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Venture Forth from Lamorinda for an Adventurous Culinary Tour

By Fran Endicott



Grilled avocado Photos Fran Endicott

We are lucky to live in one of the most food-centric places in the nation. Our seaside proximity delivers us the freshest fish. The artisanal farms and dairies of West Marin provide us with impossibly delicious cheeses and meats. And the innovations and influence of Silicon Valley seem to have rubbed off on many of the area's top chefs.

In the past couple of years that I've been covering local restaurants, I've encountered several dishes and drinks that elicit oohs and aahs and closed-eye, heavy sigh satisfaction. And thus, I've compiled my first ever "best list" - here below, in no particular order. To experience some of these noteworthy items might require stepping out of a comfort zone, but I guarantee, each bite or sip will be worth it.

Best start to a meal: Philipponnat Reserve Brut Rose, Nico, San Francisco (Pacific Heights).

Each night, the Nico staff open a magnum of this gorgeous pink elixir; a civilized start to any meal.

Best beer selection: Sessions at the Presidio, San Francisco (Presidio). More than 100 selections with varying alcohol counts, under categories such as 'fun,' 'exciting,' 'classic,' 'crisp,' and 'big.'

Best Bloody Mary: The Ritz Carlton, San Francisco (Nob Hill). The Ritz's decadent Second Sunday Brunch features a mix-it-yourself Bloody Mary bar with a choice of mixers and garnishes including bacon, cucumber, celery, green beans, olives, or lemon slices.

Best cocktail for a cause: Bluestem Smash, Bluestem Brasserie, San Francisco (SOMA). During happy hour, \$1 from each order of the bar's namesake drink - a refreshing blend of St. Germain, vodka or whiskey, muddled seasonal fruit, mint, lime and sparkling wine - is donated to UCSF cancer research.

Best margarita: The Copita Margarita at Copita y Comida, Sausalito. Made with 100% agave blanco tequila, agave nectar, and fresh lime juice, it's shaken at the table and poured over a singular large ice cube. One is likely not enough.

Best martini: Top of the Mark, Mark Hopkins Hotel, San Francisco (Nob Hill). It's not that their version is particularly superior; it's the view. Nowhere else can you experience this skyline vista while deciding if you want yours shaken or stirred.

Best namesake cocktail: The Steph Curry, Dosa, San Francisco (Fillmore District). Inspired by the energy and fortitude of the NBA all-star and made with Four Roses Single Barrel Bourbon, curried nectar, spiced agave, lime juice and Tempranillo.

Best low-octane cocktails: Myriad Gastro Pub, San Francisco (Mission District). You won't miss the hard stuff in Myriad's cleverly named cocktails made with creative, low alcohol ingredients.

Best use of avocado: Grilled avocado, Bird Dog, Palo Alto. One perfect avocado, peeled, sliced in half, and warmed on the grill, served with ponzu and wasabi. So uncomplicated and so good.

Best appetizer: The 'breaking bread' course at Haven, Oakland changes daily. An example: basket of homemade breads and crackers, olive oil drenched burrata, chicken liver mousse, charred scallion hummus, Monterey squid, and Oregon Dungeness crab fritter.

Best pate: Duck Liver Mousse, Hillside Supper Club, San Francisco (Bernal Heights). Incredibly luscious and creamy and served in a small canning jar with a huckleberry gelee glaze.

Best side dish: Carciofo, Poggio Trattoria, Sausalito. Smoky and tender grilled artichoke with lemon vinaigrette and basil pesto aioli.

Best fish dish: Ora King Salmon, Little Gem, San Francisco (Hayes Valley). A large, perfect piece on a bed of quinoa with almonds and Kalamata olives. Simple yet so flavorful.

Best chicken dish: Roasted Mary's Chicken at Delfina, San Francisco (Mission District). This succulent, salt-brined breast and leg served with King Trumpet mushrooms and olive oil mashed potatoes is the definition of soul-satisfying.

Best Swedish meat balls: Kottbullar at Volta, San Francisco (SOMA). If your definition of Swedish meatballs is derived from those at a certain retailer of ready-to-assemble furniture, try Volta's version - small spheres of beef/pork/veal served with potato puree, cream sauce, and fresh lingonberry.

Best pizza: Boot and Shoe Service, Oakland. Perfect fire blistered crust topped with fresh, seasonal ingredients.

Best ramen: Any of the choices at Shibu Ramen, Emeryville Public Market, Emeryville. Light or creamy broth with varied ingredients such as bean sprouts, soft-boiled egg, pork chashu, bamboo shoots, green onions, microgreens, grilled kabocha squash, corn and green onions.

Best steaks: Alfred's steakhouse, San Francisco (FiDi). California grass-fed beef, dry-aged and mesquite grilled to order. Choose from Filet Mignon, Ribeye, Porterhouse, or New York cuts.

Best vegetarian dish: Carrot and Red Quinoa Salad, The Keystone, San Francisco (SOMA). Served with cashew cheese, serrano chili, crispy ancient grain and berbere spiced citronette. So delicious that the meats will not be missed.

Best Eggs Benedict: Eggs Benedict 'Carbonara,' Locanda, San Francisco (Mission District). Two perfectly poached eggs and crispy prosciutto cotto on Locanda's signature pizza bianca (a light focaccia), smothered in a light hollandaise 'cacio e pepe.'

Best dessert display: Sunday Q Brunch Club, Quattro Restaurant, Four Seasons Hotel Silicon Valley at East Palo Alto. A dizzying array of all-you-can-eat house-baked pastries including pumpkin cake, peanut butter cake, raspberry chocolate brownies, tiramisu, maple pot de crème, and homemade cookies.



Margarita



Ramen

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