

TWIN CITIES HOW TO GET **100 MPG** OUT OF **YOUR CAR** **METRO**

TWIN CITIES METROPOLITAN 09/08

51 **best ethnic** **restaurants**

MIDDLE EASTERN, INDIAN,
THAI, MEXICAN & MORE

> **Ethnic Market Guide**

Specialty delis, grocers
and butcher shops

> **Cheap Eats**

10 meals under \$10

> **Root Beer!**

5 crazy-good local brews



Why can't anyone figure out
DOWNTOWN ST. PAUL?





GO GLOBAL, EAT LOCAL

DIG INTO 11 OF THE TWIN CITIES' MOST DIVERSE CUISINES AS LOCAL EXPERTS GUIDE US THROUGH THE BEST, MOST AUTHENTIC ETHNIC RESTAURANTS AND MARKETS IN TOWN.

by MECCA BOS-WILLIAMS, TAMMY SPROULE KAPLAN and ERIN MADSEN
photography by JENN CRESS

We don't have a Chinatown, but so what?

We've got University Avenue—home to vibrant Hmong and Vietnamese communities and their businesses. (Some friends recently did a yearlong “pho tour” along the avenue to see what place offers the best. The verdict? Impossible to choose just one.) Or there's East Lake Street, lined with Mexican mercados and restaurants and more than 120 African-owned shops.

Seems you can't swing a sombrero these days without hitting a storefront created by one of Minnesota's 300,000+ immigrants, and to say they've had a huge effect on our cultural identity would be an obvious understatement. Really, they define it. I mean, what would going out for dinner in the Twin Cities be without chile rellenos, dim sum, jerk chicken, pad Thai, plantains, laab, falafel and coconut curry? It'd be flat-out dull, all liverwurst and onions.

Here's more proof: That dreamy, perfectly meltable queso Oaxaca you can get at nearly every grocery store? Not long ago it was next to impossible to find, and we know who to credit for the change: Maria Silva. Silva alone brought the diverse, regional cuisines of Mexico to the Twin Cities' dining (and shopping) masses. She opened her market and restaurant, El Burrito Mercado, in St. Paul nearly 30 years ago, and more recently consulted the state's largest grocery stores on what Mexican products they should put on their shelves. (She giddily recounts the time she forgot to bring cilantro on a family trip to Brainerd but found it at the local SuperValu.) “We are becoming very sophisticated in our food culture in the Twin Cities,” Silva beams. “It's very exciting.”

We couldn't agree more. So we decided to seek out the best, most authentic ethnic food in our metro, and went straight to the experts for help. Here, some of the cities' brightest chefs and restaurateurs share their top 40 picks for unarguably great food from around the globe. —EM

INDIAN

VISHWANATHA NADIG, CHEF-OWNER, DANCING GANESHA AND NALAPAK

When a cuisine starts popping up in contemporary form, prepared by highly trained chefs, it's a sure sign that it's evolving within its locale. Such is the case with Indian cuisine and the recently opened Dancing Ganesha in downtown Minneapolis. Owner Vishwanatha Nadig, who also owns Nalapak in Columbia Heights, has found an audience of repeat customers in tune with the nuances of Indian cuisine, and plans to replicate Dancing Ganesha in St. Paul and Woodbury sometime next year—though he says it can still be a challenge finding qualified Indian chefs. These restaurants feature a few of his favorite Indian dishes around town:

Nalapak

With a name derived from Hindu mythology, Nalapak is a purely vegetarian restaurant serving South Indian cuisine. Nadig recommends house

specialties like masala dosa, vegetable korma, upma (an Indian cream of wheat) and vada (a lentil doughnut). The weekday buffet gives you a lot of bang for the buck, and you'll likely walk out feeling comfortably stuffed. [4920 Central Ave. N.E., Columbia Heights; 763.574.1113; nalapak.com]

India Palace

While spending time living in Eau Claire, Wis., Nadig grew fond of the Woodbury location of India Palace, where he loves the way the dishes are seasoned. His typical order includes the aloo gobi and chicken tikka. The generous platters of food served here make this suburban favorite a sure winner for groups. [2570 N. Cleveland Ave., Roseville, 651.631.1222; 8362 Tamarack Village, Woodbury, 651.731.6300; indiapalacemn.com]

Hyderabad House

The prices at Hyderabad House, a humble, mom-and-pop stop attached to Patel Groceries, make dining there a steal. The menu is truly regional, not just the same old list of Pan-Indian standards, with plenty of vegetarian options. The buffet is filled with home-cooked delights like dal, masala dishes like chickpea or okra, paratha (whole wheat, fried flatbread) and a selection of hot pickles. [1831 Central Ave. N.E., Mpls.; 612.706.3292] —TSK

THAI

SUPENN HARRISON, CHEF-OWNER, SAWATDEE

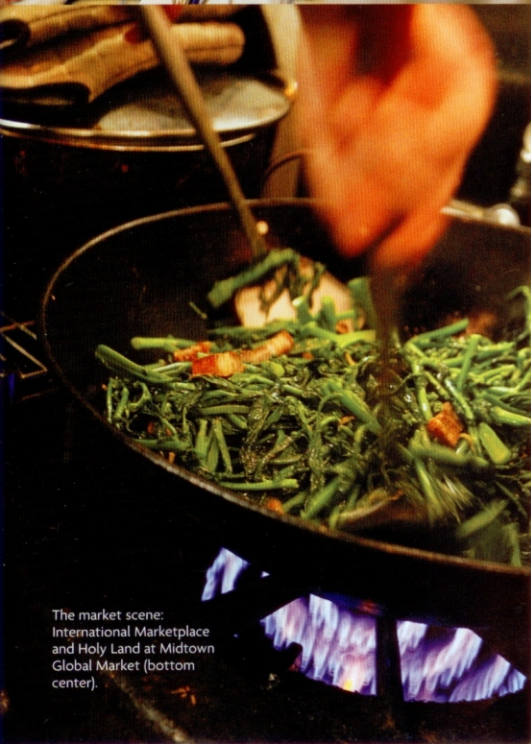
To say Supenn Harrison—the 30-year owner of Twin Cities Thai institution Sawatdee—is a spitfire would be like saying Minnesota winters can be “a little cool.” The 62-year-old native of Uttradit, a small village between Bangkok and Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand, is credited with bringing Thai food to the Twin Cities when Minnesotans didn't know Thai from Taiwanese. “I'm the first one in the Twin Cities, and I'm going to be the last one on the planet!” Harrison says with piercing conviction. She says the Twin Cities is a good place to find Thai cuisine, but only in the past 10 or so years. She points out that many of the restaurants currently in business are owned or operated by alumni of Sawatdee. And she takes great pride in the cooking she learned from her mother, who still lives in Thailand. Harrison says you can determine the authenticity of a Thai meal by its balance of hallmark flavors: sweet, hot, salty and sour. No single dish should tip in the direction of one or the other, but rather maintain an easy balance between them all. The staples a Thai cook can't do without include Jasmine rice, rice noodles, green vegetables, lemongrass, galanga (a type of ginger), fish sauce and chilies.

Royal Orchid

“They have a dish there that I don't have on my menu called crispy noodle. It's really crisp and a little sweet. Other dishes I recommend are keow teow rad na—a big thick noodle that's stir-fried and topped with a choice of meat and broccoli and a thick soybean sauce. People love this. They also make their own Thai sausage with ground pork, rice, curry paste and Kaffir lime leaves. Yum!” [2401 Fairview Ave., Roseville; 651.639.9999]

Spice Thai Cuisine

“This is just a simple but good little place in the suburbs. Many of the restaurants in the city are overpriced, and this one isn't. They have the best fried rice with shrimp.” [3898 County Rd. 42, Savage; 952.882.9272; spicemn.com]



The market scene:
International Marketplace
and Holy Land at Midtown
Global Market (bottom
center).

Pho 79

Shouldn't we all be so lucky to have an auntie who owns a pho shop? Truong grew up on the pho served at Pho 79, and the broth here is made from the same secret family recipe that he uses at Ngon Vietnamese Bistro, with a few of his own tweaks, of course. Which is better? That's for you to decide. [2529 Nicollet Ave., Mpls., 612.871.4602]

Al Hues Bakery

Truong likes to stop in at this blink-and-you'll-miss-it bakery tucked away behind Krua Thailand for the Vietnamese sandwiches and pastries. [432 University Ave. W., St. Paul; 651.602.0231] —TSK

MIDDLE EASTERN

SAMEH WADI, CHEF-OWNER, SAFFRON

Like any good chef, Sameh Wadi, the young chef-owner of downtown's stylish Saffron, widely thought of as our town's only haute Mid-East cuisine, is particular about what he defines as "authentic." This is why he considers the Twin Cities just an OK place to find Middle Eastern cuisine. "Every place you go, the menu is going to be a little bit Americanized," Wadi says. "For instance, most places use what I call 'gyro Spam,' the conical pressed lamb that goes inside gyros—which is delicious. I crave it all the time. But it isn't authentic." For real Middle Eastern cooking, Wadi says he can't live without his spices, especially garam masala and ras el hanout (translating to "head of the shop," or the best spices a shopkeeper has to offer), which is a blend of about seven spices varying slightly from cook to cook. Wadi's version blends cardamom, allspice, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, coriander and black pepper. But when he wants someone else to do the heavy lifting, here's where (and what) you can find him eating:

Barbary Fig

"It's owned by a North African chef, Brahim Hadj-Moussa, who's been there for about 20 years. He treats the customers as if they are at his home, and he cooks the food that he grew up eating. He doesn't serve the tagines [a slow-cooked meat and vegetable stew named for the dish it's cooked in] in some fancy tagine; the couscous is always spot-on; he makes his own merguez [spicy sausage]; and all of his desserts are from scratch—the chocolate-hazelnut briouats [filled pastry triangles] with honey and lavender are effing great!" [720 Grand Ave., St. Paul; 651.290.2085]

Caspian Bistro

"My whole family goes here specifically for the ground meat kebabs, which are cooked over an open flame, so they don't get charred, but instead the heat creates a nice crust on the meat. The simple seasoning on the meat makes it really unique, because traditionally kebabs are highly spiced." [2418 University Ave. S.E., Mpls.; 612.623.1113]

Holy Land

"Holy Land offers an authentic shawirma [gyro] sandwich on Fridays only. The chicken is whole-boned and spit-roasted one on top of another, so when it's sliced you get a little bit of everything—thigh, breast and fat. The beef and lamb version is made with flanks and shoulders, and then everything is seasoned with vinegar, fresh herbs, garlic and sumac, and then served in super-thin Lavosh instead of the fat pita bread. You have to get there by 11 a.m., or no later than noon, if you want to get one!" Holy Land is also home to a halal butcher shop, which follows strict religious guidelines pertaining to slaughtering and freshness. [2513 Central Ave. N.E., Mpls.; 612.781.2627; holylandbrand.com]

Saffron

At Saffron, Wadi focuses on offering a cross between traditional and new Middle Eastern cuisine. Mezze, very small starters akin to tapas, are authentic and could be found on most dinner tables in the Middle East. But with other items, he takes a more modern approach with flavors (you won't find foie gras on many tables in the Middle East, but the accompanying date- and almond-filled briouat is traditional). Either way, you can't go wrong. [123 N. 3rd St., Mpls.; 612.746.5533; saffronmpls.com]—MBW

ECUADORIAN

GERMAN SARMIENTO, COOK, GRAND CAFÉ

German Sarmiento is one of an estimated 10,000–15,000 Ecuadorian immigrants currently living in the Twin Cities, according to the local Ecuadorian consulate, and like many of those immigrants he's been working in the food-service industry since his arrival. With about three years of fine-dining experience under his belt, Sarmiento currently cooks at Grand Café in Minneapolis. Due to this large new community, the Twin Cities is becoming a good place for Ecuadorian food, and Sarmiento estimates that there are about 10 Ecuadorian eateries in business here, most along East Lake Street in Minneapolis. Ecuador's richly varied topography—tropical coastline, Andean mountains and Amazon rainforest—makes characterizing its native cuisine difficult. As in any coastal region, seafood is highlighted, and in agrarian communities you'll find chicken, beef and cuy—more commonly known as guinea pig and usually reserved for special occasions. "It's my favorite dish," Sarmiento says. (Most area restaurants will prepare cuy, but you need to call a couple of days in advance.) And no, he says, it doesn't taste like chicken. Typical seasonings used to flavor roasted meats and soups include cumin, achiote, garlic and cilantro.

Los Andes

Our conversation took place over dinner at Los Andes, Sarmiento's first pick for its breadth of menu choices. He chose a giant dish of rice, pinto beans, marinated beef steak, thick-cut bacon that put Nueske's to shame, fried egg, fried plantain, half an avocado and an arepa (a thick corn cake). It's a towering dish, and could easily feed two or maybe even three. For me, he recommended the mariscos mixtos: mussels, crab legs, shrimp, squid and plantains in a flavorful broth over rice. The two dishes side by side are a nice illustration of land-to-sea variants. Beverage accompaniments are usually beer or one of the many sweet imported juices or sodas like the apple-flavored Flora. [317 W. Lake St., Mpls.; 612.825.1700]

While it's tempting to draw parallels between Ecuadorian and Mexican cuisines, German Sarmiento points out that there are many differences between the two. You're more likely to see potatoes as an accompaniment in Ecuadorian meals than beans and rice; chilies are almost never used in the food but instead a habanero chili sauce known as aji, which is served on the side; and rather than tortillas, you might find a smaller, thicker corn cake called arepa. As with Mexican cuisine, a simple salad of lettuce, tomato and onion usually accompanies each plate.

La Bahia

"La Bahia has a special dish called la parillada, which is kind of like a mixed grill; it's got three kinds of meat—chicken, steak and a pork chop—and I also really like the la trucha, or trout." (Canadian trout were introduced to lakes and rivers in poor Andean communities to provide a much-needed protein source to their diets. The fish are doing well there and are now considered something of a national dish.) [1024 E. 38th St., Mpls.; 612.252.0250]

Guayaquil

"Guayaquil has the best carne asada (known as a Mexican dish, but this is an Ecuadorian take on it) ceviches and also la bandera, which translates to "the flag," and has stewed meat—usually goat and maybe tripe or chicken—along with rice and a kind of pasta." [1526 E. Lake St., Mpls.; 612.722.2346]—MBW

CARIBBEAN

WEST INDIES: HARRY SINGH, CHEF-OWNER, HARRY SINGH'S CARIBBEAN RESTAURANT

As the longest-standing Caribbean restaurateur in the Twin Cities—his first incarnation opened in 1983—Harry Singh, like Supenn Harrison of Sawatdee, is an institution, and he knows it. "I'm the only one doing authentic Trinidadian food here," he says. "If you go to Trinidad and you come back here, you're getting the exact same thing, and I hear that all of the time. Remember: I'm the first guy. I've got the Cadillac of hot sauces." There isn't a large Caribbean community in the Twin Cities, so it's not the best place to find the cuisine, which is anchored by peas and rice, curries, roti (wheat-flour flat bread) and tropical beverages. Singh still gets a number of his ingredients imported from Trinidad through a Florida purveyor. While he's checked out some of the other spots—he makes mention of West Indies Soul and El Meson—he continues to return to his own kitchen for the "real deal." His 25-year-old son is the only other person he trusts in the kitchen with his mother's recipes. "If I cook or if he does, you'll never taste the difference," Singh says, adding that "a good old roti with curry" is his favorite dish. [2653 Nicollet Ave. S., Mpls.; 612.729.6181; harysinghs.com]

CUBA: NIKI STAVROU, CO-OWNER, VICTOR'S 1959 CAFE

When Niki Stavrou and her then-husband, Victor Valens, who hails from Cuba, sought to open a restaurant nearly 10 years ago, Stavrou made an astute observation: "I'm Greek, but there were already several really good Greek restaurants in town and no Cuban ones, so I said, 'Let's open a Cuban place.'" Like the most famous eatery in Havana, La Bodeguita del Medio, Victor's colorful, modest interior is adorned floor-to-ceiling with the graffiti of diners gone by, and like "La B del M" (for short) nearly everyone has passed through Victor's doors at one time or another. "We're the only restaurant in the Twin Cities where you can get authentic Cuban food," Stavrou says. "I define that by the fact that we're using recipes that came from a Cuban family, and we're working hard to keep that integrity intact. It's not always easy to get these ingredients, and I have to go through Miami to get things like guava, coco rallado [a special shredded coconut], Cuban sodas and plantain chips." The must-have ingredients integral to a Cuban kitchen are rice, beans, plantains, yucca, pork, lime and garlic. "When you own a restaurant, you don't get to eat out a lot, but I like what Hector Ruiz [Café Ena, El Meson, Indio] does with ceviches and seafood—he's just a really good chef. And I love Los Andes for their empanadas." [3756 Grand Ave. S., Mpls.; 612.827.8948; victors1959cafe.com]—MBW