Three D.C. restaurants — Moon Rabbit at the Wharf, Oyster Oyster in Shaw, and Imperfecto in West End — have been named to Esquire’s list of best new restaurants of in America this year, continuing a multi-year trend of local eateries rising to the top of prestigious rankings.

Last year, four local restaurants were named in Esquire’s “23 Best New Restaurants in America” list. In 2019, three local spots made the ranking.

This year’s list of 40 restaurants is longer than last year’s — in part, Esquire editor Kevin Sintumuang wrote, because the restaurant industry is still working to recover from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

“We want to support an industry that still needs it,” wrote Sintumuang. “So, to shine a spotlight on a larger number of our favorite new places this year, we enlisted not one, not two, but four people to eat around the country.”
The editors of the list — Omar Mamoon, Joshua David Stein, Jeff Gordinier, and Sintumuang — said they were especially attracted this year to “delicious, non preachy vegan meals that would make even the most ardent meat eater crave vegetables.”

Oyster Oyster, which ranked 12th on Esquire’s list, is named for two kinds of oysters: The bivalves that live in water, and oyster mushrooms. Its chefs have described its menu as “plant-forward”; they pride themselves on prioritizing local ingredients and sustainability. The mushroom, corn truffle, and potato dish at D.C.’s Oyster Oyster made the team’s list of the “most transcendent vegan options” they tried this year.

Sintumuang described Oyster Oyster as a place of “experimental exuberance,” adding that the tasting menu was a “$75 bargain” that will “make you believe that an oystertarian future can be damn delicious and fun.”

The second D.C. restaurant on Esquire’s list, Moon Rabbit, is a modern Vietnamese restaurant that opened last year in Southwest D.C. in the former Kith/Kin space.

Chef Kevin Tien said the restaurant was a way of reconnecting with his culinary heritage — cooking dishes from his childhood, but also expanding his knowledge of Vietnamese cuisine.

Sintumuang was especially taken with the fish sandwich — a catfish filet surrounded by a “pillowy” curry milk-bread bun, along with the charred cabbage and ga chien fried chicken. He said he asked for seconds of all.

“Chef Kevin Tien’s dishes are an exploration not only of Vietnamese cuisine but of maximum craveability,” he wrote.

Imperfecto, meanwhile, opened in the spring from chef Enrique Limardo, whose other D.C. restaurant Seven Reasons has also received national acclaim (it topped Esquire’s list last year). He and business partner Ezequiel Vázquez-Ger wanted to “find all those strings that connect South America with the Mediterranean and create new dishes,” Limardo told us in March.

Sintumuang writes that they managed to do so, “purposefully yet playfully across several artful, luxe dishes.” He points out the restaurant’s tuna tartare, which is laced with chiles, fois gras served on plaintain brioche, and an ancient grain salad that gets a tart bite from pickles.

The editors of the list acknowledged that while travel was difficult or fraught for many people this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, it has become more possible — and especially satisfying — to satisfy the need for a journey or escape by trying new foods.

“When you’re ready, get out there and support these places, those on our previous years’ lists, and any of your local favorites,” wrote Sintumuang. “Because sometimes that escape is closer than you think.”