

# 12 Most Unique Best Restaurants in Denver



Although Denver was long dismissed as a culinary cow town, in more recent years the Mile High City has re-emerged as far more than a glorified steak joint on the way up to the greener pastures of Aspen. Those who graze the city's food scene will now find an open range of unique choices—in and out of the increasingly trendy neighborhoods—while moseying their way through the best restaurants in Denver.

From the high kitsch of Casa Bonita to the quintessentially Colorado Buckhorn Exchange, visitors can count on a delicious meal and distinctive experience. The city has lost a few treasures over the years, including its historic Chinatown and the once-vibrant Little Italy. But the

metropolis still boasts a few ethnic enclaves and a smorgasbord of delightful offbeat novelties peppered across the city.

Whether one's taste runs to authentic recipes, distinct décor, or quirky history, Denver's ever-evolving restaurant scene has your table waiting.



## Atmospheric Fun

Food is important, of course. But man cannot always live on a salad and main course alone. Some restaurants put on a show.

## Casa Bonita

If you are seeking classic Colorado— a southwestern menu of subtlety and decorum—you have come to the wrong place. Lodged in a gaudy pink castle, this cult favorite promises the best *sopapillas* this side of the border (the Denver-Lakewood border, that is). Add to that a pirate's hidden-treasure cave, an indoor waterfall, and cliff divers. Mariachis stroll about an elaborate, cavernous, sometimes-jungle-ish multi-level dining room.

Debuting in 1974, [Casa Bonita](#) was once part of a small family of similar, garishly fun eateries, though Denver's location outlived its parent chain by decades. The cultish survivor nearly met the wrecking ball from the stresses of COVID-19. But after years of disrepair, particularly in the crumbling cave and game room, *South Park's* Trey Parker and Matt Stone of Colorado saved the day—and a Denver landmark—after famously featuring the notably campy castle in one of their episodes.

The self-described “greatest restaurant in the world” re-opened in 2023 after a major renovation. The update included not just the cave, dining room, and waterfall, but also the food, which was notoriously awful. A visit to the new and improved Casa Bonita will require some planning, however. An endless soft reopening and waiting list have kept the willing tapping their fingers for as much as a full year.





## The Melting Pot

Chain restaurants do not typically make lists for best restaurants—much less most unique—but the [Melting Pot](#) on suburban [Littleton's Historic Main Street](#) is a rare exception. Sure, one will get delicious multi-course fondue, replete with steak, lobster, and pots of gooey beer cheese, but another attraction is not on the menu. This maze-like, multi-level restaurant—based in a turn-of-the-century French-inspired structure that once housed the city jail—is famously haunted and has

attracted a wide range of media and ghost hunters from around the country.

Over the years, employees and guests of this neighborhood “haunt” have reported beer taps with minds of their own, video surveillance of a bulky cappuccino machine leaping off the counter, urinals flushing in a coordinated rhythm, and the unexplained echoes of moving doors and footsteps well after closing time. Employees have even reported leaving with strange claw marks on their backs. One even quit after insisting a ghost had followed him home one night.

Some say it is all tied to a bloody jail escape, while others point to drownings in a nearby river or a little girl who was pulled from the local fountain. If these walls could only talk—actually they do, though it is reportedly more of a whisper at eerie table no. 63 in the basement. The Melting Pot is especially popular for birthdays and anniversaries, as well as Halloween, if you’re still hungry.





## Downtown Aquarium

Seeking out a zoological sea-life museum in a landlocked city a mile above sea level may not be top of mind for most tourists of Denver restaurants. But [Downtown Aquarium](#) is a dining adventure, even for those visiting from Orlando or San Diego. Where else can diners enjoy mahi mahi or Atlantic salmon adjacent to a 50,000-gallon, floor-to-ceiling aquarium boasting more than 100 species of tropical fish?

In 2005, when Landry's Restaurants purchased a failed nonprofit aquarium to open a seafood restaurant, the irony was palpable. Maybe it is a little awkward eating fish as your dinner's distant relatives swim by in imagined judgment. But the unmatched atmosphere is well worth the weirdness. After dinner, pay an admission fee to wander an exhibit that takes visitors on a living ocean journey. You will walk through the

desert, sea, and rainforest. A shark cage—and, yes, even a mermaid—show can round out your sea voyage. Try that, Red Lobster!



## A Slice of History

Colorado is full of Western history, from the academic to kitschy. These restaurants serve up healthy portions in both menu and character.

## Buckhorn Exchange



Denver eateries do not get more historic, or Colorado, than the classic [Buckhorn Exchange](#), which famously holds the state's liquor license no. 1. Established in 1893, this is Denver's oldest still-operating restaurant, and visitors can taste the wild Old West history as much as the buffalo prime rib, elk, marinated rattlesnake, and exquisite Rocky Mountain oysters. This place truly defines food in Denver.

Founded by "Shorty Scout" Zietz, a sidekick to Buffalo Bill Cody, Buckhorn Exchange has fed Native American tribal leaders, miners, railroad men, and four U.S. presidents, ranging from Teddy Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan.

The establishment, along with its hundreds of taxidermy artifacts, survived—and even thrived during—Prohibition. Rumor has it that the back stairs once conveniently led to a speakeasy.

A tip to visitors: This place is a bit pricey, but those staying in downtown hotels can save a few dollars by conveniently taking [light rail](#), which stops at 10th Avenue and Osage Street, directly in front of Buckhorn Exchange, in the Lincoln Park neighborhood.

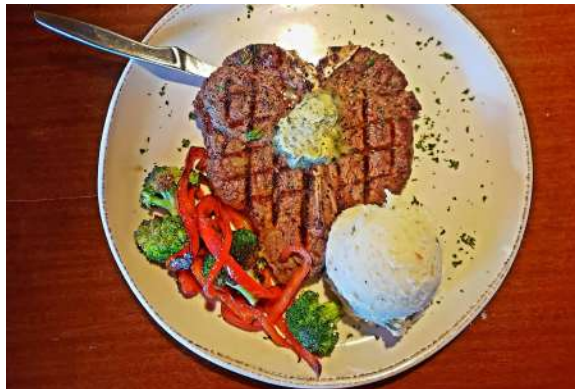






## Bastien's

Denver has no shortage of steakhouses—good, bad and trendy. But [Bastien's](#), with its reasonable prices and mid-century vibe, is a treasure. On a lively stretch of the city's legendary [East Colfax Avenue](#), a passerby couldn't miss the iconic sign announcing this divey 1950s-era eatery as the proud "home of the sugar steak." This is not some sort of novelty dessert cut, by the way, but a sumptuously textured ribeye or New York strip, served rare or medium rare only. It goes down well with the old-school cocktails that Bastien's has been mixing for decades. Try a famously dirty Colfax martini, a staple of this neighborhood's bars and restaurants.



## Davie's Chuck Wagon Diner

Speaking of history-rich vintage restaurants with tall, distinctive signage, [Davie's](#)—on the opposite end of Colfax in Lakewood—is Colorado's tops in classic Old West diner culture. Thankfully, gentrification has not wagon-trained this far west. The stainless-steel, train-like eatery has sat virtually unaltered since President Eisenhower was in the White House. Still standing is the towering, kitschy sign of chef Davie and the giant horse atop the building. Davie's (on the

National Historic Registry) offers the best in American basics, including the much-heralded chicken-fried steak and cinnamon rolls.



## Ship Tavern

This bar and restaurant in the historic Brown Palace Hotel may be the most stubbornly unchanged room in all of [Downtown Denver](#). Its decor mirrors what Presidents Harding or Truman would have known.

Although the Beatles never dined here when they stayed at the Brown in 1964, they famously ordered its fish and chips via room service.



Most, though, swear by the [Tavern's](#) French onion soup. This is one of the staples of this nautically themed pub, adorned with model ships, that have stood the test of time since Prohibition's end. Although Executive Chef Kim Moyle likes to keep the menu fresh with a regular shake-up.



## Ophelia's Electric Soapbox

Denver's [LoDo](#) was once infamous for its Old West and turn-of-the-century brothels—and the Victorian brownstone that houses [Ophelia's](#)



is no puritanical exception. This self-described “gastro brothel” was not only a historic bordello, but a less charming sex shop and live-girl peep show. Rather than hide its past, Ophelia’s plays it up. The venue features soft-core film posters, “mood” lighting, and nods to classic sex entertainment. Menu headings include Foreplay (Cuban plantains, for example), Hot and Ready Pizza, and Happy Endings (e.g. Churr-oh so hot). The supper club even boasts live entertainment, including old-school burlesque.

## Linger

Ophelia’s chef-founder Justin Cucci is known for creative repurposing of older buildings. His other themed restaurant, [Linger](#), is named as a shortened, burned-out-letter version of a previous resident, Olinger, a onetime funeral home. (The word “mortuaries” has been likewise converted to “eatuaries.”) Similar to Ophelia’s and its sexual novelty, this “lively” restaurant plays up the death angle a bit, but not enough to threaten an appetite. Linger is a wind-powered restaurant with a 6,000-square-foot organic garden, and it specializes in “responsibly-sourced, vegetable-forward menus.” According to the website, all animal products are non-GMO, certified humane, and pasture-raised. Even so, the international menu and rooftop bar overlooking the skyline may be more impressive to some.





## Ethnic Authenticity at the Best Restaurants in Denver

Had enough of Americanized world cuisine? From Native American tacos to ultra-genuine Asian fare, Denver is a mile high in true ethnic dining.

### Domo

Fans of ultra-genuine Japanese were dealt a near-fatal *kirioroshi* in 2022 when [Domo](#), a Japanese country-style restaurant and garden, briefly closed, but thankfully the one-of-a-kind eatery is back with a samurai's vengeance—albeit with a scaled-back menu. Domo's food was always excellent, but fewer options allow owner Gaku Homma to up his own game. Half the fun is the seven, often-unusual mystery side dishes that are put on every table.

With incredible outdoor seating, a farmhouse dining room, and a neighboring aikido dojo, Domo is a visit to Japan without the jetlag. The multi-course menu may be foreign—quite literally—to fans of trendy sushi bars, so make sure to budget enough time for questions. The seaweed-less sushi may be unrecognizable, and the hiyashi ramen is a chilled summer noodle dish. It comes topped with chicken, vegetables, blueberries and is served with homemade sweet and tangy miso shoyu.

Atmosphere aside, this is one of the best places to eat in Denver.

*Meshiagare!*





## Tocabe

If there is a cuisine unlikely to find a home in a modern fast-casual format, it is Native American—but don't tell that to Ben Jacobs of the Osage Nation. [Tocabe](#) is touted as the “only Indian-owned and operated restaurant” serving real Native cuisine in metro Denver. The authentic, yet contemporary, food is amazing and not just as a novelty. The menu, inspired by multiple tribes, features familiar favorites like Indian tacos and stuffed fry bread. It also offers bison ribs, posu rice bowls, and a variety of tasty [vegan options](#). The line-up-and-pick-your-ingredients aspect will be more familiar than the menu.







## Garibaldi Mexican Bistro

With its large Hispanic population, Denver has almost too many Mexican restaurants for its own good. As a result, the subpar entries seldom survive. ([7 Leguas](#) and [El Tejado](#) are two of the finest mainstays.) Although many of the restaurants have their own specialties, nearly all are of the northern Mexico variety. But [Garibaldi](#), named for a famous plaza in Mexico City, serves a unique menu inspired by southern Mexico, the nation's capital in particular.

The strong Aztec influence means *nopales*—or cactus—as a recurring ingredient. The menu's huarache Azteca is a whole cactus paddle grilled and topped with fresh avocado, pico de gallo, and poblano sour cream. For dessert, try the *platanos machos*, which are fried plantains with creamy, caramel-like lechera and strawberry sauce. Garibaldi is mostly take-out, and when you visit the bistro you will understand why.

The unusual restaurant is inexplicably based in a gas station on South Broadway in Englewood.



## Reasons to Return

A visit to the Centennial State is incomplete without a taste of the historic Old West, which is easy to find. Fortunately, Colfax's Route 40 retains much of the atmospheric quirk from the station wagon trips of a century ago. While Denver is no San Francisco, the authentic

restaurants in the city (especially Mexican and Central American) are well worth venturing into less-traveled areas.

One will not likely visit all the best restaurants in Denver in one trip. So those seeking unique experiences will simply have to keep coming back to the Mile High City. And before dinner, don't miss the highly unusual [Meow Wolf!](#)

If you enjoyed reading about the best restaurants in Denver, meet [Jesse Albertini](#), one of Colorado's rising culinary stars.



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