



Iron Hill Brewery

PHOTO: TIMLYN VAUGHAN PHOTOGRAPHY

BEST OF West Chester Dining

Cara Corridoni

THE STORY FROM THE OGs
TO THE NEWBIES AND MORE

BY NOW YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD the story of West Chester's transformation from sleepy county seat to busy dining destination. As the story goes, on a fateful day in 1998, and with the help of West Chester Mayor Dr. Clifford DeBaptiste, Iron Hill owners Kevin Finn, Mark Edelson and Kevin Davies signed a lease for the vacant Woolworth Building, thus changing the course of local dining history. Since then, dozens of restaurants have come and gone from the Borough.

From those pioneers who first saw the potential, to the second generation who added diversity, to the new restaurants who explored refined dining, and the many bars in this college town, here's our look at the best of West Chester dining as it stands today.



Bar Avalon



Limoncello Ristorante



Kooma

THE OGs

Downtown West Chester's 20-some blocks are home to more than 60 restaurants. In a town of only 18,000, that's one restaurant per 300 residents. It's a diverse dining scene that would not be here if it weren't for some dreamers with big ideas and high risk tolerance.

By the time the tanks began arriving at 3 West Gay Street, the revolution was already in motion. The newly adapted Woolworth Building would not only mark a fresh start for the Borough, it would be the first Iron Hill location to include a full brewery setup.

Opening its doors during the West Chester Restaurant Fest (now the Chester County Restaurant Festival), the new brewery drew a crowd so large it had to close for a few days to restock inventory. More than 20 years later, Iron Hill remains a West Chester icon. Grab a seat in the newly renovated bar and enjoy one of their many award-winning brews. And bring the kiddos for family dining.

Avalon, as it was known during the early days of the 2000s, was initially located on South High Street. This Italian BYOB serendipitously ended up in the hands of the restaurant's website designer, now owner John Brandt-Lee, after the former owner abruptly left. After securing an elusive Borough liquor license, Brandt-Lee worked hard to create an elegant dining experience in the renamed Bar Avalon that still pleases two decades later. If you get the chance, try the four-course chef tasting menu.

Although Iron Hill is often credited with launching the downtown revitalization, Spence Cafe is the original OG, named after the Spence family that ran oyster houses and restaurants catering to local elite from 1840 to 1910. True, this was not the Original Spence Cafe that sits today across the street from the Hotel Warner, but acclaimed Chef An-

drew Patton's first restaurant, named Spence Cafe, opened on Gay Street in 1996.

Chef Patton revived and reimagined his concept another time or two before landing at 131 North High Street with an update on the original. It's a refinement that earned him a 2021 OpenTable Top 100 Restaurant distinction. The Spence lump crab cakes are a must, as is the house-favorite crème brûlée.

In 1999, if you headed to North Walnut Street, you might have felt you were outside the downtown district. Those once desolate blocks, however, were later graced with a place for a delicious homemade Italian dinner celebrated with a Limoncello toast, compliments of the Mingrino family.

Today, the Limoncello experience remains much the same. Meals are still prepared using the family's generations-old recipes and still end with the namesake liqueur. If you're a first-timer, try the chicken limoncello — egg-dipped chicken in a lemon, white wine sauce, served with lump crab and asparagus.

If Limoncello is family-style Italian, Teca counters with a more modern, small-plate approach and an extensive wine bar. Opened in 2002 by established Delaware Valley restaurateur Alberto Guadagnini and his son Roberto, Teca has been the Borough's go-to place to meet up with old friends. If you can, grab a seat at the lively bar, put in an order for a glass of red and the burrata di Giorno, a shareable plate of fresh house-made cheese. Then leisurely enjoy both while you peruse the rest of the menu.

With a selection of established Italian options and a beer scene filling in, Kooma arrived on Gay Street in 2002 as something different. Bringing an Asian-fusion menu with solid sushi offerings and a modern cocktail menu full of "tinis," it quickly became a hit with residents and West



Pietro's Prime



Mercato Ristorante & Bar



The Social Lounge

Chester University students alike. In 2013, Kooma relocated to a larger space on Church Street. With its modern, neon-dotted interior and an expansive bar, it's still a fun place to start out your night in West Chester.

SECOND GENERATION

If the early aughts set the core of West Chester's restaurant landscape, the next two decades would be marked by expansion, diversification and closings. Many restaurants would come and go trying to secure their space in the suddenly popular downtown dining scene.

No downtown dining experience would be complete without a steakhouse and martini bar. West Chester got one in 2007. Opened by Sean and Marisa Powell, **Pietro's Prime** offers steakhouse dining without the pretense. "It's not the white tablecloth thing," Marisa once said in an interview. "If you're looking for that whole stuffy thing, you probably want to go somewhere else." Do try the creamed corn, the espresso martini and any of the richly marbled, premium black Angus steaks.

There are no two ways about it, West Chester loves a good Italian restaurant. The argument may be — don't we have enough already? Then someone comes along with another twist on the iconic cuisine, and we fall in love all over again. As was the case with **Mercato Ristorante & Bar**, when well-established restauranteurs Alfredo and Barbara Giannaccari opened their rustic take on Neapolitan cuisine in 2014. Try the zuppa di pesce with a slice of tiramisu to finish in the warmth of their stone and wood interior.

In the 2000s, farm-to-table restaurants started to pop up all over the country, anchored by a message of farm-fresh taste and lowered environmental impact. **Roots Cafe** brought the concept to West Chester. All the products, proteins and produce used by the Gay Street bistro are carefully chosen for sustainability and proximity. Make your midday meal something special with a Roots hot chicken sandwich washed down with a tall glass of house-steeped passion berry iced tea.

When **The Social Lounge** first came to West Chester, it was hard to separate the potential of the new venue from the ghosts of West Chester restaurants' past. Owner Donnie Moore, who previously operated West Chester's only music venue, The Note, first opened The Social where Spence Cafe once was, then moved to a new location that once housed Doc Magrogan's Oyster House. But, the longer the Social Lounge and Chef Dan Funk's Southern-inspired menu remain in the Borough, the fainter the imprints of the past remain on the rich wood walls.

NEWBIES

As it passes into its third decade of dining success, West Chester is less a place to take a chance but one where reputations are made. Just look at award-winning Andiaro (see "Best of the Best" in this issue). While the Borough is starting to catch the eye of established industry professionals, it's still a place for a chef with a dream.

Local Charm

There are fine dining, casual dining and grab-and-go eateries. There are high-end lounges, European-style pubs and corner bars for a pilsner and a special. But what makes West Chester unique is places that refuse to be typecast.

When Speer Madanat opened **Pizza West Chester**, he was determined to do things his own way. There would be no website, no phone, no credit cards. Just exceptional pizza. It was a risk that paid off. Buzz around the pizza grew so great, it drew the attention of Barstool Sports' David Portnoy, who drove from Philly to give his popular one-bite review. The result was a solid 8.4 score. "If you know my scale," he told his followers, "you know that's a ridiculously high score."

For the last five years, **Miss Winnie's** has brought the tropics to West Chester by way of delicious Caribbean cuisine, which is the hallmark of first-generation Jamaican-American Chef Bertie Johnston. If you can stand the heat, order the jerk chicken sandwich with a side of fried plantains for a true taste of the islands.

There are college bars where you drink and college bars where legends are made. **Jake's Bar** is the latter. Opened in 1938 on the eastern edge of the West Chester University campus, Jake's is the home of \$1 beers and countless stories. Last winter the pub landed in the Final Four of the Barstool Sports Best College Bar challenge. Friday and Saturday nights can get crazy, but midweek, midday all are welcome.

Opened by friends Kostas Botos and Savvas Navrozidis in 2016, Opa Opa brought satisfying portions of homemade Greek staples to the Borough. It was casual dining, and it was a hit. Then in 2019, Opa grew up and became **Opa Taverna**. Gone was the cliché blue-and-white décor. In its place were elegant, neutral tiled walls, fully operational floor-to-ceiling windows, and some of the region's best Pan-Hellenic dishes. Get started with the pikilia spread, a three-sauce sampler served with freshly baked pita, as you take in the menu.

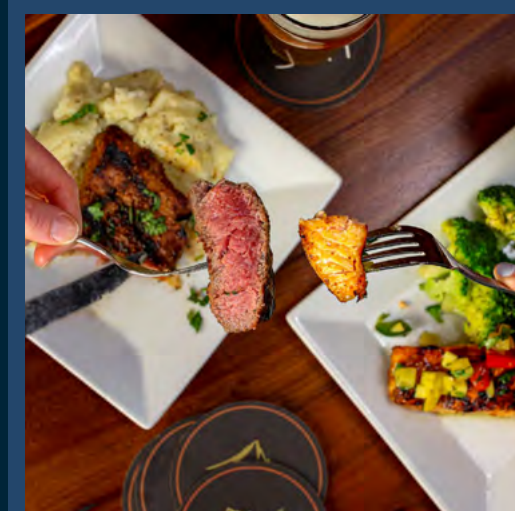
After years of leading the kitchens of top area restaurants like Dilworthtown Inn and Duling-Kurtz, Chef Josh Taggart decided to take a chance on his own talents, opening a farm-to-table BYOB in the heart of town. Specializing in seasonal cuisine served in a warm, rustic environment, **Mae's** likes to treat you to a personalized meal. Go anytime, but in the spring, when the weather warms, dining spills out into the street, where dressed-up picnic tables greet guests amid a fountain backdrop.

If Mae's and Opa Taverna represent West Chester's entrepreneurial spirit, **Sedona Taphouse** is among a new breed of established restaurants being drawn to the Borough. The 16th location from the Virginia-based chain, the West Chester Sedona is spacious and comfortable, with large windows, roomy leather booths and a view into the kitchen. While "chain" can be a dirty word in a town like West Chester, there's something to be said for consistency of quality. Open a year, Sedona Taphouse has quickly become one of the toughest reservations in the Borough.

Much like Sedona, **Stove & Tap** is another new restaurant whose reputation preceded its arrival. Co-owners Justin Weathers and Matt Moyer opened their first Stove & Tap in Landsdale in 2016,



Mae's



Sedona Taphouse



Stove & Tap

Other Dining Options in West Chester

BREAKFAST, LUNCH AND MORE

Blazin' J's (39 W. Gay St., [BlazinJs.com](#)) serves fresh, spicy chicken with different degrees of heat to cater to every preference.

Buddy's Burgers, Breasts & Fries (11 W. Gay St., [BuddysBBF.com](#)) makes great burgers, boardwalk-quality fries, chicken sandwiches and thick milkshakes.

The Couch Tomato Café (31 W. Gay St., [TheCouchTomato.com](#)) offers soups, sandwiches, pizza and snacks that are organic, all-natural and non-GMO.

FIRE Nashville Hot Chicken (126 E. Gay St., [FireHotChicken.com](#)) serves everything from Nashville's hot chicken wings to desserts from family recipes.

La Baguette Magique (202 W. Market St., [MagicBaguette.com](#)) is a traditional French bakery and café with handmade breads, pastries, desserts and more.

Lorenzo and Sons Pizza (27 N. High St., [LorenzoAndSons.com](#)) is known for their giant slices of pizza, extra large pies, specialty sandwiches and more.

Love Again Local (18 S. Church St., [LoveAgainLocal.com](#)) serves plant-based, healthy food—vegan, GMO-free meats, cheeses and Love Chunk Vegan Cookies.

Market Street Grill (6 W. Market St., [MarketStreetGrillWC.com](#)) is a popular breakfast & lunch café getting raves for avocado omelettes and breakfast burritos.

Nudy's Café (300 W. Market St., [NudysCafes.com](#)) is a crowd-pleasing local breakfast and lunch chain with tons of choices.

Penn's Table (100 W. Gay St., [PennsTableRestaurant.com](#)) serves breakfast and lunch in a warm, comfortable atmosphere.

Poke Bros (124 E. Market St., [EatPokeBros.com](#)) serves sushi-grade fish and farm-fresh veggies in an authentic Hawaiian poké bowl.

Rize Pizza (124 E. Market St., [RizePizza.com](#)) offers the "Rize"-style crust, light and airy with a toasted sesame seed bottom. Plus sandwiches, salads and more.

Turk's Head Café (111 N. Church St., [TurksHeadCoffee.com](#)) pours espresso shots, nitro cold brews, coffee and teas, smoothies, frappes and serves baked goods.

AND FOR DINNER ...

Andiaro (106 W. Gay St., [Andiaro.com](#)) is an award-winning, intimate restaurant offering a focused and evolving menu celebrating the best local ingredients.

INTERNATIONAL CHOICES

La Scala's Fire (40 W. Gay St., [LaScalasFire.com](#)) coming soon, offering wood-fired Italian classics with a modern twist.

La Tartine (109 W. Gay St.) has everything from crepes to falafel and from smoothies to shawarma.

The Mediterranean (150 W. Gay St., [TheMedWCPA.com](#)) is a comfortable BYOB known for authentic ethnic dishes.

Pho Life (237 E. Gay St., [PhoXuaNoodles.com](#)) specializes in pho, banh mi, spring rolls, egg rolls, Vietnamese coffee, black bubble milk tea and more.

Rai Rai Ramen & Hawaiian BBQ (124 E. Market St., [On Facebook](#)) serves ramen noodles and Hawaiian barbecue (as its name suggests).

Santino's Tap & Table (40 E. Market St., [SantinosTapAndTable.com](#)) offers fine Italian cuisine with outdoor seating and take out.

Taco Mar (122 E. Gay St., [TacoMar.com](#)) offers delicious Mexican food in three convenient ways: Burrito Bar, Taco Stand and Baja Grill.

Tsunami Bistro (10 W. Market St., [TsunamiBistro.com](#)) serves Japanese and Thai cuisine in a casual environment. ♦

See the 2023 Dining Guide in this issue and our website, [CountyLinesMagazine.com](#) for more local dining destinations.

and another in Malvern. Situated in the spacious former home of Landmark Bar and Grill on the corner of West Gay and South Darlington Streets, Stove & Tap serves farm-to-table pub fare amid a rustic American backdrop. Try their famous deviled eggs to start.

BARS AND PUBS

Home to West Chester University, the Borough is also known for its lively bar scene. It's a reputation that can be off-putting to those not seeking a techno-dance beat and a drink special. But, don't worry. If you know where to look, West Chester has an option for everyone.

Yes, West Chester had early pioneer Iron Hill, but by 2015, it had lost much of its craft brew cred. Enter Eric Santostefano and Tim Floros, founders of **Levante Brewing Company**, outside the downtown area. Over the years, Levante has refined its recipes and pushed the limits of what you can do with beer. You probably know Cloudy & Cumbrous, their popular NEIPA. So, settle into their lowkey Carter Drive taproom with a Philly Twist, a pilsner ode to our neighboring city, while you discuss your next selection with your knowledgeable bartender.

Is there a more universal symbol for hearty food, drink and a laugh than an authentic Irish pub? Opened in 2003, **Kildare's Irish Pub** has played that role in the Borough for the last two decades. Designed and built in Ireland, the bar was literally shipped to Gay Street from overseas and reassembled. Come for soccer matches, a perfectly poured Guinness and a lively debate over who has the best backfield in the EU.

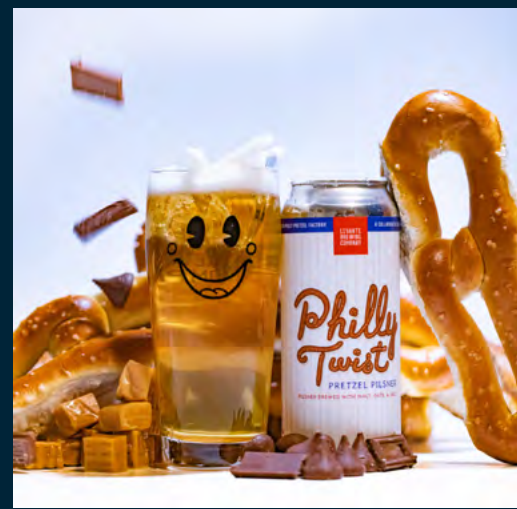
If there's no better place on a cold winter evening than Kildare's rich mahogany bar, on a Saturday in the summer, **Más Mexicali Cantina's** rooftop with a pitcher of margaritas is where you want to be. With strings of lights and a bird's-eye view of downtown, it's become a seasonal destination without match. Opened in 2009, Más specializes in modern Tex-Mex fare to go with your tequila-infused sunset watching.

No tour of the West Chester pub scene would be complete without a trip to **Barnaby's of West Chester**. With seven bars and 50 TVs, it's a great (and sometimes only) place to catch a game on a Sunday afternoon. It's also a good place for celebrity spotting. Over the years, Philly greats such as Cole Hamels, Roy Halladay and Jayson Werth have all been seen there.

And if you like all kinds of beer, you'll like **Side Bar & Restaurant**. Featuring nearly 200 different beers to choose from, Side Bar offers one of the most extensive craft beer menus in the Borough. With three bars on two floors and a relaxed vibe, Side Bar aims to be your neighborhood bar. A place as they say, "where everyone knows your name." And at that, they succeed.

And those stories are just a few of the reasons we love West Chester dining and think you will, too! ♦

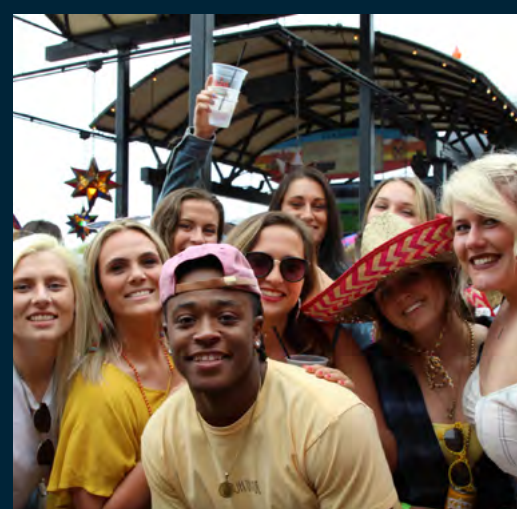
Cara Corridoni lives in West Chester and is a huge fan of the Borough. She writes the weekly e-newsletter, "Hello, West Chester."



Levante Brewing Company



Kildare's Irish Pub



Más Mexicali Cantina



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