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10 great places for 'Best of Zest' cuisine

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Hot temperatures call for hot foods. Spice up what's left of summer with sultry, sizzling tastes, says Joel Gregory, publisher of Chile Pepper magazine, which this month features culinary writer John Mariani's "Best of Zest" restaurants. Whether it's Southwest, Asian, Mexican or Italian, "these restaurants are not for the bland leading the bland," Gregory says. "If your idea of edgy eating is a chicken pot pie, don't go here." For those who like to turn up the heat, Mariani shares his quest for zest with USA TODAY's Shawn Sell.

Senor Fred Sherman Oaks, Calif.

"In their seductively shadowy dining room, chef Andre Guerrero and his staff turn out superb dishes like a quesadilla with *quelites* (Mexican red spinach), *chile verde con nopales* (prickly pear cactus with green chile) and dark, sweet, velvety hot chocolate. This is truly Mexican soul food at its finest." 818-789-3200; senorfred.com.

Inn of the Anasazi Santa Fe

"Built with the same Southwestern adobe-feel that gives this popular city its charm, this loveliest of small hotels also is home to one of the town's best restaurants. Surrounded by exquisite folk and Indian art, diners enjoy chef Tom Kerpon's regional culinary dishes, such as grilled corn tortilla soup with cheddar cheese and cinnamon-and-chile-rubbed beef with sweet yellow mango salsa and mashed chipotle-riddled potatoes." 505-988-3236; innoftheanasazi.com.

San Pietro New York City

"Drawing from their Amalfi coastline upbringing, the Bruno brothers serve wondrous dishes: linguine with anchovy juice, lemon, garlic, parsley and extra-virgin olive oil; risotto with sausage and sweet peppers; and fresh chicory and fava beans sautéed in garlic and chile peppers. The restaurant gets a regular business crowd at lunch, while dinner caters to locals and savvy out-of-towners." 212-753-9015; sanpietro.net.

Salpicon Chicago

"Growing up in a Mexican family where eating was always a celebration, Priscilla Satkoff and husband Vincent recapture that feeling at this classy restaurant. Their imagination knows no bounds with dishes like ancho chile-glazed salmon in a creamy tomatillo sauce and soft-shell crabs *mojo de ajo* style." 312-988-7811; salpicon.com.

Jasper's Plano, Texas

"At his new hot spot, chef Kent Rathbun serves up hearty Texas flavors with dishes like salt-crusted prime rib with onion jus and baby baked potatoes, barbecued pork tenderloin with bourbon-laced cream corn and scallion potatoes, and crab cakes with grilled tomato and avocado cream. This scrumptious place has a big Texas swagger and a comfy atmosphere." 469-229-9111; jaspers-restaurant.com.

TenPenh Washington, D.C.

"This elegant restaurant is known for its sensuous Asian look with its teak chairs and a curving wine wall made of chestnut. Spicy dishes, such as red Thai curry shrimp with pineapple and jasmine rice, grilled salmon with wasabi mashed potatoes and Hong Kong-style crispy whole catfish with a fresh chile-tamarind garlic dipping sauce, always tempt the hungry local crowd." 202-393-4500; tenpenh.com.

Nan Atlanta

"With an open kitchen and a display of spice and vegetables in a dining room of silk pillows and comfortable banquettes, Nan combines an exquisite style with relaxed intimacy. Chef Joey Riley offers delicacies with punch, such as *kanom jeeb* (chicken and shrimp dumplings with mushroom vinegar and dry roasted chiles) and *moochoo chee* (grilled pork tenderloin with roasted red curry and kaffir lime leaves)." 404-870-9933.

Hanna's Bar-B-Q Lenoir, N.C.

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"Every region of the country boasts its own special type of barbecue. For North Carolina-style, you can't go wrong at Hanna's, with its smoked pork shoulder smothered in a tangy, peppery sauce, tasty slaw and beans. There's also a drive-in window if you need to eat in a hurry." 828-754-7032.

Jake's Boss BBQ

Jamaica Plains, Mass.

"Even though Massachusetts seems an unlikely place to find good barbecue, chef Kenton Jacobs is a virtual master of his craft, serving both Texas-style 'cue and a little Carolina-pulled pork for good measure. You can ask for a variety of sauces and get some corn bread with your order. Lip-smacking good." 617-938-3701.

Bern's Steak House

Tampa

"Truly one of the most luxurious restaurants in the world, Bern's Steak House features a choice of 37 caviars — including wasabi flying fish caviar flavored with Japanese horseradish and caviar peppar flavored with jalapeño, serrano and Absolut peppar — and six cuts of Prime beef." 813-251-2421; bernssteakhouse.com.

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