TASTY TOWN

ITHACA EMERGES AS A CULINARY MECCA



ITHACA/TOMPKINS COUNTY CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

vante Myrick '09 has a beer named after him—which seems fitting for a mayor whose city is increasingly renowned for its food and beverage scene. It's called Svante's Legislative Session IPA, and it's on tap at Bandwagon Brewpub, a North Cayuga Street eatery that not only makes beer but cures its own bacon and sources more than a third of its ingredients from local producers. "The dining scene here is almost too good to be true," says Myrick, sitting in his City Hall office just steps from a veritable United Nations of culinary options both casual and fancy, from Mexican to Italian to Asian to Middle

Eastern to a new Ethiopian joint. "You can't throw a stone in this town without hitting a world-class restaurant—no exaggeration."

So, Mister Mayor, what's the official word: Is the local culinary sector on the rise? "My waistline thinks so," Myrick says with a laugh. "If that expansion matches the expansion in our restaurant scene, then we're doing about fifteen pounds better."

In many ways, it's been a tough couple of years for downtown Ithaca. A massive renovation of the Commons has been ongoing since spring 2013, turning the city's once-lively pedestrian mall into a dusty, fenced-off construction zone for a full year longer than planned. A dreadful winter kept shoppers away. And most tragically, a tractor-trailer crash last summer not only took the life of a pregnant woman but partially destroyed a local landmark: Simeon's restaurant, a fixture at the east end of the





SUZANNE FINE REGIONAL CUISIN

Commons for decades.

But things are looking up. The \$15 million Commons renovation—which Myrick calls "the most complicated public works project the city has ever attempted"—is set to be completed at the end of July. The owners of Simeon's have filed rebuilding plans, and the restaurant could reopen this fall or winter. And spring has finally come to Ithaca, a seasonal change heralded downtown by the first intrepid diners filling the outdoor tables on Aurora Street's Restaurant Row.

ven during the grim days of winter, the city's dining scene remained a bright spot in the local economy. On any given weekend, Ithaca's bars and restaurants are hopping—from familiar venues like the popular tapas bar Just a Taste and the vegetarian mecca Moosewood to newer venues including the French bistro Le Café Cent-Dix and Coltivare, an upscale farm-to-table spot that doubles as a vocational training facility for the local community college. "For Upstate New Yorkespecially for rural Upstate New York—there's nothing even close to it," Bruce Stoff, director of the Ithaca/Tompkins County Convention & Visitors Bureau, says of the area's dining options, which his agency chronicles at ithacafork.com. "I don't know what city near us even compares for the quality and variety of food. It's somewhere between unusual and unprecedented." Hotel school lecturer Cheryl Stanley '00, who has traveled far and wide, says: "Whatever you want in terms of food and beverage, Ithaca has it."

In a 2008 travel piece, the *New York Times* called Ithaca "a liberal, cultural, and gastronomic oasis." And in fact, Stoff says, the downtown dining and shopping scene is the third leading draw for out-of-town visitors, after Cornell and natural areas like waterfalls and gorges. "The food here is getting better and better," says veteran local chef Dave D'Aprix, who teaches popular Cornell's Adult University cooking classes—



FELICIA'S ATOMIC LOUNGE

including one on food truck cuisine that's set for this summer. "It's a whole different animal than when I arrived in 1980." In mid-April, the Daily Meal website put Ithaca at number six on its list of America's top twenty college towns for dining.

Just as culinary options have expanded—echoing a national trend that has seen the rise of the Food Network, "Top Chef," and more—so has the beverage scene. Craft cocktails are *de*

rigueur at many restaurants and bars, with spots like Felicia's Atomic Lounge (located on a stretch of West State Street that's fast becoming a second Restaurant Row) even using libations to showcase local produce. "People care what they're putting behind the bar and on the wine list, which is very exciting,"

'Whatever you want in terms of food and beverage, Ithaca has it.'

- Cheryl Stanley '00

says Stanley, a beverage expert who teaches Intro to Wines. "It's not just, 'Let's throw together some wines.' It's, 'Let's think about what's on the list, how the wines pair with the food being served."

Unsurprisingly—given that Cornell has a world-class hotel school—numerous players in the local food and beverage world are alumni who returned to town or never left. They include Hotelies Greg Norkus '77, MS '87, and his son Lindsey Norkus '05, who operate Le Café Cent-Dix and the upscale Italian restaurant Mercato, both located on Restaurant Row. "During the summer months, it's packed," Greg says of the scene on Aurora Street. "It's like going to the Magic Kingdom in Orlando. There are people everywhere, overflowing the sidewalk. It's really quite a sight."

Why does Ithaca have such a vibrant food scene? In a word: Cornell. Students, professors, and staff comprise a critical mass of people with broad and refined palates—and the disposable income to keep restaurants in business. "The scale of Cornell, and the international draw of the institution, make for a very worldly audience of diners here," says Stoff, "and they demand great food."

TO BILL OF FARE TO

A GASTRONOMIC TOUR, FOR EVERY TASTE AND BUDGET

For alumni coming back for Commencement, Reunion, or just a vacation, CAM offers a dining guide, featuring some four dozen local and staff favorites.

What's New

Bar Argos \$\$

The Argos Inn is a boutique hotel located directly across the street from CAM's offices on East State Street, and our staff got a bird's-eye view of its stem-to-stern renovation a couple of years ago. Its handsome bar has become a favorite with locals, offering live music and creative cocktails. argosinn.com

Ithaca Beer Co. \$\$

Long a favorite of hops aficionados, this beverage mecca off Route 13 recently renovated to add a taproom with a full menu, dining area, and outdoor patio. Some of the fare, like cheddar ale soup, incorporates the house brews. ithacabeer.com



Le Café Cent-Dix \$\$\$

Styled as a classic French bistro, this addition to Aurora Street's Restaurant Row is the latest effort from Mercato proprietors Lindsey Norkus '05 and Greg Norkus '77, MS '87; their chef de cuisine is Kevin Curley '13. It features typical dishes like steak frites and frisée salad with lardons, as well as rotating plats du jour. lecafecentdix.com



Coltivare \$\$\$

One of the newest arrivals to the downtown dining scene is an interesting hybrid: a farm-to-table restaurant married to a vocational training facility. Run by Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3), Coltivare boasts a seasonal menu as well as a bar popular with the after-work crowd.

coltivareithaca.com

Gola Osteria \$\$\$

Located in the historic Quarry Arms building off East State Street, Gola Osteria offers a modern take on Italian cuisine, featuring imported ingredients as well as fare from local farms and wineries. Its chef formerly worked at Babbo, Mario Batali's Michelin-starred restaurant in Greenwich Village. golaosteria.com





Cornellian Favorites

Collegetown Bagels & Ithaca Bakery \$

In addition to the College Avenue location, this local mainstay has outposts downtown, on Route 13, at Triphammer Marketplace, and in East Hill Plaza. While it offers a wide variety of baked goods, prepared foods, and other fare, the centerpiece of its menu is a huge roster of tasty, creatively named sandwiches for both vegetarians and omnivores alike. collegetownbagels.com

Purity Ice Cream \$

While Ithaca's Ben & Jerry's store didn't survive, this local favorite has been around since 1936. Recently renovated, it boasts dozens of flavors, including originals such as Finger Lakes Tourist (chocolate with chocolate chunks and hazelnuts), Sleepers Awake (coffee with chocolate swirl and chunks), and Bulldog Crunch (praline with caramel swirl and chocolate-covered pecans). purityicecream.com



PROVIDED

Shortstop Deli \$

This downtown sandwich stalwart, where diners turn in their custom orders by checking boxes on preprinted slips, is open 24/7/365. The owners purchased the Hot Truck from its founder, and its beloved PMPs (Poor Man's Pizzas) are now part of the menu. **shortstopdeli.com**

The State Diner \$

Following the recent closing of Manos on Route 13, this downtown favorite stands as the last of Ithaca's old-school diners. Founded in 1936, it (naturally) serves breakfast all day, and its hearty fare (like fries with cheese *and* gravy) has been sustaining Cornellians for generations.

thestatediner.com

Glenwood Pines \$\$

With a prime location overlooking the western shore of Cayuga Lake, this unpretentious roadhouse has attracted generations of Cornellians craving what local surveys routinely name the best burger in town: the famed Pinesburger. glenwoodpines.com



PROVIDE

Moosewood \$\$

The Dewitt Mall's venerable vegetarian mecca—which has won three James Beard awards for its restaurant and cookbooks—is still going strong after more than forty years. A go-to spot for both tourists and locals, it features a changing menu of creative-but-comforting vegetarian fare, plus some fish entrees. Over the years, the collective that runs it has included numerous Cornellians. moosewoodcooks.com

The Nines \$\$

They're still sending pizzas down the dumbwaiter from the second-floor kitchen at this deep dish diehard, located next to Collegetown's Firehouse Number Nine. If you're in the mood for a slice—a quarter of a deep-dish pie—you can pick one up for around \$4, plus toppings.

theninesithacany.com

Rulloff's \$\$

Newly reopened, this College Avenue fixture—established in 1977 and named after a notorious nineteenth-century murderer—is now under the management of the owners of the Collegetown Bagels empire. In addition to lunch and dinner, it hosts weekend brunch and a late-night menu. rulloffs.com

Souvlaki House \$\$

Greek and Italian fare are served up in this popular, unpretentious spot on Eddy Street. Highlights include pizza, Greek salad, and Parmigiana dishes such as eggplant, chicken, and meatball. (No website, but the menu is viewable on sites like **grubhub.com**)

Taverna Banfi \$\$\$

Featuring a Tuscan-inspired menu, the Statler Hotel's restaurant has been feeding Cornellians (and their visiting parents) for many years. The lavish lunch buffet is particularly popular with faculty, staff, and visitors. **tavernabanfi.com**

LOCALWIKI.ORG/ITHACA



Upscale

The Antlers \$\$\$

Established in 1982 by Bill Openshaw '70 and Toby McDonald '71, the Antlers calls itself the oldest restaurant in Ithaca to boast sole proprietorship. Located on Route 366, it has a homey décor and a heavily carnivorous menu with specials on prime rib, lobster, and more. antlersrestaurant.com

Fine Line Bistro \$\$\$

With its owners stepping down to spend more time with family, Fine Line Bistro is for sale, and its future may be in doubt. That would be a blow to its many fans, who laud the West State Street eatery as one of Ithaca's most consistently satisfying spots for interesting American fare. finelinebistro.com

Mercato Bar & Kitchen \$\$\$

Run by the same team as Le Café Cent-Dix, this Aurora Street spot specializes in what it calls "Italianinspired, seasonally conscious cuisine." Like its more casual cousin, it also features a welcoming bar with a sophisticated cocktail menu. mercatobarandkitchen.com



ZaZa's Cucina \$\$\$

Northern Italian cuisine is on the menu at this downtown spot—located in what alumni of a certain era might remember as the Video Ithaca building on Route 13-which features fresh pasta like spaghetti, ravioli, and gnocchi. The owner, who also runs Mia, formerly operated the nowdeparted Thai Cuisine and founded the still-popular Just a Taste and Madeline's, which he later sold. zazascucina.com

The Heights Restaurant and H Bar \$\$\$\$

This elegant spot, located at Community Corners in Cayuga Heights, is popular with the professorial crowd. It has a seasonal menu of Mediterraneaninspired American cuisine and a wine list running to more than 400 selections. To enjoy the ambience in more modest fashion, try the bar menu. (Hint: if you order coffee, it comes with such tasty accompaniments as whipped cream, rock candy, and chocolate chips.) theheightsithaca.com

John Thomas Steakhouse \$\$\$\$

This classic steakhouse on South Hill features hand-turned, dry-aged beef. Popular for special occasions like Commencement and for entertaining visiting dignitaries, it offers typical accompaniments like creamed spinach, clams casino, and Caesar salad alongside its prime cuts.

johnthomassteakhouse.com







Moderate

Agava \$\$ 🛦

Located next to East Hill Plaza, this Southwest-inspired spot is named for the cactus that tequila comes from. A wood-fired oven produces a variety of flatbreads, and condiments like salsa, ketchup, and hot sauce are housemade. The cocktail menu features novel takes on such standards as mojitos and margaritas.

agavarestaurant.com

Carriage House Café \$\$

With brunch served six days a week, this Stewart Avenue spot is popular with the University crowd. Look for creative takes on standards like French toast (theirs is stuffed with brie), breakfast sandwiches (the "sconewich"), and the BLT (they use cured salmon instead of bacon). Voted best brunch in the *Daily Sun* and *Ithaca Times*. carriagehousecafe.com

Ciao! \$\$

A wood-fired oven produces the pies that, the owners boast, earned a spot on an industry magazine's list of the top 100 independently owned pizzerias in the U.S. Located in Lansing next to the Ithaca Mall, the restaurant —which also serves pastas, salads, and a variety of entrées—draws overflow crowds, especially on the weekend. ciaoithaca.com

Istanbul Turkish Kitchen \$\$

The Turkish cuisine makes up for the less-than-ideal location, in a tiny, isolated shopping plaza next to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Offerings include a variety of meat kebabs and vegetarian dishes like chopped salad and stuffed grape leaves. istanbulithaca.com

Just a Taste \$\$

Another stalwart of Restaurant Row, this wine and tapas bar is always hopping. While the menu changes frequently, perennial favorites include focaccia with roasted garlic, fried potato wedges with chipotle aioli, and housemade sausages. just-a-taste.com





PROVIDE

Maxie's Supper Club & Oyster Bar \$\$

New Orleans-style cuisine is on the menu at this festive spot, located on Ithaca's west side. There are raw bar specials during happy hour, frequent live music, a late-night menu, and Cajun standards like jambalaya, gumbo, po-boys, and shrimp 'n' grits. maxies.com

PROVIDED



Mia Tapas Bar & Restaurant \$\$

This pan-Asian spot on the Ithaca Commons features the cuisines of Thailand, India, Vietnam, China, Japan, and more. The bar offers exotic twists on classic drinks, like a Monsoon Margarita and Thai Basil Negroni. miaithaca.com

Northstar \$\$

Located in the Fall Creek neighborhood downtown (next to the former location of Fall Creek Pictures), Northstar offers novel twists on pub-style fare, like kimchee poutine, smoked organic chicken wings, and a vegetarian reuben. Many ingredients are sourced from New York State. northstarpub.com

Sumo \$\$

Guests can opt for hibachi—complete with the traditional showmanship—or the regular dining room at this dependable Japanese option, in a shopping plaza across from the Ithaca Mall. A wide variety of sushi rolls are on the menu, including more unusual ones like oyster tempura and avocado with honey-roasted peanuts.

ithacasumo.com

Casual

Ithaca Ale House \$\$

Twenty craft beers are on tap at this Restaurant Row grill, beloved for its burgers plus hearty fare like wings, fries, and nachos. Lighter options include a variety of salads, and menu items come with suggested beverage pairings. ithacaalehouse.com

Saigon Kitchen \$\$

The owners of Wok Village, a modest and dependable Chinese restaurant that operated out of Lansing's Small Mall for decades, closed it several years ago—and opened this popular spot on Ithaca's burgeoning restaurant corridor on West State Street, showcasing the cuisine of their native Vietnam.

saigonkitchenithaca.com







Spicy Asian \$\$

A relatively recent addition to Ithaca's many Chinese offerings, this spot in a strip mall on Route 13 is known for its fiery Szechuan dishes. spicyasianfood.com

Viva Taquería & Cantina \$\$

At the corner of State and Aurora streets downtown since 1995, this Mexican favorite is divided into two sides: a sit-down restaurant and a counter-service operation. Like many of its neighbors on Restaurant Row, it offers outdoor seating in good weather. vivataqueria.com

That's it. We surrender. Winter, you win. Key West anyone? Due to this ridiculously stupid winter, Ithaca invites you to visit

Visit Ithaca (or Don't)

A TOURISM JOKE GOES VIRAL

On a typical day, the website of the Ithaca/Tompkins County Convention & Visitors Bureau (visitithaca.com) gets about 1,500 hits. Over two days last February, it got 150,000—and then it crashed. The reason for the traffic jam? A jokey post in which the agency threw in the towel, admitting that Ithaca is a terrible place to visit in the winter and advising travelers to head to the Florida Keys instead. The doctored homepage complete with a tempting photo of sea, sun, and sand—became one of the nation's top trending news stories, reaching an audience of 75 million people via broadcast media and 590 million online, says agency director Bruce Stoff. "It was honest," Stoff says, when asked to account for the post's massive popularity. "It was what people were thinking. And it was so crazy for a visitors' board to say, 'Don't come here.' But we timed it for a week when there is virtually no visitor traffic in Tompkins County, so we had nothing to lose."

Posted the Sunday of President's Weekend, the cyber version of a white flag raised the city's profile The Florida Keys this week. Please come back when things thaw out. Really, it's for the birds here now. (Still want to Visit Ithaca? Are you sure? Ok, click here.) P.S. Send us a postcard.

around the world. But will it translate into tourism dollars during more congenial weather? The jury's still out. "We did it to plant the seed for spring, summer, and fall, so we'll know in the next three seasons if it worked or not," Stoff says. "It was clearly not intended to make people come in February. In fact, it prompted one local hotel person to book a trip to Key West."

Coffee, Desserts & Cocktails

Gimme! Coffee \$

One of the two giants of the local coffee trade, Gimme! now has seven locations, including three in New York City. Its many kudos include being named the state's best coffee shop in 2014 by Business Insider.

gimmecoffee.com



Ithaca Coffee Company \$

The other local caffeine enclave, Ithaca Coffee distinguishes itself with two locations—one downtown, the other in Triphammer Marketplace—that also offer gourmet food items and a variety of craft beers. CAM staff can often be spotted in the East State Street store, located next door to our offices. ithacacoffee.com

Corks & More \$\$

This cozy spot on the West End waterfront is a wine bar whose computerized machines dispense portions (a taste, half glass, or full glass) bought through prepaid cards. A tasting menu includes housemade crostinis and a variety of small plates. corksandmore.com

Felicia's Atomic Lounge \$\$ >

Co-owned by Amelia Sauter '92 and her wife, Felicia's is another denizen of West State Street, which is emerging as the city's second Restaurant Row. It's known for its "locavore cocktails," with ingredients provided by local producers. It now serves brunch and bakes its own cupcakes, and has plans in the works for a second location in Trumansburg. atomicloungeithaca.com

Sarah's Patisserie \$\$

While their Cayuga Heights location closed recently, the downtown store on Seneca Street is still selling delectable desserts. Its chef, an alumna of the French Culinary Institute, trained under pastry legend Jacques Torres at Le Cirque 2000. sarahspatisserie.com





Stella's \$\$

A hybrid operation on College Avenue, Stella's operates a coffeehouse next door to a restaurant and lounge. The items on the coffee menu are divided into "freshmen," "upperclassmen," "graduates," "professors," and "townies." stellabar.com

Madeline's \$\$\$

While this Commons favorite is a fullservice restaurant, it's especially popular for cocktails and desserts. With an eye-popping pastry case, Madeline's is routinely cited in local reader polls for having the best desserts in town.

madelines-restaurant.com

WWW.GARDENGROCERYGADGETGIRI.COM

On the Market LOCAVORE FAVORITE IS STILL **GOING STRONG**

Founded in 1973 (and operating at its current location at Steamboat Landing since 1990), the Ithaca Farmers' Market hosts upwards of eighty vendors on a typical summer Saturday—purveyors of crafts, produce, and prepared foods ranging from baked goods to burritos to Cambodian curries. This season will see some infrastructure improvements, including tripled bathroom capacity. (That may not sound like much, but regulars are rejoicing.) There's also a new kayak launch area, aimed to encourage watercraft as alternative transportation—both promoting sustainability and relieving congestion in the often-packed parking lot. Asks market manager Aaron Munzer: "What's cooler than arriving at the best farmers' market in the country in a kayak?"



Out of Town

Cayuga Lake Creamery \$

A scenic drive about half an hour up the west side of the lake brings you to the ice cream shop that *USA Today* named the best in New York State. If you're having trouble deciding from the dizzying list of flavors, opt for the three-scoop bowl and share it (or not). cayugalakecreamery.com

Doug's Fish Fry \$\$

This old-school, family-friendly fish fry has been a favorite for locals and tourists for more than three decades. Its menu of seafood and grill items is available at two locations, in Cortland (about half an hour away) or in scenic Skaneateles, the lakeside resort town that hosted Chelsea Clinton's wedding. dougsfishfry.com

Red Newt Bistro \$\$

Located about half an hour west of Ithaca in Hector, this bistro is part of Red Newt Cellars, a Seneca Lake winery. Lunch is served daily, with select items available until the winery closes at 5 p.m. rednewt.com

Rongovian Embassy \$\$

After an extended closure, this Trumansburg icon has reopened under new ownership. The revamped menu features local ingredients such as pork products from Ithaca's Piggery, and there's live music regularly. rongovianembassy.com

Dano's Heuriger on Seneca \$\$\$

Relocated and expanded from its original home near the Ithaca Commons, Dano's Heuriger (pronounced "hoy-rig-er") is another of Seneca Lake's culinary highlights. It serves Viennese-inspired cuisine such as spätzle, wiener schnitzel, and smoked trout. danosonseneca.com

Hazelnut Kitchen \$\$\$

Another farm-to-table favorite, Hazelnut Kitchen is about twenty minutes outside Ithaca in the Village of Trumansburg. Its simple but elegant fare has many passionate fans, and the menu changes regularly.

hazelnutkitchen.com V



Stonecat Café \$\$\$

Located in Hector, Stonecat offers lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch, plus a Sunday afternoon happy hour. The menu details the local sources for many of its products and suggests beverage pairings. stonecatcafe.com



HAI EYNAV

Suzanne Fine Regional Cuisine \$\$\$\$

A special occasion spot about an hour's drive from Ithaca, Suzanne operates out of a picturesque 1903 farmhouse overlooking Seneca Lake. Its chef was a semi-finalist for a regional James Beard Award in 2011. suzannefrc.com



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