappelletti filled with truffle polenta and served in a spicy sauce with a meatball (\$24) is the stuff dreams are made of.

The details: 400 Main St., Los Altos; [www.cetrella.com](http://www.cetrella.com)

## 9 Drake's Dealership

The vibe: Date night doesn't always have to be about roses and candlelight; sometimes it's about comfort, fun and a good time with friends. This shrine to craft beer, ensconced in a massive former auto dealership space on Broadway, offers a deep rotating lineup of the best from Drake's Brewery, as well as other standouts from brewers near and far. It's casual, lively and feels like you're hooking up with a few hundred of your closest friends for a beer.

As if beer weren't enough to make the night great, executive chef Taylor Smith's menu straddles the line between "high-end pub food" and just plain high-end -- with eight different pizzas (\$11-15) sharing space with snacks, sandwiches and duck confit.

The dish: That duck confit (\$22) is transcendent -- tender but not too fatty, with a home-run side of Anson grits, mushrooms, hazelnuts, cherries and aji amarillo. The Woodfire Chevre appetizer (\$10) may come out looking like soup, but it's a sensory experience, with warm, soft goat cheese to spread on crunchy crostini, then dip into a tangy-tart roasted tomato sauce.

The details: 2325 Broadway, Oakland; [www.drinkdrakes.com/visit/dealership](http://www.drinkdrakes.com/visit/dealership)

## 10 Gan restaurant

The vibe: The dining room here is beyond minimalist, the celadon green walls are embellishment free, and the tabletops are bare, save for pleated napkins. The focus at chef Peter Jee-Oh Chung's new restaurant is entirely on his elevated, modern Korean cuisine. And by meal's end, you'll be wowed.

Let your palate explore new flavors, starting with libations. Here, diners toast meals with makgeolli (pronounced ma-KOH-lee), a milky white Korean rice wine similar to sake, and the starters and mains are infused with sweet, salty, bitter and sour flavor sensations. It's enough to make Gan an exciting dining destination for any occasion.

The dish: Chung's menu is constantly changing, but if possible, make sure you try his Kimchee Croquettes (\$11), a housemade fermented cabbage and mung bean mash-up. Slurp savory Acorn Noodle Soup (\$13),

with delicate acorn flour noodles bathed in a rich chicken, pork and anchovy broth. Try the fork-tender braised Wedding Cheeks (\$31), with sunchoke puree, broccolini and potatoes -- Chung served this beef dish at his wedding, hence the name. End the meal sweetly with mint-infused, caramel-drizzed Sweet Perilla Ice Cream (\$8).

The details: 600 Main St., Suite G, Pleasanton; [www.ganrestaurant.com](http://www.ganrestaurant.com)

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