THE TOP 100 BAY AREA RESTAURANTS

Welcome to the best restaurants in the Bay Area. For 16 years, Chronicle Restaurant Critic Michael Bauer has compiled his favorites—surrounding this box are his 2011 picks. The larger the name, the longer the restaurant has been on the annual list. This year, there are more first-timers than ever before—they’re represented by the smaller red type. Raise a fork to the East.
The Restaurant at Meadowood

Christopher Kostow is the Bay Area's newest Chronicle four-star chef and this year his restaurant became the second in the Bay Area to earn three Michelin stars. He has developed a tasting menu that has a strong sense of place, and his combinations are precise, fresh and unique. He might pair veal breast with braciole, roast sturgeon with bone marrow, or langoustines with scallops and pork belly. These dynamic pairings are served in a tailored, elegant dining room. In warm weather the terrace is a magical place to dine, overlooking majestic redwoods, the Mayacamas Mountains and the croquet court.

Cuisine: California

Specialties: Tasting menu changes regularly but might include Wagyu beef cured in local pine; medallions of goat braised in wine; or lobster roasted in lime salt.

Seats: 46 inside, 24 on terrace; private room for four.

Prices: Tasting menus from $90-$175

Noise rating: A-A

Parking: Free lot

Vitals: 900 Meadowood Lane (at Silverado Trail), St. Helena, (707) 967-1205 or meadowood.com. Dinner Monday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted.

Ristobar

More than two decades ago, Valentino's in Santa Monica represented the pinnacle of Italian food in America, with some of the best pastas to be found. It was a surprise to learn the longtime chef, Angelo Auriana, had moved to San Francisco, where he's taken over the kitchen of this once trendy cafe-bakery owned by Gary Ruhl. After a remodel last year, featuring a grand bar and a frescoed ceiling, Ristobar was born as a full-service restaurant. Pastas are stellar, from braised veal sugo with crisp sweetbreads to squid ink rigatoni with tomato lobster broth. Ruhl uses his pastry skills on the oval pizzas that have a delicate, chewy tangerine crust. Desserts are not an elective, they're required eating.

Cuisine: Italian

Specialties: Pasta including paccheri with fennel-spaced pork sausage sugo, pizza; lamb meatballs; chicken coated in almonds; desserts such as warm hazelnut and walnut budino or mini cassata.

Seats: 95; private room for 25.

Prices: $10-$20

Noise rating: A-A-A

Parking: Street, difficult, some lots

Vitals: 2300 Chestnut St. (at Scott Street), San Francisco; (415) 923-6464 or ristobar@com. Dinner nightly. Beer and wine. Reservations and credit cards accepted.

Rivoli

The dining room at Rivoli feels like a midcentury house with sleek, Japanese overtones. Floor-to-ceiling windows look out over a lush garden filled with ferns, magnolias and camellias; it's like being transported to another time. Chef and co-owner Wendy Brucker offers a modern take on California comfort food on her weekly changing menu, where the accompaniments are as exciting as the main event. Grilled gulf is stuffed with wild mushrooms and served with both garlic brined kale and potato/wild rice gratin; she serves grilled salmon on celery root and potato puree with basil vinaigrette, orange butter, warm cucumbers and citrus and olive relish.

Cuisine: California

Specialties: Portobello mushroom fritters with lemon aioli; Caesar salad; smoked fish; any braised dish, hot fudge sundaes.

Seats: 54 plus 9 at the bar.

Prices: $15.50-$24.50

Noise rating: A-A-A

Parking: Street, fairly easy

Vitals: 1539 Solano Ave. (near Neilson Street), Berkeley; (510) 526-2542 or rivoristorante.com. Dinner nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted.

Rosso Pizzeria & Wine Bar

John Franchetti is a pizza god, his followers are so committed to the puffy, yet crisp pies he pulls from the wood-fired oven that they would follow him anywhere. The menu highlights eight combinations — half with a red tomato base, the other white sauce with garlic and oregano. Yet the story doesn't end with pizza. The menu includes excellent salads, salumi, frito misto, meatballs and a daily main course special, but no desserts. Co-owner Kevin Cronin takes care of the front of the house, and his staff is friendly and knowledgeable, paying attention to all the small details that belie the restaurant's mode strip-mall surroundings.

Cuisine: Italian

Specialties: Pizza Margherita; saluma veal and pork meatballs; house-made burrata; whole roasted crab (in season); slow smoked beef short ribs; arugula salad with oven-roasted artichokes and Meyer lemon vinaigrette.

Seats: 70 plus 20 outside.

Prices: $12-$26

Noise rating: A-A-A

Parking: Free lot

Vitals: 53 Montgomery Drive (at Brookwood Avenue, in Creekside Center), Santa Rosa, (707) 544-3221 or rossopizza.com. Open for lunch and dinner continuously daily. Beer and wine. Reservations accepted for parties of six or more. Credit cards accepted.