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Destinations & Diversions

Food & wine

Capitalize on this creative D.C. cuisine

Depth, greatness
mark dining scene

By Jerry Shriver
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The political shenanigans in this fair city can be stomach-turning at times, but don't let them cloud your assessment of the nation's capital as a dining destination.

The city always has had a few great restaurants, but today the top-tier is more populated than ever, thanks to standouts such as CityZen, Maestro, Michel Richard Citronelle (he's opening a second restaurant called Central) and José Andrés' various places. More important, the dining scene has acquired depth, as the already impressive collection of ethnic and American regional restaurants got stronger over the past 18 months with the arrival of Rasika, Blue Duck Tavern, Acadiana and the revamped Komi. And the mainstream continues to bulge with the openings of offshoots from two New York restaurants, Laurent Tourondel's BLT Steak and the trattoria Il Mulino.

Freshman politicians setting up shop in Congress next month would do well to check out some of these restaurants — on their own dime, of course (prices reflect the range of lunch and dinner entrees).

P.S. 7's

The "P.S." in this charming but awkwardly named eatery is Peter Smith, who began his cooking career at age 14 and became known for turning out modern Southern dishes during a long stint at the still-vibrant Vidalia. Smith has just opened his own handsomely designed space in the Penn Quarter neighborhood. It includes a separate bar area with its own menu (the chips are made from deep-fried veal cheeks) and quirky cocktail list (the Isobel is Cognac mixed with tonka-bean-and-coconut cream soda). Though there are a few Southern touches on the menu — a "Hot Brown" sandwich, fried oysters and fried chicken salad — Smith is cooking in a more eclectic style that's dependent upon fresh ingredients from the region, unusual pairings (candied beets with chocolate mousse) and variations on themes ("trio of veal," "lobster dégustation").

Entrees: \$12.50-\$23
► 777 I St., N.W. 202-742-8550;
ps7restaurant.com

◀ CityZen

It should be everyone's civic duty to indulge in the thrilling modern American fare that Eric Ziebold is creating at year-old CityZen, if only to honor the perfect pun in the name. For eight years Ziebold worked for masterful chef Thomas Keller at the French Laundry in Napa Valley before opening this ultra-sophisticated space on the Potomac waterfront. Like Keller, Ziebold has developed a personal style that's grounded in classic French technique and seasoned with dollops of whimsy (ethereal Parker House mini-rolls are served in a box with a lid, probably to keep them from floating away). Pork seems to inspire a creative streak in the kitchen: A clever pairing of shoit saddle and shoulder in a savory jus highlighted a recent meal, and the current menu includes braised pig's head with Gewurztraminer stewed cabbage and a poached quail egg. Heady touches pop up all over — one of the suggested beverage pairings was three small samples of microbrewed beers, and a touch of Scotch whisky finds its way into the cream that accompanies the butterscotch pudding. The wine service is especially savvy and friendly, and there are enough affordable bottles and cut-above-by-the-glass offerings that you don't have to break the bank to be sated.

Entrees: Fixed-price menus \$75-\$90
► 1330 Maryland Ave., S.W.
(in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel)
202-787-6006; cityzenrestaurant.com