JOHN MARTELLARO
Dish: Huitlacoche empanadas
Restaurant: Extra Virgin

LESLEY BORGER
Dish: Rainbow taco
Restaurant: Füd

PETE DULIN
Dish: Lobster bisque
Restaurant: Le Fou Frog

RYAN MAYBEE
Dish: Biancoverde
Restaurant: PizzaBella

STACEY LUKAS
Dish: Escargot, Beef Wellington
Restaurant: Tatsu’s

JIM COLEY
Dish: Pan-roasted duck breast with farro risotto, rillettes, sautéed Swiss chard and amarena cherry mustard
Restaurant: Room 39

MARY BLOCH
Dish: Glazed pork shoulder
Restaurant: Port Fonda’s El Comedor
Hungry? You’re going to be after reading what KC’s foodies, bloggers and cuisine extraordinaires give us as the best thing they’ve ever eaten in Kansas City. Get your car keys ready because your stomach will be rumbling as you head out to these local hot spots to see what all the buzz is about.
This is a tough call to make for someone who spent almost eight years as the restaurant critic for The Kansas City Star and had his share of great meals since leaving that job in 1998. Still, if forced to choose a favorite currently available, it would have to be the huitlacoche empanadas at Extra Virgin (1900 Main St.). Huitlacoche is a mushroom-like fungus that grows on corn plants, and as the name suggests, was first employed as a delicacy in Mexico. EV’s empanadas are tender-crisp, light-textured and plump with the earthy-sweet flavor of the fungus rightfully dominant, enhanced with some mild cheese and a piquant olive-stoked salsa.

LESLEY BORGER
Blogger for purplecarrotkc.com

Kansas City’s quaint Westside neighborhood is a hub to numerous top-notch restaurants and houses some of my longtime favorites. Located near the corner of 17th and Summit is one such restaurant, Füd (813 W. 17th St.). The first time I ordered the rainbow taco ($6), my taste buds were taken aback by this seemingly simple dish that produced complex, complete flavors. Owner Heidi Belle’s rainbow tacos are formed with organic “wild-mild” rice meat, rich cashew Goji cheddar, smooth cashew lemon cream, bright pico de gallo and a generous dollop of fresh guacamole. They’re so robust and palatable even the most loyal omnivore could eat this dairy-free, meat-free dish and not be left wanting.

MARY BLOCH
Blogger for aroundtheblockkc.com

This pork shoulder is a wonder. Owner and chef Patrick Ryan slow-roasts a heritage pork shoulder overnight. Near the end of the cooking process, he smoothers the top layer of fat with a healthy dose of brown sugar, which eventually melts into a caramel-like and glistening glaze resembling dripping candy. As Ryan brought his masterpiece to our table, my whole table let out a collective sigh of rapture.

The meat easily fell apart as we tore into it with tongs, and the crispy fat was ridiculously mouthwatering. Each bite was succulent, decadent and worth the inevitable increase in my already frustratingly high cholesterol. After ignoring signs that our bellies were full, I finally lapsed into a pleasurable pork coma. I plot my return on a daily basis.

PETE DULIN
KC Magazine and The Kansas City Star food writer

I’m a former cook and regular customer at Le Fou Frog (400 E. Fifth St.), and the bistro has been the setting for many sensory-expanding discoveries for more than a decade. Chef Mano Rafael hails from the seaport city of Marseilles, France. To limit my choice of the best dish I ever ate there to a sole selection is a farce, but I choose lobster bisque ($7). This rich, spicy soup with morsels of lobster meat evokes the ocean. The aroma and taste is exotic as a spice dealer’s stall, as warm and pleasing as a vacation set on the summery shores of the Mediterranean. Each bite not only reminds me of Mano’s origins, but of seafood’s connection to its source.

STACEY LUKAS
Wine expert and host of KC Foodies

Welcome! on Facebook

Christmas Eve is a “Groundhog Day” best-meal-ever experience for me. For the past 17 years, my family has dined at Tatsu’s French Restaurant (4603 W. 90th St., Prairie Village). Each year, I flirt with changing my order, but for nearly two decades, I have had the same meal. I start with arguably the best escargot in town ($8.95), washed down with Champagne. Next is the Beef Wellington, a marvelous puff pastry and perfect red wine reduction sauce. This is coupled with the freshest scallops seared in a white wine lemon butter (This combo isn’t on the menu, but if you ask, you shall receive!). On occasion, I have wept tears of culinary joy. We finish with dessert and Chef Tatsu himself taking a much-deserved breather at our table, as we’re inevitably the last to clear out. No blizzard or crazy night trying to close Lukas Liquor has ever kept me away from the best meal I get to eat. Every. Single. Year.

JABULANI LEFALL
KCUR host and KC Eat & Greet blogger for kcmag.com

I like to know the server and owner by first name rather than standing there waiting to be seated, looking at my watch and frustrated. I get the former at YJ’s Snack Bar (128 W. 18th St.) in the Crossroads. In particular, the Saturday Fish Fry ($7.95) has so much personal meaning for me as a non-vegetarian eater and lover of wholesome, home-cooked food. YJ’s breads shrimp and tilapia in seasoned cornmeal and serves it with a hefty helping of beans and cornbread. This makes it the culinary denouement of my weekend. YJ’s is a place where they still call you “honey,” and you can always go across the street and get a haircut or down the street and get some threads. They even sell smokes and classic Coke bottles—perfect with fish.

DUANE DAUGHERTY
Owner of Mr. Doggity Foods

There were several things I considered to be the best thing I ever put in my mouth, but I’m going with one that I have touted to friends across the country as America’s best appetizer: Jasper’s (1201 W. 103rd St.) tableside mozzarella. The chef wheels out a cart with curds and boiling water and then makes a ball of fresh mozzarella cheese right before your eyes.
Then he slices it and serves it with fresh local tomatoes or other seasonal veggies and a drizzle of suburb olive oil. I have traveled all over the country and eaten in some of the finest restaurants, but for presentation and the taste and texture of freshly made cheese, I’d put Jasper’s mozzarella against anything I’ve ever eaten.

BONJWING LEE
Co-author and photographer of “bluestem, the cookbook”

Imagine two buttery, crustless clouds adhered together with a warm pavement of cheese and thinly sliced turkey. As if to signal how light this sandwich is, it’s dusted with a poof of powdered sugar. On the side? Strawberry jam, for dipping, of course. It’s warm. It’s comforting. It’s well constructed—a tidy little bundle that’s both light and satisfying, both simple and sophisticated. It’s got texture and a teeter-totter balance of salty and sweet. I’ve been blessed with a lot of good food in my life, and the Monte Cristo ($9) at Genessee Royale (1531 Genesee St.) is surely one of the best things I ever ate in Kansas City.

CRAIG ADCOCK
Owner of Belly Up BBQ and Jude’s Rum Cake

I stumbled across The Vineyards Restaurant (505 Spring St., Weston) on a B&B getaway to Weston in 1999. The best dish was Green Dirt Farm’s rack of lamb, morel risotto and Marsala glazed carrots ($32). Why did this top my list? It could be the historic 1845 Antebellum home with charming hardwood floors and background music, or the Mayer sister team that rocks the second you walk in the door. The crust is made from fresh, hand-tossed dough prepared in front of you after ordering. The Biancoverde’s ($12) combination of Asiago, mozzarella, Parmesan and ricotta is cooked to a perfect gooey, golden brown consistency and topped with a heaping serving of fresh arugula tossed in lemon juice and olive oil. The flavors are a perfect combination of smoky, savory and bright citrus. That pizza and PizzaBella have both a unique quality and sense of authenticity that keeps me coming back.

JASON BURTON
Founder of The LAB

I’m a little guy (think kickoff returner), but I love to eat and drink. In other words, I can pack it away. So when it comes to my favorite meals, they are always hearty—like the chicken pot pie ($9) at Julian (6227 Brookside Plaza).

Chef Celina Tio uses free-range chicken from the local Camp Lindo farms. It’s served with a puff pastry on top and that pastry is to die for and balances everything out. The “filling” part has a great balance of fresh chicken flavor (Celina makes a roux out of rendered chicken shmalztz), chunks of carrots that add a touch of sweetness and this rich, peppery, creamy sauce. That sauce takes over and can be compared to the best gravy for biscuits you’ve ever had. I love Julian, and even though it’s a newer Kansas City gem, I can go there to eat and feel like I’m having a treasured culinary experience in a number of larger cities.

RENÉE KELLY
Owner and Chef at Renée Kelly’s at Caenen Castle

If a coconut could have a beautiful flower blossom, I’m sure that is what Hot Basil’s (7528 W. 119th St., Overland Park) red curry dish ($11.95) smells like. The sweet fragrance of coconut dances across my nose, followed by the delicate herbaceous notes of freshly chopped basil. The toasted cashews and bamboo shoots bring a slight crunch to the dish complementing the soft, pillowy rice and viscous red curry sauce.

Oh, the aroma of my favorite dish is like being wrapped up with a blanket on a cool night at the beach. It’s a perfect, incredible balance between sweet, salty, hot and a little sour from fresh lime. From perfect, blossom-like aromas to every subtle crunch, this is the best thing I have eaten in Kansas City.

RYAN MAYBEE
Owner of The Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange

The best pizza I ever ate was not in Italy, not in New York and definitely not in Chicago. The best I’ve ever had is right here in the Crossroads Arts District at PizzaBella (1810 Baltimore Ave.).

The rich, smoky aromas from the two wood-fired ovens fill the small space and hit you the second you walk in the door. The crust is made from fresh, hand-tossed dough prepared in front of you after ordering. The Biancoverde’s ($12) combination of Asiago, mozzarella, Parmesan and ricotta is cooked to a perfect gooey, golden brown consistency and topped with a heaping serving of fresh arugula tossed in lemon juice and olive oil. The flavors are a perfect combination of smoky, savory and bright citrus. That pizza and PizzaBella have both a unique quality and sense of authenticity that keeps me coming back.

JIM COLEY
Wine director at Gomer’s Midtown

It says a lot when my most memorable dish on an extensive wine tour in France came not from any Michelin-starred restaurant, but from a night when Kansas City chefs Ted Habiger of Room 39 and Jonathan Justus of Justus Drugstore commandeered the stove at the legendary Domaine Chave and made the best duck breast I have ever had. Ted duplicated that magic this fall at Room 39 (10561 Mission Road, Leawood; 1719 W. 39th St.) with another duck dish. Earthy risotto, rich rillette and the bright cherry flavors of the mustard complemented the perfectly cooked duck and a nicely aged Burgundy.