Wanderlust is a real thing. Hunger is a real thing. And in a year when you couldn’t stand to look at your Instant Pot anymore and had to delay that vacation to Paris, when you craved something more than travel shows and takeout, the most satisfying way to feed the need for a journey was to go to a restaurant, feel taken care of, and try at least one thing from the menu that you’d never had before.

The transportive power of food, the soul-stirring nature of hospitality—real things, too. This is all to say that in these not normal times, we need both the normalcy and the escape of restaurants now more than ever.

And we want to support an industry that still needs it. 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: seasoned food writers Omar Mamoon and Joshua David Stein, our former food and drink editor Jeff Gordinier, and yours truly. Together and separately, we traveled thousands of miles and dined at hundreds of restaurants to deliver a list nearly twice as large as last year’s.
As we ate around America, we were drawn to food made with raw, elemental fire and charcoal—it’s never gone out of style, after all these millennia. The char called to us whether it graced the elote from a Sonoran grill at Bacanora in Phoenix, the ends of gyro meat at Andros Taverna in Chicago, or the dry-aged Wagyu at Austin’s Hestia. We couldn’t stop talking about delicious, nonpreachy vegan meals that would make even the most ardent meat eater crave vegetables. (Here’s a mini list, the most transcendent vegan options of the year: 1. Fried lasagna at Cadence, New York. 2. Mushroom, corn truffle, and potato at Oyster Oyster, Washington, D. C. 3. Sunflower bread and butter at Eleven Madison Park, New York.) We even fell back in love with multicourse tasting menus at Chicago’s Ever and Houston’s March. In the hands of the right team, they can still be a sublime, luxe experience rather than the pricey, interminable drag they oftentimes veer into. And you’ll see that there’s more New York representation than in previous years. Why? Because New York is undeniably back in a big way.

Perhaps most significant: We found ourselves digging into comfort, sure, but we also leaned into the unfamiliar. Into adventure. Eating at the very best restaurants is like winning a ticket to another place, another time. To the past and the future—and sometimes both at once. To Macau via pork chop; to the graciousness of a Wisconsin supper club when your martini glass is refreshed with a frosted one; to central Texas and the Black South through brisket; to a Scandinavian grandmother’s kitchen by way of an apple-pie crust laden with lard; to a precolonized America via the sweet, nutty flavors of hand-harvested wild rice.

Our minds have been warped. The experiential miles we logged will last us a very long time (or at least until we start reporting next year’s Best New Restaurants list). And we hope you’ll be able to take some of these culinary, cultural journeys as well. When you’re ready, get out there and support these places, those on our previous years’ lists, and any of your local favorites. Because sometimes that escape is closer than you think. —Kevin Sintumuang
When the fish sandwich arrived—a catfish fillet, delicately flaky in the middle, crunchy on the outside, scented with turmeric and lemongrass, hugged by a pillowy curry milk-bread bun—it was devoured, and immediately we asked for another, and some extra milk bread, too. We did the same with the simple charred cabbage with pineapple and even got another epic ga chien fried chicken, layered with a chile-maple fish sauce, for the road. Chef Kevin Tien’s dishes are an exploration not only of Vietnamese cuisine but of maximum craveability. Moon Rabbit at 801 Wharf Street SW, Washington, D.C. —K.S.