

ZAGAT®

Ditch or Date Guide

2011/12

VH1
TOUGH
Love

DON'T MISS VH1 TOUGH LOVE MIAMI
SUNDAYS AT 8/7c

HOW TO **DITCH**

Need to dump someone? A successful ditch requires just as much contemplation as a successful date. If it goes well, you'll leave single – and with minimal drama. But if it doesn't, you may not leave at all.

RULE #1

PICK SOMEPLACE A LITTLE NOISY. WHEN IT ALL GOES DOWN, YOU *DON'T* WANT TO BE THE CENTER OF ATTENTION.

RULE #2

CHOOSE A PLACE YOU'VE NEVER BEEN TOGETHER. THE LESS SHARED MEMORIES, THE BETTER.

RULE #3

YOU SHOULD PROBABLY PICK UP THE CHECK THIS TIME.

RULE #4

CHANGING YOUR ONLINE RELATIONSHIP STATUS BEFORE YOU'VE LEFT THE RESTAURANT JUST *ISN'T* POLITE.

RULE #5

THOUGH ONE DOOR IS CLOSING, ANOTHER MIGHT OPEN. CHOOSE A PLACE WITH GOOD-LOOKING WAITSTAFF.

RULE #6

DON'T PICK SOMEPLACE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. YOUR DATE WILL NEED TO FIND AN EASY WAY HOME IF HE OR SHE LEAVES IN A HUFF.

HOW TO **DATE**

The proper location for a night out with that special someone is not a decision to be taken lightly. Whether it's a restaurant or a nightclub – give it some thought or your next date could be a disaster.

RULE #1

DON'T SIT ON THE SAME SIDE OF THE TABLE. THIS IS A DATE – NOT DINNER THEATER.

RULE #2

CONSIDER THE VOLUME. PICK SOMEPLACE QUIET ENOUGH TO TALK – AND LOUD ENOUGH TO COVER THE AWKWARD SILENCES.

RULE #3

DON'T EMBARRASS YOURSELF. IF YOU CAN'T PRONOUNCE IT, JUST POINT TO IT.

RULE #4

HAVE A LITTLE WINE...BUT DON'T RAID THE CELLAR!

RULE #5

FASHIONABLY LATE IS NEVER IN FASHION.

RULE #6

WHEN IT COMES TO RESTAURANTS, "OUT-OF-THE-WAY" DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A BAD THING. A LONG WALK HOME IS A GREAT TIME TO FLIRT.

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Ratings & Symbols

Food, Decor and Service are rated on the Zagat 0 to 30 scale.

| | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| <u>0</u> - <u>9</u> | poor to fair | <u>20</u> - <u>25</u> | very good to excellent |
| <u>10</u> - <u>15</u> | fair to good | <u>26</u> - <u>30</u> | excellent to perfection |
| <u>16</u> - <u>19</u> | good to very good | ▽ | low response less reliable |

Cost

Our surveyors' estimated price of a dinner with one drink and tip. Lunch is usually 25 to 30% less. For unrated restaurants, the price range is shown as follows:

| | | | |
|----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| <u>I</u> | \$25 and below | <u>E</u> | \$41 to \$65 |
| <u>M</u> | \$26 to \$40 | <u>VE</u> | \$66 and above |

Comments

Surveyors' comments are indicated in quotation marks within reviews.

Symbols

- serves after 11 PM
- ☑ closed on Monday
- ☒ closed on Sunday
- ☒ no credit cards accepted

Cool Loos

Divert yourself with a trip to the WC

Signature Room *American* 18 26 19 \$54

Streetsville | John Hancock Ctr. | 875 N. Michigan Ave., 95th fl. (bet. Chestnut St. & Delaware Pl.) | 312-787-9596 | www.signatureroom.com

"When out-of-towners are in tow", surveyors "skip the Hancock Observatory" and head for this 95th-floor Streetsville American where the "view on a clear day" is so "priceless" that "marriage proposals arrive daily"; an "impressive" Sunday brunch and Saturday lunch buffet (an "unbelievable deal") are further incentives to overlook sometimes "erratic service", "dated" decor and "unpredictable" fare; P.S. don't forget to "check out" the vista "from the ladies' room."

Wave *Mediterranean* ▽ 13 21 13 \$58

Streetsville | W Chicago Lakeshore | 644 N. Lake Shore Dr. (Ontario St.) | 312-255-4460 | www.waverestaurant.com

"Beautiful decor" and a "great view of the lake" set the tone at this "trendy" Mediterranean small-plates concept off the lobby of Streetsville's W Hotel; fans find the "pretty" fare is exactly what "you'd expect", yet grouches grump that the "quality" and "attitude" are enough to make them "wave goodbye"; P.S. desserts are a "steal", and a "long, interesting drink menu" adds happy-hour appeal.

Where the Servers Are Hot

Ogle and flirt; or, how to be so inappropriate that you get the kiss-off yourself

Japonais *Japanese* 24 26 20 \$59

River North | 600 W. Chicago Ave. (Larrabee St.) | 312-822-9600 | www.japonaischicago.com

"Lots of young, beautiful people" come to "eat and be seen" at this "swanky", "pricey" River North Japanese with "excellent sushi", a "variety" of "inventive" entrees and "lethal signature martinis"; "service is what you'd expect" (some say "aloof"), but most maintain it's "managed to stay trendy" while providing "consistent" fare "for quite some time", plus the "neo-Asian decor" is an "architectural dream"—especially the "sexy downstairs bar with a river view."

Tango Sur *Argentinean/Steak* 24 16 19 \$32

Lakeview | 3763 N. Southport Ave. (Grace St.) | 773-477-5466

Meat mavens meet at this "beloved" BYO Argentine that serves "wonderfully" prepared, "quality beef" to "expats" and "Lakeview twentysomethings"; a "loud" setting and "ridiculously long waits" that "do not abate late" can be "frustrating", but "eye-candy waiters" and "huge" portions offering "incredible value" "are worth it."

To really make the breakfast stings, rub salt in the wound here, where the view is priceless and love is in the air.

A hot wait staff is a must. Because after you ditch your date, you're gonna need a new one.

Meat-Market Atmosphere

Set your mind to it and find a replacement before you head home

Carnivale *Nuevo Latino* 23 25 21 \$41

Loop | 702 W. Fulton Mkt. (Union Ave.) | 312-850-5005 | www.carnivalechicago.com

Jerry Kleiner's "extravagant", "slightly pricey" Nuevo Latino on the fringe of the Loop boasts "bright" "flavors and even brighter decor" for a "wonderful sensory overload" fueled by "funky servers" and "daring drinks"; just know the "atmosphere is true to its name" (it can be "deafening"), though there is seasonal dining on the patio.

TV Over the Bar

Slip "it's not you it's me..." into a commercial break

Hop Häus *Burgers* 19 15 17 \$21

River North | 646 N. Franklin St. (Erie St.) | 312-467-4287

Rogers Park | 7545 N. Clark St. (Howard St.) | 773-262-3783

www.thehophaus.com

"Burgers and more burgers" both "mini" and "tall" are on a "selection worth seeing" (including exotic game) along with "super-large salads", "tons of beers from around the world" and weekend brunch at these sometimes "noisy" "sports bars" with "TVs galore and a friendly staff"; P.S. Rogers Park has a "lovely outdoor setting."

LuxBar *American* 20 20 21 \$32

Gold Coast | 18 E. Bellevue Pl. (Rush St.) | 312-642-3400 | www.luxbar.com

A "diversified" Traditional American menu that's a "step up" from the "usual bar food" (and a "value for the area") meets a "hipster look" in a "dark atmosphere" with a "dynamic bar scene" of "drinks and eye candy", luring loungers to this often "noisy" Gold Coast "neighborhood spot"; with "efficient service", it also works for a "shopping break", "catching TV sports" or "people-watching", especially in the "outdoor dining area" or at a seat "overlooking Michigan Avenue"; P.S. the "fireplace" adds appeal "in the winter."

New & Notable Openings

Because you're on top of what's hot

Girl & The Goat  *American* - - - M

West Loop | 809 W. Randolph St. (Halsted St.) | 312-492-6262 | www.girlandthegoat.com
Top Chef winner (and former Scylla chef-owner) Stephanie Izard is behind this midpriced West Loop arrival offering seasonal contemporary American sharing plates with Mediterranean influences, accompanied by Three Floyds brews on tap and Izard's own wine blend; the rustic-meets-industrial aesthetic mixes woods and vintage metalwork, and there's a long open kitchen, numerous seating options (including bar, lounge and outdoor) and, naturally, goat *objets d'art*.

Maude's Liquor Bar  *French* - - - M

West Loop | 840 W. Randolph St. (bet. Green & Peoria Sts.) | 312-243-9712 | www.maudesliquorbar.com

At this West Loop French *boîte* from the Gilt Bar gang (headed by Brendan Sodikoff), an open kitchen issues housemade charcuterie, raw-bar fare and bistro classics, accompanied by wines, draft brews and craft cocktails; the cozy setting has a been-here-for-eons feel with low lighting, distressed surfaces (brick, subway tiles, wood tables), antique furniture and tunes from an old record player, plus there's a seductive candlelit lounge upstairs.

Next  *Eclectic/International* - - - VE

West Loop | 953 W. Fulton Mkt. (bet. Morgan & Sangamon Sts.) | 312-226-0858 | www.nextrestaurant.com

This highly anticipated follow-up to Alinea from über-chef Grant Achatz is built around a daring concept, offering themed tasting menus that change quarterly to reflect a different global cuisine and time frame—and equally unusual is the booking system, with diners buying 'tickets' priced on a sliding scale according to day and time; the high-style, modern West Loop setting includes a chef's table and a secluded VIP 'speakeasy', while the adjacent Aviary bar, with upholstered banquettes and torchère lighting, serves crafty cocktails and edgy bar bites.

Great Food, Not Widely Known

Call a good dinner what it really is: foreplay

Azucar  *Spanish* ▽ 22 18 20 \$42

Logan Square | 2647 N. Kedzie Ave. (Milwaukee Ave.) | 773-486-6464 | www.azucartapasrestaurant.com

Raters "run to this" "tiny" Logan Square "treasure" for "fresh, inventive and lovingly prepared" if slightly "pricey" Spanish tapas with "big flavor" and specialty drinks wielded by a "warm staff"; P.S. there's also late-night service (till 2 AM on weekends) and sidewalk seating.

Go retro. Sometimes a nod to the past can make for a promising future.

Rumba  *Nuevo Latino* ▽ 23 24 25 \$48


River North | 351 W. Hubbard St. (bet. N. Kingsbury & N. Orleans Sts.) | 312-222-1226 | www.chicagorumba.com

Salsa "dancing on the weekends" (the "floor gets packed") and "people-watching" add to the "lively" vibe at this River North supper club that also dishes up Nuevo Latino plates; the setting—floor-to-ceiling red velvet curtains, overstuffed booths—is as "excellent" as the drinks, which include a signature punch and classic mojito, but the initiated warn that "service goes downhill" when the decibels rise.

It never hurts to spice things up - whether it's on your plate or out on the dance floor.

"Let's Meet for a Drink"

Date-speak: "In case I want to make this short and sweet"

Fuego Mexican Grill & Margarita Bar  *Mexican* 24 19 23 \$30

Logan Square | 2047 N. Milwaukee Ave. (Armitage Ave.) | 773-252-1122 | www.fuegomexicangrill.com

"Upscale" and "large", this midpriced Logan Square cantina is a "notch above your average Mexican" say locals who promise it "will exceed your expectations" for service and food with its "sophisticated moles and seafood preparations"; "outstanding margaritas" are also in the mix, and it's all served in an "upbeat, lively yet not-too-crowded atmosphere"; P.S. there's a lounge and nightclub upstairs.

Wine Bars

For a mellow alternative to the typical drinks date

Tasting Room  *American* 20 21 21 \$34

West Loop | 1415 W. Randolph St. (Ogden Ave.) | 312-942-1313 | www.thetastingroomchicago.com

"Wine and cheese lovers" rendezvous over "interesting", "smaller-sized" New American dishes and entrees at this "quiet" West Loop "date spot" with some of the "best views of Chicago" from its "second-floor" lounge; cohorts concur there's "plenty to keep you interested"—starting with the "extensive" vino selection explained by a "knowledgeable staff"—and moderate tabs won't break the bank.

Webster Wine Bar  *Eclectic* 20 18 20 \$30

Lincoln Park | 1480 W. Webster Ave. (bet. Ashland Ave. & Clybourn St.) | 773-868-0608 | www.websterwinebar.com

Whether "you're an expert or not", the "oddball" but "amazing" vinos—many poured "by the glass"—at this "candlelit" Lincoln Park wine bar "boggle the mind", especially when teamed with "terrific cheeses" and Eclectic small plates; though "off the beaten track", it's a prime perch for "dates", "pre-movie drinks" or powwows with colleagues, and all benefit from the "ridiculously knowledgeable", "friendly" staff and "fair prices."

Cool Loo

Divert yourself with a trip to the WC

Rivera *Pan-Latin* 26 24 23 \$60

Downtown | Met Lofts | 1050 S. Flower St. (11th St.) | 213-749-1460 | www.riverarestaurant.com

"Inventive" chef/co-owner John Sedlar creates "simply stellar", "work-of-art" Pan-Latin plates accompanied by "outstanding" wines and cocktails at this "stylish" Downtown "knockout"; the "deservedly proud" staff provides "helpful" service, and while a few are flummoxed by the "different menus in different rooms", "shouting" noise level and "miniature" portions, most agree the "hype is merited", as well as the prices.

Where the Servers Are Hot

Ogle and flirt; or, how to be so inappropriate that you get the kiss-off yourself

Pink Taco *Mexican* 16 17 15 \$27

Century City | Westfield Century City Shopping Ctr. | 10250 Santa Monica Blvd. (bet. Ave. of the Stars & Century Park W.) | 310-789-1000 | www.pinktaco.com

So it's "not gourmet"—fans say it's "hard to argue" with the "tasty" Mexican and "strong" margaritas at this "trendy" mall stop in Century City that's a "total hangout for the young crowd", with "music on perpetual overdrive" and a provocatively dressed staff that leads some to dub it a "Hooters for tacos"; still, many call it "mediocre", although some say "lusting after the servers makes up" for the menu's shortcomings; P.S. a new branch is slated to open on the Sunset Strip in 2012.

Rock'n Fish *Seafood* 19 18 18 \$36

Downtown | LA Live | 800 W. Olympic Blvd. (Figueroa St.) | 213-748-4020 | www.rocknfishlalive.com

Manhattan Beach | 120 Manhattan Beach Blvd. (bet. Manhattan Ave. & Ocean Dr.) | 310-379-9900 | www.rocknfishmb.com

At these "hoppin'" seafooders, the "navy grogs are an essential part of the experience" ("lightweights beware"), while the menu offers a "nice selection" of "dependable" eats, including "awesome oak-grilled" fish and steaks; the Manhattan Beach original attracts an "eclectic clientele" with its "nice location by the pier", "top-notch bar" and "semi-outdoor patio seating", while the LA Live location is a "staple when visiting Staples."

Sushi Roku *Japanese* 22 21 20 \$50

Third Street | 8445 W. Third St. (bet. Croft Ave. & La Cienega Blvd.) | 323-655-6767

Santa Monica | 1401 Ocean Ave. (Santa Monica Blvd.) | 310-458-4771 ●

Pasadena | One Colorado | 33 Miller Alley (bet. Colorado Blvd. & Union St.) 626-683-3000

www.sushiroku.com

A "very LA" scene can be found at this Japanese trio where a "hip, young crowd" gathers for "fresh", "creative" sushi, "awesome drinks" and "people-watching" in a "trendy" modern Asian setting; "competent" service is another plus, even if some dub it "Sushi Broke-You."

Meat-Market Atmosphere

Set your mind to it and find a replacement before you head home

Katana ● *Japanese* 24 26 22 \$61

West Hollywood | 8439 W. Sunset Blvd. (bet. La Cienega Blvd. & Sweetzer Ave.) | 323-650-8585 | www.katanarobata.com

"Beautiful people" indulge in a "party atmosphere", inside and on the "gorgeous patio", while nibbling on "superb" sushi and yakitori dishes at this Sunset Strip "standout"; a few scene-watchers believe it's "lost some luster" of late and the food "doesn't merit the hype", but believers who relish the "'whoop' from the chefs" and recommend it for "special occasions" "don't mind shelling out for the bill."

Red O *Mexican* 22 26 21 \$58

Melrose | 8155 Melrose Ave. (Kilkea Dr.) | 323-655-5009 | www.redorestaurant.com

"Spectacular", "supremely comfortable" surroundings with a "gorgeous" bar set the stage for a menu of "artful", "savory" "gourmet Mexican" by Rick Bayless at this "über-trendy" Melrose "hot spot"; while the "attentive" service earns plaudits, the "bouncer outside is an obnoxious touch" and some critics howl "o-soexpensive" and "o-errated."

Dive Joint

If you no longer care to impress, might as well be relaxed

Hudson House ● *American* ▽ 22 17 18 \$23

Redondo Beach | 514 N. PCH (Beryl St.) | 310-798-9183 | www.hudsonhousebar.com

"Crowds show up early and the house never thins out" at this Redondo Beach gastropub serving "interesting" eats (an "outstanding pretzel bun burger") with an "extensive beer list" and "inventive cocktail menu" to match; despite the "noise" and frequent "waits", it's "comfortable"; with a "nice bar atmosphere", and the happy-hour deals "will leave your wallet as happy as your full belly."

LOUD music and a rowdy crowd drown out any drama (and the tequila doesn't hurt either).

The romance might be dead, but those Lakers tickets are too precious to waste (plus it's perfect for a fast break after the game).

New & Notable Openings

Because you're on top of what's hot

M.B. Post *American* - - - **M**

Manhattan Beach | 1142 Manhattan Ave. (Manhattan Beach Blvd.) | 310-545-5405

This ultraiively neighborhood gastropub sits just a block from the Manhattan Beach Pier, in a sprawling space with a frantically busy bar, numerous communal tables, an exposed-beam ceiling—and a world-class chef (David LeFevre, ex Water Grill) in the kitchen having fun with a midpriced New American menu broken up into sections such as 'Eat Your Vegetables,' 'Meat Me Later' and 'Seafood... Eat Food'; an encyclopedic, quirky wine list adds to its allure.

Misfit, The *Eclectic* - - - **M**

Santa Monica | 225 Santa Monica Blvd. (2nd St.) | 310-656-9800 | www.themisfirerestaurant.com

At this Santa Monica gastropub in the space that was last home to Anisette, expect a moderately priced menu of bar-friendly Eclectic dishes such as French dip sliders and shoestring fries with blue cheese crumbles, with lots of libations to match; the two-story setting features a tile floor, a bar that runs the length of the long main dining room and a display of vintage cocktail shakers.

Great Food, Not Widely Known

Call a good dinner what it really is: foreplay

Culina Modern Italian *Italian* **24** **27** **26** **\$65**

Beverly Hills | Four Seasons Beverly Hills | 300 S. Doheny Dr. (Burton Way) | 310-860-4000 | www.culinarestaurant.com

The celeb-heavy Four Seasons Beverly Hills is home to this "sophisticated" hideaway serving "delicious" Italian fare with "modern touches" ranging from raw fare at the crudo bar to brick-oven pizzas and homemade pastas; "impeccable" service and a "glamorous" setting with a "beautiful" heated patio live up to the high-end hotel pedigree – ditto the "expensive" tabs.

Eva *Californian* **23** **16** **22** **\$49**

Beverly Boulevard | 7458 Beverly Blvd. (bet. Gardner & Vista Sts.) | 323-634-0700 | www.evarestaurantla.com

"Charismatic" chef-owner Mark Gold "presides over the kitchen in his cowboy hat" at this "quirky" "little gem" on Beverly Boulevard serving "imaginative" seasonal Californian fare in an "intimate" space that's "like dining in someone's home"; a "warm", "caring" staff "makes the excellent food taste even better", and while it's not cheap, those "on a budget" claim the Sunday Supper is "one of the best bargains in town."

Small bites mean you won't be too full to make out!

Noir Food & Wine *Eclectic* **24** **19** **22** **\$46**

Pasadena | 40 N. Mentor Ave. (Colorado Blvd.) | 626-795-7199 | www.noirfoodandwine.com

"Small plates that are big on flavor" come out of the kitchen at Claud Beltran's "intimate" Pasadena bistro, where "expertly crafted" Eclectic dishes are paired with "superb" yet "not-too-pricey" wines by "non-snooty experts who know their stuff"; while a few grouse about "cramped" conditions in the dining room, the garden patio is "magical at night", and proximity to the Boston Court Theatre makes it a "perfect date restaurant" for many.

"Let's Meet for a Drink"

Date-speak: "In case I want to make this short and sweet"

Aburiya Toranoko *Japanese* ▽ **22** **24** **22** **\$45**

Downtown | 243 S. San Pedro St. (2nd St.) | 213-621-9500 | www.toranokola.com

This "hip" Little Tokyo izakaya and sib of next-door Lazy Ox Canteen finds longtime Nobu chef Hisa Kawabe preparing "beautiful", nouvelle takes on Japanese small dishes, served with beer, sake and exotic cocktails; the lively setting sports an open kitchen, a communal table and oversized graphics of tigers, warriors and deities by tattoo artists.

Waterloo & City *British* **23** **19** **21** **\$41**

Culver City | 12517 W. Washington Blvd. (Venice Blvd.) | 310-391-4222 | www.waterlooadncity.com

A "smart destination for foodies" in Culver City, this gastropub showcases "talented chef" Brendan Collins' "hearty", "sophisticated" Modern British fare that's "adventurous but not too experimental", including "excellent charcuterie plates", backed by "terrific" beer and wine; "friendly" service and a "nice crowd of all ages" contribute to the "convivial" vibe inside the "old coffee shop", and even though it can get "incredibly noisy", aficionados predict that "one visit won't be enough."

Adventurous eaters are sure to impress. Try the pig trotters, and she'll always remember this date.

Cool Loo

Divert yourself with a trip to the WC

Balans ● Eclectic 19 18 17 \$33

South Beach | 1022 Lincoln Rd. (bet. Lenox & Michigan Aves.) | Miami Beach | 305-534-9191 | www.balans.co.uk

"Watch the world go by"—or at least the "unending Lincoln Road parade of people and dogs"—at this "down-to-earth" London import offering "reliable" Eclectic fare and "one of the best Sunday brunches" on South Beach; even if waiters have a little "attitude", admirers aver the "fair prices" make it a "good option."

Where the Servers Are Hot

Ogle and flirt; or, how to be so inappropriate that you get the kiss-off yourself

China Grill ● Asian 23 23 20 \$60

South Beach | 404 Washington Ave. (4th St.) | Miami Beach | 305-534-2211 | www.chinagrillmgt.com

For more than a decade, this "still hot" Pan-Asian has been dishing out "glitz" to go with "fun fusion food" served "family-style" in a "stylish" space; it's got "outlandish prices (even by SoBe standards)" and a "deafening" clatter, but the "scenesters don't seem to mind."

Mango's Tropical Cafe ● Eclectic 15 20 16 \$34

South Beach | 900 Ocean Dr. (9th St.) | Miami Beach | 305-673-4422 | www.mangostropicalcafe.com

"Watch the wackiness happen" on South Beach at this "high-octane" "party" place where "half-naked girls and buff guys dance on the bar" to the delight of "happy" "out-of-towners"; so what if the tropical-inspired Eclectic fare is "pretty average"—fans are willing to shell out for the "hot" scene anyway; P.S. no caps, bandannas, flip-flops or tank tops for men; cover charge after 10 PM.

Go Out of Your Way

Because there's no sense tainting your local favorite

Pilar American/Seafood 24 18 22 \$36

Aventura | 20475 Biscayne Blvd. (NE 203rd St.) | 305-937-2777 | www.pillarrestaurant.com

"Cooked-just-right" New American seafood dishes lure Aventurans to this "sophisticated" "surprise" in an "otherwise mundane" strip mall; though the "comfortable" but "noisy" surroundings get mixed reviews, "fair prices" and "amicable" service keep it a "good value."

Meat-Market Atmosphere

Set your mind to it and find a replacement before you head home

Houston's American 22 21 22 \$37

North Miami Beach | 17355 Biscayne Blvd. (NE 172nd St.) | 305-947-2000 | www.hillstone.com

Part of a "chain that doesn't feel like one", this "reliable" Coral Gables outpost "clicks" thanks to a "pretty darn good" menu of "all-American comfort" items and a "modern metropolitan" ambiance that brings in "mingling singles" after work; despite debate on the cost—"inexpensive" vs. "overpriced"—most report "solid quality" here.

Sugarcane Raw Bar Grill ● Eclectic - - - E

Downtown | 3250 NE First Ave. (32nd St.) | 786-369-0353 | www.sugarcanerawbargrill.com

The Eclectic little sister of the ever-popular SushiSamba, this sweet spot north of Downtown offers a vast array of Pan-Asian small plates, including items from a raw bar, robata grill and sushi bar, as well as a few curveballs like buttery roast chicken and cheese and charcuterie plates; accommodating staffers and a funky industrial warehouse space with soaring ceilings and a vast outdoor patio complete the package, but beware: prices that seem cheap add up faster than you can say 'oh, sugar.'

People-Watching Places

Pretty faces to look at—unlike the disapproving one across the table

Front Porch Café American 21 15 16 \$24

South Beach | Penguin Hotel | 1418 Ocean Dr. (bet. 14th & 15th Sts.) | Miami Beach | 305-531-8300

"Linger on the porch" and "people-watch" at this "legend on South Beach" where "huge portions" of "delicious" American chow (including "fantastic" all-day breakfasts) please palates and pocketbooks; service can be "very *mañana*" and there's "always a line for brunch" on weekends, but with "all the standards done well" and "ocean views", "what more could you want?"

Versailles ● Cuban 21 14 18 \$26

Little Havana | 3555 SW Eighth St. (SW 35th Ave.) | 305-444-0240


This "doyen of Cuban restaurants in Little Havana" offers the "ultimate Miami experience", with "large portions of tasty", "authentic" fare and a clientele dressed in everything from "flip-flops to furs" that includes "movie stars, politicians, even defeated dictators"; if the "tacky", "diner"-esque decor and "uneven" service elicit a few versighs, the "affordable" prices, "history" and "endless energy" lead most to "feel like they're in Cuba without the communism."

Pick a place with options. Once you make the break, you can either enjoy the meat plate or the meat market.

Some hustle and bustle makes it easy to avoid eye contact when breaking the bad news.

New & Notable Openings

Because you're on top of what's hot

Pubbelly  *Asian/Eclectic* - - - M
South Beach | 1418 20th St. (bet. Bay Rd. & Purdy Ave.) | Miami Beach | 305-532-7555 | www.pubbelly.com


This pork-centric SoBe gastropub packs in scenesters drawn by its creative Asian-inspired small plates, which are complemented by a superior selection of brews and wines and served by a hip staff in a snug, brick-walled space; moderate prices further fuel its popularity.

Sustain Restaurant + Bar *American* - - - E
Wynwood | 3252 NE 1st Ave. (bet. N. Miami Ave. & SE 2nd Ave.) | 305-424-9079 | www.sustainmiami.com

Locally sourced, farm-to-table fare sustains foodies at this Midtown American offering an upscale menu that changes with the seasons; the dining room is eco-friendly too, incorporating recycled materials and striking touches such as tree branches and a ceiling dotted with umbrella-like metal canopies.

Great Food, Not Widely Known

Call a good dinner what it really is: foreplay

Bali Café  *Indonesian* 23 14 20 \$23
Downtown | 109 NE Second Ave. (NE 1st St.) | 305-358-5751

"If you didn't know how good the food is" at this "cramped yet cozy" Downtown Indonesian, "you'd probably walk by" and miss "authentic," "expertly prepared" dishes at "amazingly low" prices; "quick, friendly service" is another reason to venture to its "out-of-the-way" (some say "dodgy") location; P.S. "cash only."

Guru *Indian* 24 18 23 \$28
South Beach | 232 12th St. (bet. Collins & Washington Aves.) | Miami Beach | 305-534-3996 | www.gurufood.com

"Reasonable prices" for "inventive" Indian fare attract admirers to this "tastefully decorated" SoBe subcontinental with "friendly service"; unfortunately, it's a bit "out of the way", but that's a plus for those who want to keep it "little-known" ("I only recommend it to your best friends").

Lou's Beer Garden  *American* - - - M
Miami Beach | New Hotel | 7337 Harding Ave. (bet. 73rd & 74th Sts.) | 305-704-7879 | www.lousbeergarden.com

Chef-owner Luis 'Lou' Ramirez's way-casual American plunked pool-side in Miami Beach's New Hotel spills out plenty of craft beers and puts the 'gastro' in 'gastropub' with dishes like Iberico squid stuffed with chorizo and Manchego cheese; if you just want a burger with your brew, you can get that too, along with other pub-grub crowd-pleasers like Buffalo wings and quesadillas.

"Let's Meet For a Drink"

Date-speak: "In case I want to make this short and sweet"

Michael's Genuine *American* 26 21 24 \$54
Food & Drink

Design District | Atlas Plaza | 130 NE 40th St. (bet. NE 1st & 2nd Aves.) | 305-573-5550 | www.michaelsgenuine.com

"Everything rocks" at chef-owner Michael Schwartz's "justly popular" New American, a "genuine delight" where fans "ooh and ah" over the "locally sourced and creatively cooked" concoctions from the "homey open kitchen"; "attentive service without condescension", "pleasant" if "understated" decor, "lovely patio" seating and "affordable prices" add to the appeal, making this "Design District dining at its best."

Wine Bars

For a mellower alternative to the typical drinks date

Forge Restaurant & Wine Bar *American* - - - E
Miami Beach | 432 41st St. (Sheridan Ave.) | 305-538-8533 | www.theforge.com

Once an actual blacksmith's workshop turned celebrity magnet steakhouse, this Miami Beach icon has replaced tuxedoed waiters, heavy silver gueridons and the caged finches in the ladies room with gleaming enomatic wine dispensers, Helmut Newton nudes and a dazzling blond dining room lighted by Murano glass chandeliers; also somewhat lighter: the tabs and the American cooking (think quinoa pancakes instead of creamed spinach), thanks to veteran Miami chef Dewey LoSasso (ex North One 10).

W Wine Bistro  *French* 18 20 \$32

Design District | 3622 NE Second Ave. (NE 36th St.) | 305-576-7775 | www.winebistro.com

With its "great" vino selection, tastings and "fun" choices "by the glass", this "neighborhood" Design District French is "like hanging out in your friend's wine cellar, if your friend has a wine cellar the size of a small restaurant"; new owners have expanded the midpriced menu (including entrees like tuna tartare), while a retail side and no-corkage Wednesdays add to the appeal.

Sharing small talk over small plates is a great way to get closer - and make the evening last.

Choosing a little-known secret says you know all the hot spots.

Cool Loo

Divert yourself with a trip to the WC

Morimoto Japanese 26 26 24 \$84

Chelsea | 88 10th Ave. (bet. 15th & 16th Sts.) | 212-989-4639 | www.morimotonyc.com
 "Culinary master" Masaharu Morimoto "lives up to his Iron Chef status" at this West Chelsea Japanese duplex where the "visually pleasing", "great tasting" dishes work well with the "futuristic", "all-white" decor and "spot-on service"; since a "huge bill" is part of the experience, many "splurge" and spring for the "work-of-art omakase."

Where the Servers Are Hot

Ogle and flirt; or, how to be so inappropriate that you get the kiss-off yourself

Coffee Shop American/Brazilian 16 13 13 \$32

Union Sq | 29 Union Sq. W. (16th St.) | 212-243-7969 | www.thecoffeeshopnyc.com
 A "very known quantity" on Union Square, this Brazilian-American "mainstay" is forever "hopping" despite its "hit-or-miss" menu, "worn" setting and "not so hot" service from an "eye-candy" staff; however, as the "colorful crowd" can attest, "no one goes here for the food."

Spice Market Asian 23 26 21 \$62

Meatpacking | 403 W. 13th St. (9th Ave.) | 212-675-2322 | www.jean-georges.com
 "Wow" is the word on Jean-Georges Vongerichten's "swinging" Meatpacking "scene", combining a "dazzling", family-style menu of "upgraded" Southeast Asian street food with "fruity cocktails" and "hot", "polished" staffers; decorated in a "slinky" style reminiscent of a "Javanese Playboy mansion" (complete with "sexy" private rooms downstairs), it's "energizing" for both "New Yorkers and tourists" who report it will spice up your life.

Go Out of Your Way

Because there's no sense tainting your local favorite

Cole's Dock Side Seafood 21 17 20 \$38

Great Kills | 369 Cleveland Ave. (Hylan Blvd.) | Staten Island | 718-948-5588 | www.colesdockside.com

"Hometown" types "meet and eat" at this "casual" Staten Island seafooder with a "warm-weather" porch and "peaceful water views" over Great Kills Harbor; "tasty" fin fare served with a "smile" at "good prices" have most "wishing to return."

Vinegar Hill House American 25 20 21 \$50

Vinegar Hill | 72 Hudson Ave. (bet. Front & Water Sts.) | Brooklyn | 718-522-1018 | www.vinegarhillhouse.com

Way "off the beaten track" in "unknown" Vinegar Hill, this "destination" New American wins over "hipster foodie" types with its "first-rate" cooking, "oh-so-cozy" ambiance and "magical" outdoor garden; but many say "it's time they consider taking reservations" given the "dollhouse" dimensions and no-man's-land neighborhood.

Multiple Entrances/Exits

So you can excuse yourself for a moment and never come back

John Dory Oyster Bar Seafood 23 21 19 \$57

Chelsea | Ace Hotel | 1196 Broadway (W. 29th St.) | 212-792-9000 | www.thejohndory.com

"Reincarnated" in the Ace Hotel, this "cool" seafooder from April Bloomfield and Ken Friedman (Spotted Pig, The Breslin) offers a "fantastic raw bar" and "stunning" small plates in "fun" nautical-kitsch digs; the catches are "impossible waits" and "high cost" for "bite-size" nibbles.

Shang Chinese 20 21 18 \$58

LES | Thompson LES Hotel | 187 Orchard St. (bet. Houston & Stanton Sts.) | 212-260-7900 | www.shangrestaurant.com

"Worth exploring", this "upscale" LES Chinese offers chef Susur Lee's "flavorful" creations in a "dramatic", modern room; however, those "expecting greatness" come away "disappointed", citing just "ok" edibles and "expense account"-worthy tabs; P.S. insiders sidestep a "climb up the stairs" and use the hotel's Allen Street entrance.

If expecting a break-up fight, first consider the lay of the land. High ceilings and crowded environs help camouflage combat.

When going in for a ditch, be sure to have a quick getaway. Pick a spot near public transportation and/or great shopping - both might save your life.

New & Notable Openings

Because you're on top of what's hot

Bar Basque *French* 19 19 9 \$61
 Chelsea | Eventi Hotel | 839 Sixth Ave., 2nd fl. (bet. 29th & 30th Sts.) | 646-600-7150 | www.chinagrillmgt.com

At Jeffrey Chodorow's pricey arrival to Chelsea's Eventi Hotel, the "deep-red", "futuristic" look by Tron designer Syd Mead gets mixed reviews ("weird" vs. "very cool"), but most like the Basque menu; a "trendy" bar scene, wines via "vending machine" and an atrium roof "that opens in summer" keep it humming.

Beauty & Essex *American* 22 27 21 \$63
 LES | 146 Essex St. (bet. Rivington & Stanton Sts.) | 212-614-0146 | www.beautyandessex.com

Behind a LES "fake pawn shop", this "gorgeous" New American "sister to Stanton Social" is done up like a "modern-day speakeasy" with Vegas-worthy "draping chandeliers, recessed rooms" and even a "champagne bar in the ladies' room"; given all that, the "Gossip Girl" crowd doesn't mind much that the "clever", eclectic small plates "get expensive."

Great Food, Not Widely Known

Call a good dinner what it really is: foreplay

Miss Lily's *Jamaican* - - - M
 G Village | 132 W. Houston St. (Sullivan St.) | 646-588-5375 | www.misslilysnyc.com

Runway-ready types are all over this happening new Village Jamaican via scenemaker Serge Becker (La Esquina), where midpriced Caribbean eats are dispatched by staffers as comely as the customers; the downscale setting recalls a Kingston luncheonette (Formica tabletops, dish towel napkins), while an egalitarian door policy leads to long waits.

Rosanjin *Japanese* 27 25 28 \$125
 TriBeCa | 141 Duane St. (bet. Church St. & W. B'way) | 212-346-0664 | www.rosanjintribeca.com

"Japanese cuisine as ritual" comes to life at this "intimate" TriBeCa where the "unreal" kaiseki dinners are rendered with "architectural artistry"; a "minimalist" mien, "graceful servers in kimonos" and top-of-the-line pricing make for "special" dining you "won't soon forget."

"Let's Meet for a Drink"

Date-speak: "In case I want to make this short and sweet"

Barbounia *Mediterranean* 21 22 18 \$49
 Flatiron | 250 Park Ave. S. (20th St.) | 212-995-0242 | www.barbounia.com

Sure, this "entertaining" Flatironer proffers "tasty" Med fare, but what's "exciting" here is watching "beautiful people" dine in "stunning", vaulted-ceilinged surroundings; "steep prices", uneven service and "deafening" acoustics can annoy, but an "artisanal cocktail" or two helps.

Modern, The *American/French* 26 26 26 \$127
 W 50s | Museum of Modern Art | 9 W. 53rd St. (bet. 5th & 6th Aves.) | 212-333-1220 | www.themodernnyc.com

"Haute" museum dining turns up at this Danny Meyer "winner" in MoMA, where chef Gabriel Kreuther's "artfully presented" French-New American menu approaches "perfection"; the "sleek" space is split in two: a "casual", "buzzy" barroom up front offering à la carte small plates and a "calming", prix fixe-only rear dining room looking out on the museum's "world-class" sculpture garden; no matter where you wind up, you can expect "impeccable" service, along with "memorable" tabs.

Rayuela Pan-Latin *Pan-Latin* 23 24 21 \$60
 LES | 165 Allen St. (bet. Rivington & Stanton Sts.) | 212-253-8840 | www.rayuelanyc.com

"Decidedly different", this "vibrant" Lower Eastsider dispenses "freestyle" Pan-Latin dishes lubricated with "clever cocktails"; "helpful" service, "soft lighting" and a "conversation-piece" live olive tree enhance the "seductive" setting, but "costs can add up."

Show your cultured and classy side. With this much avant-garde art, your silences will never be awkward.

With two groovy dining rooms, a great soundtrack and beautiful clientele, this cool taste of the Caribbean can make for a very hot date.

Cool Loo

Divert yourself with a trip to the WC

Sampan *Asian* 21 21 19 \$39

Washington Square West | 124 S. 13th St. (bet. Sansom & Walnut Sts.) | 215-732-3501 | www.sampanphilly.com

"Inventive" Pan-Asian tapas are served in a "mod" setting complete with "loud" rock soundtrack and a "color-changing" illuminated "forest on the walls" at this "date" scene from Michael Schulson (AC's Izakaya; ex Pod), which many laud as an "impressive" addition to Wash West, though a few hope it becomes more "consistent" and the staff will "drop the velvet rope attitudes"; at the indoor and outdoor bars, you can choose from a selection of sake or "funky fresh cocktails"—just "beware the scorpion bowl."

Where the Servers Are Hot

Ogle and flirt; or, how to be so inappropriate that you get the kiss-off yourself

Continental Mid-town *Eclectic* 22 23 20 \$36

Rittenhouse | 1801 Chestnut St. (18th St.) | 215-567-1800 | www.continentalmidtown.com

It's a veritable "grown-up Barbie dream" at Stephen Starr's "ultracool" Rittenhouse Square Eclectic "diner-cum-nightclub", where fans dig the "enormous range" of menu choices and wash them down with "girly drinks", all served "with a smile"; the "swinging" "birdcage" chairs on the balcony add to the "funky", "retro" vibe (just "wear earplugs"), and "young, hip" folk and the "girls'-night-out" crowd can also be seen getting "kicky" on the "rooftop deck."

Valanni *Mediterranean* 24 21 21 \$44

Washington Square West | 1229 Spruce St. (bet. 12th & 13th Sts.) | 215-790-9494 | www.valanni.com

"Youth and hormones abound" in the "eclectic mix of Philadelphians" that flocks to this "sleek" Wash West Med for some "elegantly plated" "culinary magic" that "won't blow your budget", served in surroundings, including a "boisterous" bar, that are at the "top end" of the scale since an expansion/renovation; "attentive" service comes from "stylish and beautiful" servers who could be "wannabe models" as they sling "buttery" "lobster mac 'n' cheese" and other "interesting dishes."

Multiple Entrance/Exit

So you can excuse yourself for a moment and never come back

Table 31 *Italian* 21 21 19 \$58

Logan Square | Comcast Ctr. | 1701 JFK Blvd. (17th St.) | 215-567-7111 | www.table-31.com

Surveyors say Chris Scarduzio's "sleek" Italian at the Comcast Center is "finally settling into a niche" with "solid" cooking, a "bargain" bar menu augmented by a "delectable wine selection" and a "quiet", "urbane" "elegance" that "makes you feel special"; the "outdoor cafe" on the "plaza" "offers" an "unparalleled alfresco" experience for weekday lunch, and while many praise the "accommodating" staff, a few find service "hard to come by."

Meat-Market Atmosphere

Set your mind to it and find a replacement before you head home

City Tap House *American* - - - M

University City | Radian | 3925 Walnut St., 2nd level (40th St.) | 215-662-0105 | www.citytaphouse.com

With 60 arcane and accessible beers on tap, plus refined New American gastropub fare from Al Paris's now-closed Mantra—everything from pizzas to suckling pig—this newcomer located in University City's Radian is hopping with college students and staff; the sprawling, ski lodge-like environs include five fire pits on a balcony overlooking Walnut Street, making for a convivial nighttime destination.

Plough & the Stars *Pub Food* 20 21 21 \$33

Old City | 123 Chestnut St. (2nd St.) | 215-733-0300 | www.ploughstars.com

The bartenders at this "customer-focused" Irish pub in Old City pull the "best Guinness this side of the Atlantic" while the "reliable kitchen" puts out "hearty" grub; "impromptu" Sunday night "live music performances" generate a "touch of fun", and the fireplace in the main room of the high-ceilinged former bank creates a "cozy" vibe on a "cold winter's night."

When it comes to dumping, make distractions work for you. Between the loud music and bright lights, your date won't know what hit 'em.

Three words: multiple exit option. Just in case you need to cut and run after you cut 'em loose.

New & Notable Openings

Because you're on top of what's hot

Dandelion, The *British* - - - M
Rittenhouse | 122-124 S. 18th St. (Sansom St.) | 215-558-2500 | www.thedandelionpub.com

Stephen Starr's interpretation of a British pub plays out at this sprawling, double storefront near Rittenhouse Square, where a series of homey, curio-filled dining rooms hosts a full bill of contemporary fare from a genuine English chef (Robert Aikens); even the beer list, served at the upstairs-downstairs bars, is exclusively from the U.K.

Opa  *Greek* - - - M
Washington Square West | 1311 Sansom St. (13th St.) | 215-545-0170 | www.opaphiladelphia.com

At this sultry Greek resto-lounge in bustling Wash West, the mid-priced menu mixes small and large plates of updated taverna staples—think souvlaki, gyros and tourlou; the bar list brims with exotic cocktails, as well as Greek wines and beers.

Talula's Garden *American* - - - E
Washington Square West | 210 W. Washington Sq. (Walnut St.) | 215-592-7787 | www.talulasgarden.com


Aimee Olexy has brought the folksy aesthetic of her Talula's Table into Washington Square West with this indoor-outdoor garden paradise created in partnership with Stephen Starr; the words of Alice Waters literally hang over the dining rooms, which brim with reclaimed materials, and the guiding principles include seasonal American fare and an outstanding cheese selection.

Great Food, Not Widely Known

Call a good dinner what it really is: foreplay

Bistro 7  *American* 24 17 23 \$42
Old City | 7 N. Third St. (Market St.) | 215-931-1560 | www.bistro7restaurant.com

"Fresh", "local" ingredients go into the "sublime", "well-prepared" New American fare at Michael O'Halloran's "contemporary" BYO in Old City; though some grouse that the "decor is limited by the small size" of the "casual" "storefront", "uber-friendly" service and \$35 tasting menus that are a "steal" more than "compensate", which is why many vow to "return again and again."

Melograno  *Italian* 24 18 21 \$41
Rittenhouse | 2012 Sansom St. (20th St.) | 215-875-8116 | www.melogranorestaurant.com

Like "Tuscany without paying the airfare" is how loyalists describe this "bustling" mom-and-pop "oasis" near Rittenhouse, "arguably the best Italian BYO" in town according to admirers who "love watching" Gianluca Demontis "do his magic" in the "open kitchen", creating especially "delicious" specials; the staff makes you "feel at home" in the "new larger quarters", but even with the added capacity, many wail "come on—no reservations?"

"Let's Meet for a Drink"

Date-speak: "In case I want to make this short and sweet"

Cuba Libre *Cuban* 22 24 21 \$43
Old City | 10 S. Second St. (Market St.) | 215-627-0666 | www.cubalibrerestaurant.com

"Awesome" Latin food comes with a "creative twist" and the "legendary" mojitos can make you "forget where you are" at this "vibrant", "upscale" Old City Cuban, where "terrific" decor complete with "lush plantings" conjures up the "cool vibes" of "pre-Castro" "Havana"; this "mini-vacation" can be "loud but never out of control", the service is "congenial" and "salsa dancing" will help "work off dinner."

Kraftwork *American* - - - 1
Fishtown | 541 E. Girard Ave. (Montgomery Ave.) | 215-739-1700 | www.kraftworkbar.com

Artist-quality metalwork and woodwork fill this Fishtown American gastropub, a sibling of G-Ho's Sidecar, providing a workmanlike atmosphere to enjoy the 24 brews on tap (a 25th is available to-go in growlers), all presented alongside the budget-friendly, beer-focused fare.

Game-Playing (The Good Kind)

Lessen early-dating awkwardness with built-in activity

Frankford Hall *American/German* - - - 1
Fishtown | 1210 Frankford Ave. (Girard Ave.) | 215-634-3338 | www.starr-restaurant.com

Stephen Starr gets his oompah on at this German-style beer garden in Fishtown, serving the younger set in an old industrial building that opens into a gravel-covered outdoor courtyard; three bars assure little waiting and many Teutonic treats, and the menu is the best of the worst.

If you want a fairy-tale ending, then proposition your date somewhere storybook worthy.

Ladies, guys think it's sexy to enjoy a pint so ditch the martini and down a microbrew instead.



Steve Ward is BACK!

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