

Searching for the Soul of the City
Great Marriage Proposals Psyching Out the Justices

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Very Best Restaurants

The Finest Dining in DC, Maryland, and Virginia

Romantic Dinners for Two

20 Restaurants to Watch

\$2.95




Poached Pear in Pastry
With Spun Sugar and
Cranberry Compote
at Todd Gray's Equinox

Blue Point Grill

ALEXANDRIA

THE PERFECT DINNER FOR TWO requires a place with sophistication and charm, relatively light appetizers and main courses, and a killer dessert. There's no better combination of these essentials than at Blue Point Grill in Alexandria. In the evening, the candlelit atmosphere makes the bustle outside seem far away.

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Appetizer Chef Duane Keller's lobster hand rolls are a delicious play on a type of sushi called *temaki*.



Wine Chef Keller recommends a 1999 Chardonnay from Cakebread Cellars.



Dessert Go all out with Blue Point's sensational molten chocolate cake served with a scoop of ice cream.

Entrée A mixed grill of shrimp, scallops, and tuna is a light but flavorful and satisfying main course.

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In less than a month, the restaurant was averaging 450 customers a day. At a time when French cuisine is making a comeback in Washington, Bistrot du Coin, planned as a neighborhood dining spot and an after-work bar, is doing the sort of numbers that qualify it as one of the hottest restaurants of the year.

The formula for Bistrot du Coin's success is a mixture of complementary ingredients: Verdon has designed an affectionate evocation of a classic, down-at-the-heels Paris bistro—places such as A Sousceyrac and Josephine (Chez Damonet) come to mind—with a splendid bar whose zinc top was custom-cast in Paris, time-scarred chairs of different shapes, and mismatched cutlery whose provenance varies from cafeteria to the dining room of a once-fine hotel. Add the reliable, comforting cooking of Felix's kitchen: a warm salad of grilled leeks covered with slices of smoked duck; Cailletes de la Drome, a rustic pâté from the chef's native Provence; a wonderful, surprisingly light dish of tripe stewed with tomatoes; a classic *blanquette de veau*; a lush casserole of rabbit, smoky mushrooms, and spaetzle, all half submerged in cream; and a crumb-crustéd cassoulet as good as the best in town.

Sit into this mixture atmospheric touches—the well-tailored single gentleman wearing James Joyce glasses, leisurely reading *Le Monde* over a glass of house Beaujolais; the well-known British journalist perusing a book while picking at a salad accompanied by a glass of whisky—plus the occasional sight of Michel Verdon standing on the balcony and regaling the late-dinner crowd with the French national anthem and vigorously waving the Tricolor.

Bistrot du Coin, 1738 Connecticut Ave., NW; 202-234-6969. Service throughout the day Tuesday through Sunday. Wheelchair accessible.

BISTROT LEPIC

★★ Georgetown; Moderate

AS BISTROT LEPIC APPROACHES ITS fifth anniversary, it is reassuring to report that chef/owner Bruno Fortin's 50-seat storefront dining room retains all the luster it had when it opened: The varnished hardwood floor looks as though its coat of epoxy has just dried, the walls have the sunny brightness of freshly applied paint, and the graphics that accent them have the aura of paintings on the first day of a gallery opening.

A glance around the dining room tells you that Bistrot Lépïc is "owned" by the residents of its upper-Georgetown neighborhood, tweedy gentlemen and ladies, most of whom need not walk more than four blocks from their homes. Newcomers may wonder at the sight of such entrées as veal kidneys with mustard sauce or crusty boneless pig's feet with onion sauce, but the neighborhood

regulars order them as nostalgic reminders of an old-fashioned sort of French cuisine that all but vanished with the closings of Rive Gauche, Jean-Pierre, and Le Lion d'Or.

Newcomers who reserve a table at Bistrot Lépïc need only order Bruno Fortin's onion tart; such main courses as tender braised veal cheeks on fresh pasta, a robust cassoulet presented in an earthenware casserole, and a daily special of perfectly cooked flounder served on a bed of leeks; and a dessert of Fortin's rich chocolate tart to understand the enduring success of Bistrot Lépïc.

Bistrot Lépïc, 1736 Wisconsin Ave., NW; 202-333-0111. Open Tuesday through Sunday for lunch and dinner. Wheelchair accessible.

BLACK'S BAR & KITCHEN

★ Bethesda; Expensive

JEFF BLACK, THE CREATIVE CHIEF WHO opened the award-winning Addie's a few years ago, has turned his talents to a larger space in the center of Bethesda. Taking over the space formerly occupied by the Gulf Coast Kitchen, he has retained the theme. The dining area features lots of rough wood, and wall hangings include a mélange of old fishing photos and mounted fish. A glass wall separates the dining room from the long and active bar. Most of the menu focuses on seafood, but it includes a number of meat entrées, most grilled.

Oysters are a fine way to begin—on the half shell, broiled with garlic butter, Pannesan cheese, and thyme, or encrusted with cornmeal and fried. Also good are the steamed Prince Edward Island mussels and the shrimp cassoulet, made with Gulf shrimp and duck sausage in a saffron broth with thyme and tomatoes. For the main event try the Vermillion Bay seafood stew, a large soup plate full of shellfish, snapper, salmon, squid, duck sausage, a fine broth, and aioli-covered toast. Or maybe the coriander-crustéd grilled salmon over beet couscous, wilted spinach, fried butternut crisps, and a butternut-squash-lime sauce. The lunch menu includes a good oyster stew with spinach, mushrooms, artichoke slices, and pieces of bacon.

Black's Bar & Kitchen, 7750 Woodmont Ave., Bethesda; 301-652-6278. Open for lunch Monday through Friday, dinner daily. Wheelchair accessible.

BLUE POINT GRILL

★★★ Alexandria; Expensive

AT BLUE POINT, WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE? Its casually elegant dining room of gleaming dark wood and lavish florals hums with energy. The raw bar glistens. On sultry days, the most inviting of verandas makes a welcome retreat. Here is an ideal spot to share a platter of chilled clams, shrimp, oysters, and, for a few dollars more, half a lobster—shades of La Coupole in Paris.

If it's complexity you crave, you'll find it in details like artichoke-olive purée, an addictive freebie that accompanies the bread, as well as in such creations as sea bass Margherita jazzed up with black beans, tomato-corn relish, and cilantro crème fraîche. Elsewhere the combination might play like wretched excess, but in the hands of chef Duane Keller, it is sublime. A handful of entrées can be had in what the restaurant refers to as "tapas" portions, generous enough for many appetites to call dinner. Besides innovative fish fare like Thai shellfish stew and macadamia-coconut shrimp, there's a juicy New York strip steak glammed up with bourbon barbecue sauce and a gorgeous Gorgonzola-potato-stuffed Vidalia onion. Save room for dessert. The molten chocolate cake is a dream.

Blue Point Grill, 600 Franklin St., Alexandria; 703-739-0404. Open for lunch and dinner daily. Wheelchair accessible.

BOBBY VAN'S STEAKHOUSE

★★★ Downtown DC; Expensive

HERE'S THE WAY TO TELL THE difference between a Washington foodie and his New York counterpart: A Washington foodie complains when a new steakhouse opens that we already have too many of them, while a Manhattan foodie simply casts another vote for Peter Luger's Brooklyn steakhouse as one of the top ten restaurants in the New York edition of the Zagat Guide. The New Yorker, who lives in the nation's best dining city, understands that a perfectly aged, top-prime steak is as much a delicacy as the most complex dish that springs from the imagination of a French, Italian, or American chef.

Judged by its porterhouse, New York import Bobby Van's shakes up the hierarchy of local steakhouses. Following the practice of Peter Luger, Bobby Van's dry-ages its top-prime porterhouse for six weeks. The result is an exquisitely tender steak with a richly beefy, "nutty" flavor that can be achieved only by dry aging. It is as close as you can get to enjoying a Peter Luger steak without taking the shuttle to New York.

Peter Luger has maintained its reputation by offering porterhouse steak as its sole main course. Regulars at Bobby Van's who can resist the porterhouse can vary their diets with the likes of outstanding braised short ribs of beef, a splendid braised lamb shank, or a simple but delicious dish of lemon-pepper shrimp, which is offered in both appetizer and main-course portions. But once you've tasted the porterhouse steak, you probably won't find yourself ordering anything else.

Bobby Van's Steakhouse, 809 15th St., NW; 202-589-0060. Open Monday through Friday for lunch and dinner, Saturday and Sunday for dinner, "until the last customer leaves." Wheelchair accessible.



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