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Gourmet

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RESTAURANTS

The places we're talking about—and making reservations at—this month.

CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA: *Bonne Soirée* slipped into town so quietly that almost no one noticed. Then word about Chip Smith's innovative takes on French classics began to spread, and now locals are lining up for tempting items like an airy Gruyère tart with caramelized onions and a soft-poached egg; oxtail *en crépinette* with homemade *pappardelle*; and braised thigh and grilled loin of rabbit with Savoy cabbage and spaetzle. 431 West Franklin Street (919-928-8388).

DENVER: If the life of a city can be documented in its restaurants, then the advent of tiny *Fruition* has opened a whole new chapter for Denver. Chef Alex Seidel, an alum of local standard-bearer Mizuna, creates pristine comfort food such as chicken soup with handmade pasta and "crock-pot veal cheeks" with crisp Fontina polenta, while partner Paul Attardi masterminds the welcoming air in the cozy dining room. 1313 East Sixth Avenue (303-831-1962; fruitionrestaurant.com).

MINNEAPOLIS: *Saffron* chef-owner Sameh Wadi, a Palestinian who was born in Kuwait, is on top of his game with his contemporary dishes inspired by the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Everything on the menu is deftly cooked and delightfully creative, including the earthy house-cured lamb BLT and the salmon *tagine*, a tony riff on the classic Moroccan stew. 123 North Third Street (612-746-5533; saffronmpls.com).

PHILADELPHIA: At sophisticated *Xochitl* (pronounced "so cheet"), 32-year-old Dionicio Jimenez plays the role of culinary envoy from Puebla with the festive foods of his childhood in Mexico. Squid luxuriates hot-pot-style with guajillo chiles, while the soulful braises—pork in a vigorous *mixiote* sauce, lamb

infused with pulque—pulsate with flavor. No wonder Marc Vetri wouldn't let him continue to wash dishes once he'd tasted his cooking. For seconds, *Osteria*, the new home for Vetri's high-art spins on rustic Italian dishes, recharges the red, white, and green with *candele* pasta and wild boar; wood-grilled octopus; and blistered-crust pizzas. *Osteria*, 640 North Broad Street (215-763-0920; osteriaphilly.com); *Xochitl*, 408 South Second Street (215-238-7280; xochitlphilly.com).

SEBASTOPOL, CALIFORNIA: Stephen Singer and Jonathan Waxman, who last teamed up at Napa's Table 29, are at it again, this time an hour north of San Francisco. *West County Grill* consolidates all of the duo's passions—regional bounty, great wine, and a convivial gathering spot. The casual appeal of Darren McDonald's cooking is best expressed in his pristine Pacific halibut tartare, delectably moist grilled quail, and robust *farro* pasta with porcini and crisp pancetta. 6948 Sebastopol Avenue (707-829-9500; westcountygrill.com).

WASHINGTON, D.C.: An irresistible lobster burger topped with thick fried potato slices, 72-hour short ribs more flavorful than Wagyu sirloin, or just perfect freshly shucked oysters and grilled hanger steak with fries—Michel Richard (of Citronelle) may well be the best French chef in America, but he's also an unpretentious fellow with a huge sense of fun. *Central*, his bright and lively new "modern American French bistro," gives him plenty of room to play. 1001 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. (202-626-0015; centralmichelrichard.com).

Chef de cuisine Cedric Maupillier mans the stove at *Central*, in Washington, D.C.; in Denver, *Fruition* updates oysters Rockefeller.