

—DENVER'S—

25

—BEST—

RESTAURANTS

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SIX IS
THE MAGIC
NUMBER
A cozy corner
at Denver's
Table 6.



16

VESTA DIPPING GRILL

Downtown

When it first opened in 1997, Vesta's circular booths, concrete-topped bar, and saucy menu rendered it the city's must-go restaurant. Thirteen years later, the downtown spot is still flooded with diners in search of chef Matt Selby's bold cuisine. Many dishes—such as the piquant madras-grilled venison or smoked and grilled duck breast—have become staples, and Selby has deftly massaged a trend (dipping sauces) into his signature venue for creativity. Despite having dined at Vesta dozens of times, we're still entranced by the moody lighting and the sultry of-the-minute menu. **1822 Blake St., 303-296-1970, www.vestagrill.com**



DUO *Highland*

17

Everything about Duo is refreshing and comfortable. This sense of ease extends to chef John Broening's intelligent take on brunch and dinner: light shrimp-risotto fritters, soulful braised wild boar, warm white bean salad. Here, you'll find a restaurant that's designed to both nourish and inspire. **2413 W. 32nd Ave., 303-477-4141, www.duodenver.com**



Z CUISINE *Highland*

18

Certain restaurants ooze authenticity, and Z Cuisine, chef-owner Patrick Dupays' French bistro, is one of those spots. Inside the tiny space, French is spoken, ceramic pitchers deliver wine, and braised meats perfume the air. The wait for a table is often hours—but the lingering is worth it. **2239 W. 30th Ave., 303-477-1111, www.zcuisineonline.com**



24

BLACK CAT *Boulder*

This cozy nook of a restaurant doesn't have a bad table—but it does have a great one. Nab the seats overlooking Black Cat's kitchen window and you're privy to all the action. You'll watch as ingredients (many of which come from chef-owner Eric Skokan's farm) are finessed into composed dishes. Don't be tempted to skip over the appetizers—it is here that we think Skokan's cuisine is the most finely tuned. **1964 13th St., Boulder, 303-444-9110, www.blackcatboulder.com**



25

OLIVÉA *Uptown*

Over the winter, the Mediterranean flavors of Olivéa have sustained us. We taste Spain in chef and co-owner John Broening's smoky patatas bravas, Italy in the duck meatballs with creamy polenta, and France in the caper-studded tuna crostini. Supplement any of these dishes with the house-cured charcuterie or the dynamic pork belly with tangerine glaze and lentils, and rejoice in an Uptown restaurant that challenges and educates with each bite. **719 E. 17th Ave., 303-861-5050, www.olivearestaurant.com**

TOP CHEFS

Each year we, as diners, are influenced by the chefs whose restaurants we frequent. It's through their dishes that we broaden our culinary horizons, experience the trends, and rediscover the pleasure that can come from a perfect bite. We commend the chefs below for the excitement they've brought to the Denver-Boulder scene.

CHEF OF THE YEAR

Toshi Kizaki,

Sushi Den, Izakaya Den, Den Deli

Over the past 20 years, Toshi Kizaki has proven to skeptics that ocean-fresh fish can—and does—exist in landlocked Colorado. With prudent sourcing and a brother who works Japan's largest fish market, Sushi Den's seafood sees only 24 hours between being caught and landing on a plate. Kizaki's unprecedented Japanese cuisine has such a following that, two years ago, he opened Izakaya Den across the street to help feed demand. The menu offers sushi along with a creative Japanese tapas-style menu (grilled panzanella salad, hoisin duck tostada) that further demonstrates Kizaki's depth as a chef. And in November of last year, Kizaki added a third Platt Park spot, Den Deli, that functions as a Japanese-style deli, seafood market, and noodle bar. His dedication to authenticity is relentless—he even refused to serve ramen at Den Deli until the flavor profiles met his strict expectations. Excellence is difficult to achieve in even one restaurant; Kizaki manages near perfection in three.

RISING STAR

James Rugile, Venue

When James Rugile took the executive chef position at Venue 18 months ago, few had ever heard of him. Now this 25-year-old, who honed his skills at Black Pearl and Vesta Dipping Grill, has exploded onto the Denver dining scene. He's a bold-faced name in the newspaper; he's spearheaded the Highlands' Chef Collaborative (a small group of like-minded neighborhood chefs); and he's always dining out (everywhere from Olivéa to Frasca) and surveying the competition. We appreciate Rugile's depth of natural talent, his dedication to simple and seasonal eats, and his insatiable drive to better both his restaurant and the greater dining community.

PASTRY CHEF

Yasmin Lozada-Hissom, Duo and Olivéa

Anyone who has ordered dessert at Duo or Olivéa already knows the power that pastry chef Yasmin Lozada-Hissom wields. Her sweets succeed in the balance of texture and flavor—never will you experience a cloying or jaded bite. Instead, her carefully crafted desserts strike an equilibrium of sweet, savory, and salty in every single bite. For proof, order any dessert featuring a heavenly semifreddo.