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"Oh,

thank God," declared my friend the Food Aristocrat when I gave her the news. The great tidal wave of giant Vegas-style dining establishments that has flooded the city's dining scene the last few years appears to have crested and washed out to sea. Down in the meatpacking district, you can still feast in great ocean-liner-size spaces if you wish, or drop thousands of dollars on sushi delicacies jetted in from around the globe. But New York turns out more prize-winning barbecue-pit masters these days than grandiose superstar chefs. In this hypercasual, eco-minded era, the really hot restaurants don't require jackets or ties, and many don't take reservations. Japanese cooks have ditched the big-box model and are once again opening elegant little restaurants in elegant little rooms. Dainty finger foods are the rage in Italian food, and the swells at the posh new spots along Park Avenue and at the Ritz aren't clamoring for soufflés. They're ordering platters of organic Swiss chard to go with their farm-grown dinners and spiking their $15 cocktails with carrot juice.

We analyze these curious dining trends, plus many more, in this, our annual compendium of all that's stylish, fabulous, and new in the fickle galaxy of New York restaurants. In the following pages, you'll find our recommendations for an entire year's worth of serious eating, broken down, as usual, into categories reflecting the most notable culinary happenings of the moment. We will tell you where to procure the most lethal absinthe cocktails in town, instruct you on where to find a good duck egg for brunch, and provide a list of the most lavishly expensive haute cuisine establishments in which to blow the remnants of your year-end bonus. Consider it a kind of road map to take with you on your culinary ramblings. Oh, and if you're looking for the finest Chinese grub in Brooklyn, we've got that, too, along with our yearly summation of New York's best new restaurants, the best up-and-coming chefs, and, last but not least, the best venues, in this age of rampant culinary correctness, for a sinfully delicious, hormone-saturated, nonorganic feast.

MARKET TABLE
Market madness done well. Go at lunchtime, and order the cheeseburger.

STEAKS AND CHOPS

The grilled, bone-in Black Angus strip at **Ouest** gets my other vote for top steak and chop dish on the Upper West Side, but downtown, in my own neighborhood, the blue ribbon goes to Joey Campanaro's new spinoff on Carmine Street called **Market Table**. This frenzied joint has all sorts of accomplished non-steak items on the menu, like short ribs sunk in gnocchi, and an already semi-legendary lunchtime cheeseburger, served with a tangle of fries tossed with Old Bay spice. But when I finally managed to secure a table in the crowded little room not long ago, the dish everyone fought over was the New York strip, courtesy of New York's great beef wholesaler Pat LaFrieda. You can get the marbled LaFrieda sirloin expertly grilled, over a mess of arugula salad and crispy fried artichokes, at the restaurant itself. Or purchase the same beef cut to order at the restaurant's market counter up front, then take it home and grill it yourself.