

**Best of 2011: The Restaurant Edition**

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Mood and mind, place and time: once recorded, they cannot be erased. Neither can company nor cast, nor the events that happened at table.

To do so would be a pity anyway, for [dining is theatre](#); every part a prop, everyone a role. And, as with life, in its unscripted scenes are often its finest moments. So keep them all, I say, and learn to love every bit, the good and the not so good. Leave nothing on the cutting room floor.

I will not pretend that I can detach matters of the heart from matters of the mind. I'd be foolish to make such a claim. So, on what basis do I choose the best restaurant meals I've had this year? The food? The service? The upholstery? The weather? The conversation? Can they be separated?

I say they cannot.

Complete objectivity is a myth. I know you know this, and yet I feel compelled to repeat it. So, I'll simply disclaim: this year's list of my best restaurant meals – like [every one of them in the past](#) – is nothing more than a filtered figment. I wish I could account for the ticks and tacks that add up to the number before us. But I can't.

Are these the most delicious meals I had this year? Not necessarily.

Are they the most flawless? Not particularly. The most memorable? Perhaps, but not entirely.

For a variety of reasons – food being primary – the following ten meals set themselves apart from the rest.

In 2011, this was no easy feat.

This year took me to many of the best restaurants in the world, and to times and places here and there. I've never eaten so well, or with such breadth and depth in my life, and probably never will again.

I ate in Paris, 1906, and in Lyon, 1965. In a pink *mesón*, I glimpsed 18th-century Puebla in a mole *poblano*, and at a 16th-century pub on the coast of Kent, I tasted salt marsh umami in lamb *pré salé*. Chagall and Bonnard kept me company, whilst I ate veal and *rösti* alone in Zurich in the 1920s, and the king of France himself met me for lunch on a marbled terrace by the sea in Monte-Carlo, bringing with him the gilded, Bourbon opulence of the 1760s.

In Charleston, George Washington whispered in my ear while I ate foods that he might have eaten there, lost and recovered in between my time and his. In Italy, I was taken back to the future on an eel, swimming up the Po to discover an orchard of apples. And in Germany, I feasted in a fairytale castle on *neue* cuisine, the handiwork of that country's most talented chefs.

On the Costa Brava, I was lost to time altogether, over and over again, recollections replayed anew by luminaries of the *vanguardia* - where three rocks appeared on the landscape of my memory, where a box appeared on a terrace by the sea, and where an iridescent parrotfish brought me licorice in a little, golden house with blue trim, the soul of the Mediterranean.

I threw caution off the icy slopes of St. Moritz and celebrated with white truffles. I threw good sense out the window of our rental on I-77 and drove seven hours (each way) to eat in a forlorn town in the Appalachia. I'm glad I did, that meal is one of the ten on this year's list.

In the West Village, I ate mightily; a burger with blue cheese. In the East Village, I ate monastically; vegetables with sake and tea.

And in San Francisco, I arrived at a hearth, warm and cozy, the threshold of a new and exciting era in dining.

Those of you who read this blog regularly will know of the times and

places to which I refer. And you know of the largesse from which I must choose. But if this all sounds a bit abstract, a wee apocalyptic to you, then decode these mysteries for yourself here: it's all unpacked by my [suitcase party](#).

This year's ten best meals share few similarities. They range from the charming to the epic. Some electrified, others comforted. Each was unique. But two commonalities are striking enough to be mentioned: nine of these meals were within walking distance of the ocean,\* and I ate at six of these restaurants more than once this year – two of them thrice, four of them twice. A seventh one I've visited more than a half-dozen times in the past decade. So, most of the restaurants that appear on this year's list have the unfair advantage of familiarity, as well as repeated opportunities to impress.

But I wouldn't have returned without warrant, right? Clearly, I couldn't get enough of them.

This year, the first five meals staked their claims confidently – in some cases, even before I finished eating – and held their places at the top for months, unseated and untouched by many subsequent worthies. These five are truly in a league of their own.

The remaining five slots proved much harder to assign, especially the last one. There were simply too many great meals to consider, comparable or special, in one way or another. But, I resisted expansion and split hairs to keep this year's list at ten entries.

So, across a dozen states, eleven countries, and over eighty Michelin stars, here are the best meals I had in 2011.

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1. [Quique Dacosta](#)  
(Dénia, Spain)



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Collectively, the three meals that I had at Quique Dacosta in July of this year changed my life. The second one – a lunch – was not only my favorite of the three, but the best meal I had in 2011. Yet, it was far from being one of the most delicious meals I had this year. For those candidates, you'll have to look down the list and beyond. So why did Quique Dacosta catapult so high above the rest? More than any other meal I had this year, my lunch at Dacosta's taught me the smells and flavors of a different land. This was the Levant of Spain, where the earth and sea meet at sunrise. This was the world [inside his mind](#). And for Quique Dacosta's ability to carve it into mine, he finds himself atop the rest.

2. [Husk](#)  
(Charleston, South Carolina)



How is it possible for an Asian-American boy from the Midwest to have such an affinity to Southern food? Is it the pork fat, the lingua franca of the current culinary world, which you will find here, suffused into every dish with a hint of smoke? No, rather, I think it's the story that Sean Brock weaves into every dish, a tale more finely stitched than any flavor could ever sew. When you eat at Husk, you're eating centuries of history, clear and concise, confident and convincing. There is no guessing here – this is the South by way of the rest of the world, and the sum of many who have worked the sea and soil from the Appalachia to the Gulf, from the Lowcountry to the Mississippi River. And you'll find its [provenance](#) on its walls: buttermilk from the Cruze Family in Tennessee; rabbit from Ashley Farms in North Carolina; *fleur de sel* from Midge Jolly in Key West, Florida; grits from Hagwood Hills, South Carolina. But rising above all the thought, all the lore, and all the tradition is unmitigated deliciousness. Here are those crispy pig ears that topped my list of [best dishes this year](#), along with many others, like a meaty, molted crab with peas, or a skillet of golden cornbread, simple but amazing. Maybe it was a sense of discovery that made it particularly special, or the good friends with whom I ate that night, or Sean Brock's infectious laugh, which rings on in my mind, but my first

meal at Husk was my favorite of the three I was lucky to have there this year. And certainly, it was one of the very best meals I had in 2011.



3. [Louis XV](#)  
(Monte-Carlo, Monaco)



It rolls in slow motion, edges vignetté, focus softened. And yet, the memory of my meal at Louis XV is as crisp and clean as those linens that hugged my table, as rich as the sauces and gold that [gilt](#) each plate. What can you say to pampering and perfection? Yes, please! Louis XV is one of the only restaurants left that argues for grandeur beyond hope and spoils with excess beyond reason. And yet it is not a relic. It is very relevant. It is a masterpiece. As I wrote earlier this year: behold, Louis XV: proud, prodigal, peerless.



4. [TownHouse](#)  
(Chilhowie, Virginia)



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Slow to start, when my dinner at TownHouse hit its stride, it took off and didn't stop. In fact, it's still going. It revisits me often and bids me to recall that sweet, hay-infused milk sauce that John Shields drizzled around *farro* and beef cheeks (one of the [very best dishes](#) I had this year) and the X.O. sauce that lowered a tender piece of pork a few octaves with its indescribable depth. I remember too, Karen Shields leading me through a fragrant forest of quince and herbs (one of the [very best desserts](#) I had this year), arriving at a campfire, where she unearthed a molten ingot of dark chocolate, sweeping away the ash with the tang of yogurt. Poetic? Highly. Imaginative? Few exceed. What are they doing in Chilhowie, Virginia? Thinking, learning, reaching, pioneering. [You can't get there quickly enough.](#)

5. [The Sportsman](#)  
(Seasalter, The United Kingdom)



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[My best meal in 2008](#) was at The Sportsman. It eclipsed all others. So I'm not surprised to see it return to this year's list. In January, I went back to this gastropub on those pebbly shores of Kent for two meals. The first one, a quiet dinner alone, is the one that ranks here. There is excitement in simplicity, and Stephen Harris knows this well. Monkshill lamb with a spot of potatoes; a simple tart, paved with mushrooms *duxelles* and capped with a fluffy egg custard; a fleshy pyramid of skate dressed with vinegary butter – one of the [best dishes](#) I had this year – and a frothy chocolate mousse, with dark caramel and a cold, milky sorbet – one of the [best desserts](#) I had this year. This meal was a joyous [return to that salt marsh umami](#) I remembered and loved so well.

6. [El Quim de la Boqueria](#)  
(Barcelona, Spain)



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Among the chaotic stacks of meat and fruit at the Mercat de la Boqueria in Barcelona, you will find a beautifully varnished counter wrapped around a kempt stall. This is el Quim de la Boqueria, where I had two fantastic meals this year. The first one in February was so good that I returned in July, heading there straight from the airport for a quick bite before returning to the airport to pick up my friend for a road trip down the coast (the round-trip cab fare cost more than that lunch). Chiparones the size of gum drops, inky and tender under a fried egg. A sautéed slice of *foie gras*, crusted with burnt sugar, atop wild mushrooms. Razor clams and *gambas*, cooked on the *plancha*, and baby artichokes, fried until crispy. A length of *butifarra* with a crowd of creamy beans, and a fat blood sausage filled with rice and served with onions. These are the simple, yet spectacular pleasures of el Quim. I [crave](#) it.

7. [Mirazur](#)  
(Menton, France)



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The scent of lemons, the smell of the sea, these are the things I remember most about Mauro Colagreco's Mirazur, perched just this side of the French-Italian border on the Côte d'Azur. On top of super-fresh ingredients and impeccable cooking, at the second of my two meals there, I was served a beautiful [spectrum](#) of flavors, colors, and textures from the surrounding land and waters, an edible rainbow.



8. [saison](#)  
(San Francisco, California)



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I was smitten with saison the moment I walked into its rambling space, and fell further in love with it at chef Joshua Skenes's kitchen counter. There was something untamed about it all, a liveliness of spirit that excited me. It wasn't just a philosophy, it was innate, organic, and it welled up on each plate that arrived. This was nature at its very finest, á la saison, magnified and magnificent. This was [holism](#) at hearth and home, and one of my best meals of 2011. Oh, and the soundtrack? Totally awesome.

9. [Jean Georges](#)  
(New York, New York)



Perhaps it's fitting that I first fell hopelessly in love with fine dining under the gaze of a globe, the world and all its delicious possibilities looking down on me, a young man, dining alone in that jewel box on Columbus Circle. I can name the dish, too, that awakened me to the rest of my eating life: a trio of warm *kumamoto* oysters dressed with crispy bacon, sherry vinaigrette, and creamy leeks. And the desserts that followed were just as seminal – a set of four, thrilling tastes, including poached quince with goat cheese and Pedro Ximenes *granité*, and a red wine tart with prune and Armagnac ice cream. In those dishes, I glimpsed the exciting possibilities that awaited me in restaurants near and far, and it launched a quest that sees no end. So, it gives me great pleasure to return to Jean Georges, year after year, and find it just as exciting as, if not more so than when I first arrived (Jean Georges also appeared on my list of [best meals last year](#)). In May, I reaffirmed my faith and hope there, when I found [splendor anew](#). Next week marks the last for Johnny Iuzzini as pastry chef of Jean Georges. I thank him for his many generosityes over the years and wish him the best beyond.



10. [elBulli](#)  
(Cala Montjoi, Spain)



How cliché of me, right? For anyone who's been, elBulli's appearance on their year-end list seems all but obligatory. Truth be told, even though my first meal there in February was unforgettable, if that were the only meal I had at elBulli this year, the restaurant's name would not appear on this list today (not even close). Instead, you'd be reading about my meal at [Philippe Rochat](#), or The Modern, or [Sant Pau](#), or [el Moli](#), or Sushi Yasuda, where I had far more pleasing food. But I had two meals at elBulli this year, and the second one – in July, right before Ferrán Adrià closed its doors – was far better, in my opinion. The food seemed more finely tuned; thrilling at times, even. Was it one of the ten best meals I had this year? Reluctantly, I say that it was, and I will not begrudge its rightful place among its peers. Might I have been blinded by the rarity of the occasion, softened by the lovely cast of characters that assembled on that terrace by the sea? Perhaps. But I cannot overlook the tremendous thought poured into the forty-four courses we were served that day, an [anthology](#) of tastes that took us around the world, upending each corner as we passed them by. And much of it was surprisingly delicious, on top of being innovative and challenging. I went to Cala Montjoi a skeptic, and left a believer.

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### About the Author

Bonjwing Lee is a food writer and photographer based in Kansas City, Missouri.

Most recently, he photographed and co-authored “bluestem, the cookbook” with Colby Garrelts, a Food & Wine Best New Chef and five-time James Beard Award nominee, and his wife, Megan.

Bonjwing’s photographs have also appeared in numerous publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Food & Wine Magazine*, and *Scanorama Portfolio*, the inflight magazine for Scandinavian Airlines. He has also photographed at culinary events around the world, including the Bocuse d’Or in Lyon, France and the James Beard Awards in New York City. He is a regular writer and a photographer for KC Magazine and the author of the blog, “the ulterior epicure.”

Bonjwing holds a Bachelors of Science in Radio, Television, and Film from Northwestern University (2000) in Evanston, Illinois and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Michigan Law School (2006) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Prior to taking up a career as a full-time photographer and writer, he worked in Hollywood as a web designer for Sony Pictures Entertainment, as an aide to a U.S. Senator in Washington, D.C., and practiced corporate and aviation law in Kansas City.

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