

BEST of SOHO

BEST BREAKFAST

Balthazar

80 Spring St (between Broadway and Crosby St)
212-965-1414

Schiller's may be Keith McNally's newest nightlife nexus, but Balthazar is his masterpiece, an evocation of a Paris brasserie that outglows anything within Brie-tossing distance of the Seine. Yet for all its visual impact and despite McNally's uncanny skill at creating a place that remains hot longer than most of its patrons' relationships, Balthazar's tender braised short ribs, shepherd's pie made with duck or grilled dorade ringed by roasted eggplant and peppers is exactly the kind of brasserie fare you would like to remember having had the last time you strolled the Boulevard St-Germain. The only smudge in this postcard is that every American not in Paris seems to want to dine here, meaning tables have been planted everywhere—some so close to the front door that those seated there will get coat-smacked silly. In that case, dash into Balthazar's superb bakery, grab a baguette, and make do with a walk along the Hudson.

SECOND BEST BREAKFAST (AND BEST DESSERT PAIRED WITH WINE)

Giorgione 508

508 Greenwich Street (just below Spring Street)
212-219-2444

Giorgione 508 is a place for the up-and-coming Hudson Square neighborhood to grow up around. Future residents of Philip Johnson's Urban Glass House will be able to feed the hangovers they earned at the Ear Inn the night before with breakfast dishes like grits with green onions and ham (\$4.75) or shirred eggs with lentils and bacon in a puff pastry shell (\$12). There's a roster of sandwiches and pastries available at lunch, and simplicity reigns among the main dinner courses. It's hard to figure out where the chef, Alex Schindler, who worked at Starwich before taking over stewardship of both Giorgione restaurants six months ago, learned to work pastas the way he does, but it's certain that he has a knack for them. The portions at Giorgione will, I'd predict, frustrate those who measure the quality of their sandwiches by the foot or equate heft with value. But they are perfectly calibrated to the crowd that's already claimed the restaurant, a mix of old SoHo, an effortlessly stylish group prone to tasteful black sweaters and dramatic glasses, and a younger, trendsetting group, like one of the Queer Eye guys having dinner with a friend or a pair of men at the long bar critiquing Polaroids from the day's fashion shoot between glasses of wine.

BEST PASTRIES

Once Upon a Tart

135 Sullivan St. (between Prince and Houston)
212-387-8869

With a few tables and chairs scattered casually on the sidewalk, and a few more in its roomy tangerine-colored interior, this laid-back specialty shop is a convivial spot for bag-toting consumers to recuperate with a cup of coffee and a snack. Originally a wholesale warehouse in Long Island City, the café has built its reputation on its tarts—both the sweet and the savory. Diameters range from five inches to nearly a foot so these flaky-crust confections can be consumed alone or with a friend. Decorated muffins and cookies (some shaped like school supplies) round out the bakery selections, while, for heartier eaters, a variety of sandwiches and salads are served on the premises.

BEST SANDWICHES

Vesuvio Café and Bakery

160 Prince St. (between W. Broadway and Thompson St)
212-925-8248

Vesuvio has famously been credited with being the most-filmed storefront in New York City and it's easy to see why. With its fanciful green curlicues and windowful of crusty Italian bread, this landmark, founded in 1920, embodies time-tested downtown picturesque; it's also the kind of casually friendly, neighborhood place where it comes as no surprise when a guy opens the door and sticks his head in just to ask at large, "Hey, is Anthony around?" Inside, the small, brick-walled dining area offers little to detract from the baked goods filling the counter. The homebaked bread—such as foccaccia, ciabatta and rolls—can serve as the basis for a sandwich of your own design, or you can opt for one of the shop's six panini, from the vegetarian-friendly grilled Portobello to the mighty Vesuvio (cappicola, sopressata, prosciutto, mozzarella, tomato and gaeta olive spread). For breakfast, the muffins are well-seasoned and moist while the croissants are feather-light. Strong coffee complements any pastry choice, and adds to the conviviality.

BEST of SOHO

BEST BAR DURING THE DAY

Fanelli's

94 Prince St. (at Mercer St)
212-226-9412

Since 1922—long before the area south of Houston became the city's biggest outdoor mall—Fanelli's has been serving up cheap drinks and pub grub. A bulwark against the ritzy local emporia, this one-time speakeasy maintains a low-key vibe with a weathered bar up front and wobbly tables (covered in red-and-white checkered tablecloths) in the back room. Lunches and late nights are bustling with burger lovers; the blasé wait staff would sooner spit in your drink than smile. But it's this dose of reality that gives the joint its charm. No wonder that local shopkeepers and staffers flock here in the evenings, seeking solace from the charlatans they've been catering to all day.

BEST GROCERY STORE

Gourmet Garage

453 Broome St. (at Mercer St)
212-941-5850

Gourmet Garage, a five-store chain of airy, well-lit gourmet supply shops, features unusual imports (think Moroccan anchovy paste) as well as fresh organic produce, well-priced private-label oils, pastas, snacks, and vinegars, and distinctively strong Peet's coffee, from Berkeley, California. The fact that the Garage's offerings seem utterly familiar and increasingly ubiquitous is an odd testament to its success, as purveyors of imported exotica to America's top chefs. In the store's salad days over 25 years ago, when it was named Flying Foods, only chefs were permitted to stroll the warehouse aisles, but a hungry public demanded access—and were eventually allowed in, but only after the busy, early morning hours, once chefs from New York's best eateries had plundered the stocks. After the sale of the Flying Foods brand to Kraft Foods, the original owner opened Gourmet Garage, with new outlets steadily added. Epicures can happily fill their market baskets with a varied selection of high-end dry and imported goods, but cognoscenti head for the top-quality private-label staples, which easily compete with higher-profile imports. For eaters on the run, fresh-made sandwiches and wraps—upscale variations on standard American fare, like tuna with chipotle mayo—are available by the bushel basket. Each store features takeout soups and a sushi bar.

BEST DIVE BAR

Milady's

160 Prince St. (at Thompson St)
212-226-9340

At Milady's, rent control pensioners paying \$300 a month rub shoulders with yuppies paying \$3,000 for the same apartment. But the only factionalism is between the dining contingent, which takes up most of the postage stamp-sized space, and drinkers clinging to the bar. The place feels like a condensed version of the pool table/jukebox/poker-machine joints that still thrive in the outer boroughs. The unavoidable TV sets switch from AMC by day to ESPN at night, as the crowd shifts from young and old to young and younger. As the evening wears on, classic rock cranks up, territorial pool regulars close ranks and you feel as if you're at a Staten Island cop bar plunked down in SoHo.

BEST ICE CREAM

Emack & Bolio's

73 W. Houston St. (between Laguardia Pl. and Wooster St)
212-533-5610

In 1975, when attorney Bob Hook opened this side project—an eco-friendly ice cream parlor—he was working pro-bono on behalf of two homeless men. Those gents wanted him to name the shop after them (Donald & John's), but Hook thought their last names made for a catchier moniker. And so it stayed. The interior of most of E&Bs still harks back to the halcyon days of the late 1960s, laced with a funky, cosmic sense of design, when Peter Max reigned supreme. The hippie-dippy approach also manifests in organic and hormone-free ingredients in the over 40 flavors of ice cream and the large selection of iceless smoothies. Flavors extend beyond organics, and beyond the norm: The grasshopper pie incorporates crème de menthe liquor with Oreo chunks and chocolate flakes, while the purple cow enriches black raspberry ice cream with white and dark chocolate chips and blueberries. Adjusting to everybody's dietary needs, E&B provides sugar-free, fat-free, low-fat, Splenda-sweetened, and lactose-free options.

BEST of SOHO

BEST NEW YORK PIZZA

Lombardi's

32 Spring St. (between Mulberry and Mott Sts)
212-941-7994

Lombardi's was America's first full-fledged pizzeria, established in 1905 at a short walk down Spring Street from its current location and most of New York's top pizzerias owe their existence to Gennaro Lombardi. John Sasso of John's, Patsy Lancieri of Patsy's, and Anthony Pero of Tototonno's all learned the craft under Gennaro's tutelage. The place recently added a full bar and is consistently ranked in popular surveys as one of Manhattan's top pizzerias, but the main reason to go is the clam pie. It's made with freshly shucked top-necks from Connecticut, and the lack of any sauce or mozzarella cheese makes for a super-crisp crust. The clams, garlic, herbs, olive oil, and sprinkling of pecorino Romano are, taken together, reminiscent of very good linguini with white clam sauce, but with a foundation of coal-oven-crisp pizza crust instead of pasta.

BEST SUSHI

Tomoe Sushi

172 Thompson St. (between Bleecker and Houston Sts)
212-777-9346

This very busy sushi mecca has long been considered one of the best in town. Service is brusque and hurried—Tomoe wants to turn tables fast—and your best bet is ordering a la carte. The Negi-Toro hand rolls virtually explode with freshness, as though the tuna were hurled through the air from the Fulton Fish Market straight onto your table. Like all the most highly regarded sushi joints in town, Tomoe is determined to get the freshest possible fish onto its clients' needy palates.

BEST CHEAP DINNER

Ivo & Lulu

558 Broome St. (between Sixth Ave. and Varick St)
212-226-4399

Fans of A, the itty-bitty French-Caribbean cafe on the Upper West Side, will feel right at home at this equally mellow offshoot, which shares A's commitment to organic produce, D'Artagnan game, and bread from Amy's Bread. Grilled avocados stuffed with spinach mousse, pheasant terrine swathed in an herbed Brie crust, and everything else on the eight-dish menu falls in the equally palatable \$11-\$15 range. It is BYO, so bring your own bottle of wine.

BEST DESSERT-ONLY BAR

Room 4 Dessert

17 Cleveland Place (between Kenmare and Spring Sts)
212-941-5405

The long, narrow Soho space that was Bar Veloce, then Bar Tonno, and finally Bar Sasa is reborn once more, this time with a confectionery bent and a provocative pastry chef installed in the open kitchen. Will Goldfarb, best remembered for his dessert derring-do at Papillon and Cru, was enlisted by a pair of French private chefs who wanted a dessert bar to call their own. Goldfarb focuses on high-concept thematic tastings, often grouped in quartets and based on ideas like "Infance" (cotton candy and meringue), and a curry-scented "Voyage to India," all of which can be paired with quartinos of wine or pots of exotic tea.

BEST FRENCH BISTRO FROM KEITH MCNALLY THAT IS NOT BALTHAZAR

Lucky Strike

59 Grand St. (between Wooster St. and W. Broadway)
212-941-0772

Keith McNally's shabby-chic bistro is now more than a decade old—which in hotspot years is, like, a hundred. It's mellowed nicely as a no-pretension neighborhood hangout for savory Gallic comfort food and generous cocktails. For many SoHo locals, the velvet-draped doorway, French film posters and menu written on the wall are as homey as their own living rooms. The hammered copper bar seats only six, but go ahead and wait for a table. After a few of those Lucky Martinis (Absolut, grapefruit juice and cherry herring), you'll be craving their fluffy mashed potatoes, sauteed spinach and steak frites.

BEST of SOHO

BEST WINE BAR

Vintage New York

60 Wooster St. (between Spring and Broome Sts)
212-226-9463

Now that the city's only New York–dedicated wine shop has opened a restaurant next door, its clientele no longer need hunch over the shop's popular tasting bar, comparing Schneider Cab Francs to Bedell Merlots. Now they can do it in the relative comfort of the café, where the small-plates menu, like the wine list, is devoted to New York products, and neatly folds over so that each dish is matched up with a suggested paired wine. The warm house-smoked salmon, for example, went nicely with the Lieb Pinot Blanc. But the biggest surprise was the Rivendell Cab, an unexpectedly perfect match for the gooey richness of the "chocolate fantasy," an oversize take on the molten, flourless, soufflé-like staple of dessert lists everywhere.

BEST DIVEY MEXICAN FOOD

Lupe's East L.A. Kitchen

110 Sixth Ave. (at Watts St)
212-966-1326

A cluster of bottled hot sauces, including a piquant jalapeño, smoky chipotle, fiery red habanero, and potent green habanero, sits on each Formica tabletop of this Mexicali diner. But they tend to go unused because the homemade salsas served up with the casual cantina fare are sharp and tasty enough on their own. And who'd want to mask the lingering kick of the pico de gallo topping delicious, thick pucks of cazuelitas, corn flour cakes filled with shredded beef, beans and cheese? And why distract from the textural pleasure of the potato tacos, crispy on the outside, soft on the inside and covered with a tangy tomatillo-laced green sauce? Do, however, use it liberally on the bland super burrito, where the red chili gets lost in the jumble of chicken, sour cream, guacamole and refried beans stuffed inside the flour envelope. Yes, it's all that sloppy, Americanized South of the Border fare, but it's the kind that you grew to love, no matter which coast you're from. And while the kitchen and the kitsch factor—including a Mexican disco soundtrack, a wall of retro Spanish-language album covers, and margaritas served in tall, fountain glasses—conjure East L.A., the diverse crowd is purely NYC.

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This list is loosely focused on the Soho neighborhood, and includes locations barely over the border. Most of the content and reviews were taken from New York Magazine.