

Cover story:

**THE VALLEY'S 50 BEST DISHES:
FROM BURGERS TO BAR FOOD, PASTA TO PIZZA, HERE ARE 50 OF THE MOST DELECTABLE
DISHES IN TOWN. CAREFUL – THESE MEALS MIGHT FORCE YOU TO LICK THE PLATE IN
PUBLIC.**

Compiling the 50 best meals in town might sound like a plum assignment, but I soon found I may have bitten off more than I could chew.

How does someone who adores food so much pare down the choices? I solicited suggestions from foodie friends. I ate out daily for many weeks to refresh my memory and try places I hadn't been.

Sure, it sounds like a cakewalk, but you try it sometime. I had to force down forkfuls of food that I couldn't fathom anyone would eat twice, let alone recommend. Not to mention, my jeans now hold more cottage cheese than a cheap salad bar.

When I was done, it all boiled down to one factor: stuff I love. If I had to eat any one of these dishes weekly for the rest of my life, I'd say, "plate it up."

I realize I'm opening myself up to the Great Phoenix Food Debate of 2009. My favorites aren't necessarily yours. It would probably be more accurate to say, "50 of the best dishes in the Valley." And I couldn't include some of the best restaurants in town, because the chefs use seasonal ingredients and change their menus often – even daily (hello, Binkley's and Quiescence!).

Finally, a few restaurants on our original list shut down during the writing process, so please double-check that the following places are still in business before heading out. Prices also may vary by the time this gets to you.

BEST APPETIZERS

Farm to Sea to Table
Digestif
7114 E. Stetson Drive, Scottsdale
480-425-WINE
digestifscottsdale.com

This dish changes with the seasons, but you'll get something like this: A creamy base of puréed sunchokes, mellow oyster mushrooms, tender fava beans and salty, paper-thin slices of Pecorino cheese. A shot glass of tea and truffle oil topped with tiny sliced scallions might come on the side – you can pour it on top or drink it straight, it's so good. \$12

mantwo
Kabab Palace
710 W. Elliot Road, Tempe
480-775-6288
kababpalace.biz

A ravioli-like shell is filled with onion and beef, served on yogurt and topped with carrots, yellow split peas and beef sauce. The savory sauce with the mild yogurt and veggies combine to form a complex yet accessible blend of flavors. \$5.95

BEST BARBEQUE

Beef Ribs
Stacy's Smokehouse
1650 E. Indian School Road,
Phoenix
602-230-6724

Owner Stacy Phipps starts with super-smoky, ultra-meaty, fall-off-the-bone, so-good-they-almost-hurt ribs, and tops them with a delectable sweet-spicy sauce made of catsup, sugar, vinegar and spices. If you're driving along Indian School Road (at 16th Street) with the windows down, your car will nearly veer into the parking lot on its own due to the aroma. Cash only; expect waits. \$7.50 (half-slab)

Pulled Pork Plate
Joe's Real BBQ
301 N. Gilbert Road, Gilbert
480-503-3805
joesrealbbq.com

Whether on a plate or a bun, the pecan-smoked pulled pork here is a crowd-pleaser. It's lean yet juicy and full of flavor even before sauce touches it. Give up on the gristly, gamey stuff elsewhere and do as the locals do: Eat at Joe's. \$8.99 (with side)

BEST BAR FOOD

Gamberone Con Prosciutto
Va Bene Italian
Cuisine & Wine Bar
4647 E. Chandler Blvd., Phoenix
480-706-4070

Take plump, sweet shrimp. Wrap them with prosciutto and big, fresh basil leaves. Flash-fry them to give them a hint of crunch, and serve on a roasted red pepper cream sauce. The only way these get better is when they're half-price at happy hour, all day Sunday and Monday, and 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. \$9.95

Ham & Eggs
The Roosevelt
816 N. Third St., Phoenix
602-254-2561

This isn't just any bar: It's Matt Pool's bar, so these aren't just any ham and eggs. They're cage-free eggs (same as he serves at Matt's Big Breakfast), deviled Southern-style – with sweet relish – and served with slabs of applewood-smoked ham from Nueske's Farm in Wisconsin. And they're addictive. \$6

BEST BREAKFAST (SWEET)

Bar Harbour Flapjack
The Breakfast Club
4400 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale
480-222-2582
thebreakfastclub.us

They call these the “undisputed king of blueberry pancakes,” and this tried-and-true, lifelong blueberry fan can vouch for them. Fluffy hotcakes are thick but not heavy, the rich blueberry purée isn’t too tart or too sweet, and the berries taste as fresh as if you picked them yourself. \$9.95

Apple Pancake
Original Pancake House
6840 E. Camelback Road, Scottsdale
480-946-4902
originalpancakehouse.com

“Pancake” isn’t the best word to describe this treat, which is more like a sweet apple bread pudding. It takes up the entire plate and sits a couple of inches high. Apples, egg and pancakes coexist happily in the sticky cinnamon glaze. And it’s big enough for two. Cash only. \$7.75 (junior)

BEST BREAKFAST (Savory)

Chicken Fried Steak in Pork Chili Verde
Ranch House Grille
5618 E. Thomas Road, Phoenix
480-946-1290

Famous among foodies, this is the ultimate hangover meal (if you’re not into menudo). Tender steak with a gentle crunchy coating is smothered in spicy chili verde and served with perfectly cooked eggs, wonderfully crisp hash browns and toast or pancakes. \$8.50

Morning Glory Benedict
Morning Glory Café at the
Farm at South Mountain
6106 S. 32nd St., Phoenix
602-276-8804
thefarmatsouthmountain.com

Eating farm-fresh food on a real farm for breakfast is a great way to start the day. The Morning Glory Benedict is one of the best picks of the crop here, with Hickman’s eggs, braised fresh greens and a tangy Hollandaise. \$11.95

BEST BURGERS

Delux Burger
delux
3146 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
602-522-2288
deluxburger.com

If you think beef and blue cheese is a match made in heaven, this burger is angelic. A Harris Ranch beef patty is perched on a puffy, toasted demi-baguette and laced with layers of organic arugula, caramelized onions, applewood-smoked bacon and blue and Gruyere cheeses. Nothing overpowers; it all works in harmony. Can you hear the harps? \$9.50

Big Butter Burger
Matt’s Big Breakfast
801 N. First St., Phoenix
602-254-1074
mattsbigbreakfast.com

Pure indulgence, this one. Again with the fresh (never frozen) Harris Ranch ground chuck, which gets buttered before and during grilling to make it even more luscious. Go with classic toppings of lettuce, tomato and American cheese, or upgrade to Maytag blue for a buck. Everything sits on a hearty potato roll to sop up the juices. \$7.95

BEST CHEESECAKE

Caramel Cheesecake
Crème Brûlée
T. Cook's at the Royal Palms
5200 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
602-808-0766
royalpalmsotel.com

Executive pastry chef Pierino Jermonti first designed this phenomenal dessert for a dinner at the James Beard House. Ever since, it's won several awards and become a mainstay at T. Cook's at the Royal Palms Resort and Spa. Italian pecan and almond cookies are ground up for the crust, and the combination of caramel cheesecake and crème brûlée makes it creamier yet lighter than a typical cheesecake. Guava sauce and fresh berries deliver us from pedestrian toppings. \$12

New York Cheesecake
de la Cruz Bistro
10 W. Main St., Mesa
480-258-6942

This is old-school, thick cheesecake that actually tastes cheesy – not bland and boring – thanks to a longer creaming method that the kitchen uses. The crushed Oreo cookie-crumb crust and homemade raspberry glaze on top are the kickers that will make you fall in love with this classic all over again. \$7

BEST CHOCOLATE DESSERTS

Lava Cake
Sweet O Wine &
Chocolate Lounge
9380 W. Westgate Blvd., Glendale
623-877-3898
sweetolounge.com

If you think you've had rich or decadent desserts before, think again. The lava cake here is the ultimate chocoholic fix, made with a dense, dark chocolate cake and warm chocolate ganache in the center. Even the most devout cocoa-nuts probably won't be able to finish it because it's so rich. \$8.50

Chocolate Soufflé
Zinc Bistro
15034 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale
480-603-0922
zincbistroaz.com

Made with Valrhona chocolate, this perfectly puffy soufflé is worth the wait. Tell your server if you want it when you order your entrée, because they make it from scratch, and it shows. Choose from chocolate, mint or Grand Marnier sauce to top it off – and don't worry, there is no wrong answer. \$7

BEST ENCHILADAS

Green Chili Pork Enchilada
Richardson's
1582 E. Bethany Home Road, Phoenix
602-265-5886
burningembersphoenix.com

Smoky and succulent, these are the kind of enchiladas that make you forget calorie counts and fat grams. The roasted Anaheim chilies give off just enough heat to give the dish gusto without blowing your face off. \$15

Beef Enchilada
Mango's Mexican Café
44 W. Main St., Mesa
480-464-5700
mangosmexicancafe.com

No one does shredded beef like Mango's. It's marinated in celery, onion, tomatoes and spices for four to six hours and must also have voodoo magic in it, because it induces serious cravings. Wrapped in a corn tortilla and topped with succulent sauce and melted cheese, it's hard to believe such a tiny package can bring such great joy. \$4.75

BEST FRENCH FRIES

Parmesan Fries
Portland's Restaurant
& Wine Bar
105 W. Portland St., Phoenix
602-795-7480
portlandsphoenix.com

I judge the quality of fries by how many I can eat before getting bored. I don't think I could ever reach a saturation point with these beauties, delicately crisped and liberally coated with clumps of garlicky Parmesan. At happy hour, they're \$5. Encore, encore! \$7

Trio of Fries
Bourbon Steak
7575 E. Princess Drive, Scottsdale
480-513-6002
michaelmina.net/mm_bourbonsteak_scottsdale/

What devious mind came up with this evil plan: Fry potatoes in truffle oil then serve them with three sauces that are so outrageously delicious, you won't know which way to turn. And, oh yes, offer them for free as an amuse bouche (a pre-meal palate tickler) so that diners crave them so much they'll have to go back repeatedly to get satisfaction. This should be illegal.

BEST GUACAMOLE

Pomegranate Seed Guacamole
Barrio Café
2814 N. 16th St., Phoenix
602-636-0240

The freshest of the fresh, greenest of the green avocados are lightly tossed (not mashed) tableside with the usual suspects, and – wait, what's this? Sweet, crunchy little nuggets? Pomegranate seeds are the not-so-secret ingredient that make this guac rock more than any other in town. \$10.50

Seafood Guacamole
Maria Maria
2000 E. Rio Salado Pkwy., Tempe (Tempe Marketplace)
480-449-3663
mariamariarestaurants.com

Guacamole purists may get their pincers in a knot over this one, but it's quite a catch: It combines the clean, green flavor of the avocado with briny lump crabmeat and sassy shrimp salpicon to add zip. And it's served up in one of the best-looking dining rooms in town. \$15

BEST KABOBS

Lamb Kebab Plate
Spices Mediterranean Kitchen
4040 W. Ray Road, Chandler
480-491-4777
spicesmk.com

Nearly every Middle Eastern restaurant in town overcooks its lamb into hard little pucks, but Spices is a welcome exception. Praise be to the chef – the meat is slightly pink in the center, as it should be. Even better, it's dressed with a mouth-watering marinade and has a light, smoky taste from the grill. The sides are exceptional, too. \$11.95 (with sides)

Koobideh Kebab
Persian Room
17040 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale
480-614-1414
persianroom.com

Ground beef, minced onions and a whopping amount of seasoning is wrapped onto skewers and broiled. The result is a dish so aromatic you won't know how all that flavor comes out of such a humble-looking package. \$12.95

BEST INDIAN CURRY

Chicken Makhani
Curry House Flavor India
2051 W. Warner Road, Chandler
480-857-2277

This saucy little number takes the honors for its rich, buttery, tomato-and-onion-laced gravy. Even when it's not ordered hot, the spices skyrocket it into a fury of curry that's so irresistible, you have to mop up every last drop with traditional Indian naan bread. \$12.95

Chicken Madras
Indian Paradise
15111 N. Hayden Road, Scottsdale
480-483-9284
indianparadiseaz.com

The layers of flavor in this pungent curry overlap so much it's difficult to explain what makes it so good. Maybe it's the onion gravy or the creamy coconut milk. Maybe it's the hint of mint. Like a good patchwork, just enjoy the finished result rather than dissecting the parts. \$12.95

Best Pasta

Agnolotti Boa
Caffe Boa
398 S. Mill Ave., Tempe
480-968-9112
cafeboa.com

Earthy portabella and cremini mushrooms are tucked inside tender homemade ravioli and topped with a phenomenal herbal tomato cream sauce. It's no wonder this has been on the menu since the place opened – there would be fire and pitchforks in the streets if anyone dared mess with this crowd-pleaser. \$17.95

Rigatony Bolognese
That Italian Place
3941 E. Chandler Blvd., Phoenix
480-759-4459
thatitalianplace.com

At this intimate eatery, tucked away in an Ahwatukee stripmall, the pasta is not fanciful, exotic or even homemade. But the Bolognese beats anyone's in town. The chef combines pork and veal with sautéed carrots, onions, celery, white wine and chopped tomatoes, and slow-cooks it all day until the flavors exude comfort-food pleasure. \$15.95

BEST PIEROGI

Mushroom & Sauerkraut
Bista's Deli & Market
24825 N. 16th Ave., Phoenix
623-580-1591
bistasdeliandmarket.com

These little pockets have a rare balance. The not-too-sour sauerkraut lets the fungi shine, creating a harmony of much-loved flavors. Fried in butter and topped with diced bacon, they're not for the light eater, but they're worth the calories. \$7.50

Potato & Cheese
A Touch of European Café
7146 N. 57th Drive, Glendale
623-847-7119

It's a peasant food, really, the lowly pierogi. But in the right hands, it can be heavenly. Here, the dough is not too thick, and the farmer's cheese and potato filling are expertly seasoned and are just the right consistency – not chunky, mushy or dry. And they're pan-fried to golden goodness. \$8.50

BEST SALADS

Beef Yum Gai
Tottie's Asian Fusion
7901 E. Thomas Road, Scottsdale
480-970-0633
tottiesasianfusion.com

This salad is hot and cool: Spicy grilled sirloin is accented by lettuce, cucumbers, mint, lime leaf and cilantro, and it gets added punch from crisp onion slices, garlic and fish sauce. It's complex, fiery and beautiful, and it's every foodie's dream. \$8.95

Ceviche & Shrimp Salad
Restaurant Salvadoreño
303 E. Southern Ave., Mesa
480-964-5577

Refreshing yet substantial, this salad will transport you to the beaches of Cabo before you can say, “Muchas gracias.” A bed of lettuce is topped with shrimp ceviche – diced shrimp “cooked” in a citrus marinade – and layered with tomato, onion, peppers and grilled whole shrimps. Slices of avocado, tomato and cucumber round out the platter. \$11.50

BEST PIZZAS

Wiseguy
Pizzeria Bianco
623 E. Adams St., Phoenix
602-258-8300
pizzeriabianco.com

Well, this is a no-brainer. Check almost any “best of” list, from New York Times to Wine Spectator, and Chris Bianco’s place is on it. He’s been quoted as saying the Rosa (with pistachios) is his favorite, but I’m fond of the Wiseguy, thanks to the house-smoked mozzarella, wood-roasted onion and fennel sausage. \$14

Portobello Arugula

Nello’s Pizza
4710 E. Warner Road, Phoenix
480-893-8930
nellospizza.com

This is the only Nello’s to serve this pizza, but hopefully the others will follow. Herbal arugula and garlic with meaty Portobello, cremini and white mushrooms is enhanced by creamy fontinella and mozzarella cheeses and slightly salty shaved Parmesan. Meat? We don’t need no stinkin’ meat. \$15

BEST PORK

Carne Adovada
Carlsbad Tavern
3313 N. Hayden Road,
Scottsdale
480-970-8164

This slow-roasted pork simmered in red Anaheim chilies can pack a wallop, depending on whether the chilies are in season or not, but it’s worth it. The big choice here is whether to enjoy it in the interior, with its copper bar and bat theme, or on the gorgeous patio, with water features and fireplaces. \$10.75

Kurobata Pork Three Ways
Kai
5594 W. Wild Horse Pass Blvd.,
Gila River Indian Community
wildhorsepassresort.com

Your fork won’t know which way to turn: Start with pan-seared tenderloin rolled in fair-trade coffee and native seed chili dust. Or the silky, slowly braised pork belly lacquered with a sweet-hot mixture of Irish whiskey mustard, apple cider and Happy Bear honey. Maybe the pulled pork with pomegranate and pudding-like roasted onion flan? It’s all exquisite. \$37

BEST SANDWICHES

Cubano
Tortas El Güero
611 N. Arizona Ave., Chandler
480-963-2633

The Cubano is no sandwich for the weak, the faint of heart or those short on appetite. It's served on a soft yet hearty mini-loaf of bread as big as your head, stuffed silly with sliced ham, pork and fried steak, and topped with queso fresco, shredded lettuce, tomatoes and pickled jalapeños. It's a work of art, architecture and culinary prowess all in one. \$6.50

Mozzarella, Tomato & Basil
Pane Bianco
4404 N. Central Ave., Phoenix
602-234-2100

Talk about "from scratch." The focaccia dough for the sandwiches is made fresh every morning and cooked in a wood-fired oven every five minutes. The mozzarella is house-made, and the basil and tomato are locally grown. And yes, this is the same Bianco of Pizzeria Bianco fame, so would you expect any less? \$8

BEST SOUPS

Gazpacho
Havana Café
4225 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
602-952-1991
havanacafe-az.com

Soup can be a hard sell in Phoenix for most of the year, but not if it's the gazpacho here. The zesty, traditional-style recipe, made with chunky tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet peppers and onions – served cold – is always in season. \$6.50

Pho Tai Bo Vien
Saigon Pho
1381 N. Alma School Road,
Chandler
480-786-8828

It might include Chinese five spice, but you'll swear this highly scented pho (pronounced "fuh") contains hundreds in its beef broth. This sliced beef and beef ball soup stands on its own and will make a meal, but it's even more of a knockout when you stir in some fresh basil, bean sprouts and sriracha hot chili sauce. \$5.95

BEST SPRING ROLLS

Shrimp Spring Rolls
Da Vang
4538 N. 19th Ave., Phoenix
602-242-3575

Spring rolls can be judged on the quality of the filling. You'll find no brown lettuce, puny shrimp or tough pork here – it's all top-notch, from plump shrimps and delicate pork strips to crispy greens and herbs. A dark, thick peanut sauce for dipping adds extra oomph. \$2.25

Tofu Spring Rolls
Latitude 8° Thai Grill
11 W. Boston St., Chandler
480-722-0560
latitude-eight.com

Oh, don't give me attitude about tofu – you'll love it in these lively and attractive wraps, which are also filled with crunchy lettuce, Japanese noodles and a hint of mint, with sweet and sour sauce on the side. \$6

BEST STEAKS

Filet Mignon
Donovan's Steak & Chop House
3101 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix
602-955-3666
donovanssteakhouse.com

This is filet mignon at its best: a pure, unadulterated slab of aged USDA prime beef, seared at 1,800 degrees to lock in juicy, meaty flavor. Whoever says filet has little flavor has never eaten the cut here. (Price includes potato, vegetable and bread, too, unlike at other steak joints.) \$38 (8-ounce cut)

Filet Mignon
Cheuvront Restaurant & Wine Bar
1326 N. Central Ave., Phoenix
602-307-0022

This is not only a great steak, it's one of the best values out there. They use the same purveyors that the big steakhouses in town use but take the small cuts that many others don't buy. Its buttery consistency is complemented by a lovely, slightly herbal green peppercorn cream sauce. \$20.50 (6-ounce cut)

BEST TACOS

Hard-Shell Beef Taco
El Conquistador
16428 N. 32nd St., Phoenix
602-493-3913

The freshly fried shell manages to be crisp, not greasy or soggy, and the juicy shredded beef filling is the kind that makes you go "num, num, num." Add grated cheese, lettuce and pico de gallo, and it's an all-around shining specimen of a simple food that's often difficult to pull off so well. \$7.99 (two, plus rice and beans)

Chicken Taco
Pedro's
4938 W. Glendale Ave., Glendale
623-937-0807

The popular Pedro's keeps its hustle-and-bustle thanks to well-executed classics like this. The chicken is moist, not dry, which is a good start, but then it's smothered in a fabulous mild green chili sauce with onions and tomatoes. It's topped with white and yellow cheese and lettuce and served in a freshly fried, crispy corn tortilla that has the heft to keep the sauce from seeping through. \$4

BEST THAI CURRY

Chicken Mango Curry
PaPaYa Thai
2706 E. University Drive, Mesa
480-964-3171

A light, creamy base with a whisper of fruity mango sweetness and a dose of spice makes this one of the more interesting curries around. And the super-soft, melt-in-your-mouth chicken chunks are a welcome change from the stiff or rubbery globs that other places try to pass off. \$8.95

Green Curry Beef
Benjarong Thai
1440 S. Country Club Drive, Mesa
480-890-9988
benjarongthai.com

The coconut milk ratio is just right in this curry, which coats thin beef strips, julienned bamboo shoots, eggplant, mushroom, sweet basil leaves, and red and green pepper. And the beef does not resemble shoe leather, as it too often does at other ethnic eateries. \$8.95

BEST VEGETARIAN

Misir Wat
Café Lalibela
849 W. University Drive, Tempe
480-829-1939
cafelalibela.com

It's hard to explain the flavors of Ethiopian food to someone who's never had it, but suffice to say, they're extraordinary. All the dishes here will make you want to eat your veggies, but this one is tops. Red split lentils simmered with onions, herbs and berbere – red chili powder and spices – doesn't look like much, but your mouth will be surprised. Get it on a combo plate with some other items and scoop it up with flat, spongy injera bread. \$4.75

“Buffalo” Wings
Green: New American Vegetarian
2240 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale
480-941-9003
greenvegetarian.com

Green's modus operandi is to offer comfort food vegan-style. They manage to make it work, serving up delicious replicas of your favorite comfort food, like amazing “buffalo” wings that are so much like the heart-clogging real thing it's hard to believe they're made from white mushroom stems. A kick-butt house-made sauce helps; so does the fact that it's served with familiar cucumber ranch dip (dairy-free) and celery sticks. In any case, you won't feel like you're suffering in the name of health. \$5