

Best new restaurants of 2023 in Cincinnati

It was another exciting year for [the Greater Cincinnati dining scene](#). Along with some ambitious high-end restaurants, we saw the openings of a lively Italian cafe in Mount Lookout, a chef-driven taqueria in Terrace Park and an intimate tapas spot in Ludlow.

As in past years, I've limited my list of best new restaurants to those that opened before November (so if you're rooting for Collette or Atwood, you'll have to wait until next year).



Conserva Wine & Tapas Bar, Ludlow

Lauren and Challis Hodge brought destination dining to Ludlow with [the opening of this lively wine bar](#) and tapas spot. Conserva offered up some of the best bites I had in 2023, including the Gilda, a short skewer of plump green olives, spicy-sweet peppers and anchovies. And [the tinned fish lover in me](#) appreciated the curated menu of mackerel in olive oil, razor clams in brine and octopus in paprika sauce.

There's also jamon serrano topped with tangy sundried tomato, nutty Manchego and sweet honey, and garlic shrimp cooked in sherry and tossed with mild guindilla peppers. If you haven't experienced Conserva yet, make it one of the first places you dine in 2024.

225 Elm St., Ludlow, 859-261-0680, conservatapasbar.com.

Opal, Covington

A rooftop restaurant is a special sort of thing. And when it's done right, it can go beyond the great views and turn into a classic. [Opal seems poised](#) to do that. A dark dining room with pops of purple-ish blue contrasts against the illuminated aperture of an open kitchen in which an open-fire oven (inspired by the traditional parrillas of Argentina) takes center stage.

That oven churns out flat iron steaks, dry-aged duck, grilled bread and one of the best broccoli dishes in town. Many of them are served with sous vide fingerlings that, with their concentrated flavor, prove just how good a simple potato can be.

While Opal's outdoor seating is the main attraction during warmer months, the indoor dining room provides an intimate spot for a date. Opal is helmed by Bill and Morgan Whitlow, the same team that brought us Rich's Proper up the block.

535 Madison Ave., Covington, 859-261-0629, opalrooftop.com.

Baru, Downtown

This Downtown sushi and izakaya restaurant proved it is among [the most on-trend restaurants in Cincinnati](#) with its embrace of "darkroom-core," an emerging restaurant trend that embraces dark interiors primarily lit in red.

The menu is similarly on-trend. Tempura rock shrimp is a nod to the dish made famous by the chef, Nobu Matsuhisa, at his [Nobu restaurants](#), and the bar menu nods to America's current obsessions with espresso martinis and Japanese whisky highballs.

Ishiyaki-style dishes let customers cook American wagyu or Scottish salmon among themselves, though most people come for the sushi, mostly made with wild-caught fish. (The tart, citrusy yellowtail tuna in yuzu rice is particularly good.)

Baru, 595 Race St., Downtown, 513-246-0150, [barusushi.com](#).

VV the Italian Experience, Mount Lookout

When Melissa De Giorgi and Andrea Stefano moved to Cincinnati from Puglia a decade ago, they wanted to bring a little bit of Italy along with them. I'm glad they did, because VV Italian, [as I wrote earlier this year](#), is the most quintessentially modern Italian restaurant Greater Cincinnati has ever seen. It's also one of my favorite places to eat.

A carbon copy of the cafes and alimentaris of Italy, VV is a place where you stop in for a cappuccino and a croissant in the morning, a bowl of pasta or a big salad for lunch, and a glass of wine or a Negroni before heading home for dinner. I particularly love the Pugliese-style Salentina made with orecchiette, rapini and cured tuna. And during these colder months, savoring a big bowl of VV's comforting Tuscan soup can be a lifesaver.

1026 Delta Ave., Mount Lookout, 513-485-4007, [vvitalian.com](#).

Five on Vine, Over-the-Rhine

As I wrote in [my recent review of Five on Vine](#), this is the kind of place that

pops into your head whenever you hear the word "restaurant." As I put it, "Great lighting, the din of forks and knives and soft conversations in the background, a pampering staff and comfort foods that naysayers might think they can make at home for less money even though they really can't."

The name is a nod to it being the fifth in chef Anthony Sitek's growing restaurant empire, which also includes Losanti, Rosie's Italian, Crown Republic and Crown Cantina. The chophouse menu includes premium cut steaks, fish, French pork chops and roasted chicken. There's also an enticing pasta selection that includes spaghetti and clams and a short-rib stroganoff.

Like most chophouses worth their salt, things can get a little pricey, but if you order creatively, you can soften the blow. It's the kind of restaurant where you can sit at the bar for a cocktail and a bite or use it as an escape for a well-earned date night without the kids.

1324 Vine St., Over-the-Rhine, 513-246-4301, [fiveonvine.com](https://www.fiveonvine.com).

Golden State, Terrace Park

[The California-style taco spot](#) Dan and Lana Wright opened this year is housed in a 1950s-era gas station, with seafoam-colored tile floors and a vibe that's distinctly SoCal a la Terrace Park. The tacos here remind you why Wright is so important to the city's culinary scene in the first place.

There's a sly hint of his Abigail Street restaurant's DNA in Golden State's blood. Just as the former restaurant sneaks a variety of flavors and textures into each ostensibly simple dish, so too do the tacos, appetizers and mains here. Each ingredient receives just the right amount of love and attention.

704 Wooster Pike, Terrace Park, 513-831-

8226, goldenstatetacos.queencityhospitalitygroup.com.