The 10 Top Iconic American Restaurants

In a field where failure is far more common than success, and in a food culture with a short attention span, these 10 restaurants have each excelled for at least 25 years. Here's how they do it—and what lessons other businesses can learn from their success.

**01 CANLIS, Seattle**
Canlis looks today much as it did in 1950, when Peter Canlis, the son of a Greek immigrant restaurateur, opened it. Housed in a building designed by Northwestern architect Roland Terry, Canlis offers sweeping views of Lake Union, the Olympic mountains and Seattle. "The view is timeless, but it's the inventive use of ingredients from the Pacific Northwest that makes this restaurant an icon," says Zagat.com's senior editor James Mulcahy. "To say we don't struggle with how to change would be dishonest, but for us to obsess over it would be a waste of time," says current co-owner Mark Canlis, a grandson of Peter.

**02 CHEZ PANISSE, Berkeley, Calif.**
Alice Waters, a UC-Berkeley grad and student of French cuisine, opened Chez Panisse as a quiet neighborhood bistro in 1971, but the restaurant almost immediately attracted attention for its commitment to using only organic, seasonal, sustainably sourced and locally grown food—a rarity in the U.S. at the time. "The restaurant isn't just about cooking food for Chez Panisse," Waters says. "We have a bigger mission in the world—feeding people ideas." Adds Izabela Wojcik, director of house programming at the James Beard Foundation, "There are two words to express the success and longevity of Chez Panisse: Alice Waters. She's an enduring symbol of delicious, approachable seasonal cooking."

**03 HUGO'S, Portland, Maine**
Since opening in 1988, Hugo's, situated at the top of Portland's Old Port district, has evolved from its humble Irish-pub roots. Today, Hugo's is a nationally acclaimed culinary destination known for New England-style dishes with a refined approach: cornmeal-crusted soft-shell lobster; local pheasant with polenta, turnips and shiitake; rabbit salad. "There's a sense of community here," says Andrew Taylor, a co-owner and chef. "The people who work here love their jobs, and their love of the food and their energy comes across to the guests."

**04 LA GRENOUILLE, New York**
French expat Charles Masson Sr. opened La Grenouille, an elegant jewel-box of a restaurant, in 1962, "on a quiet night in the midst of a snowstorm," according to the restaurant’s history. Over the years since it has established itself as one of New York’s stalwarts of traditional French cooking. And though it was once saddled with a reputation for haughtiness, La Grenouille has grown more welcoming under Charles Masson Jr., the founder’s son, who says that he faces each day as if he were opening a new restaurant. "We're dealing with a clientele that expects a lot," Masson explains. In important ways, though, La Grenouille has changed very little. "We don't really follow the trends," Masson says.
LE BERNARDIN, New York
Le Bernardin has been a Manhattan fixture since 1986, but the restaurant was actually founded in Paris in 1972 by sister-brother restaurateurs Maguy and Gilbert Le Coze, who served only seafood and prepared it beautifully. Now under the co-ownership of Maguy Le Coze (Gilbert died in 1994) and chef Eric Ripert, Le Bernardin enjoyed its first four-star review from the Times only three months after opening in the U.S. “Part of our success is due to having a loyal team,” says Ripert. “Our maître d' and executive chef have been with us for 18 years.”

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LE CIRQUE, New York
Owner Sirio Maccioni has made a point of being physically present in his dining room at least five days a week since he opened Le Cirque in 1974. Maccioni may be famously gregarious, but when it comes to food, he is stubborn, refusing to add menu dishes that he doesn’t like—even when the chef does. By rarely changing Le Cirque’s offerings, “we are doing something even more adventurous,” he says. “People come back because they like it that way.”

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L’ESPALIER, Boston
L’Espalier was founded in 1978 by chef Moncef Meddeb, who hired Frank McCelland as his chef de cuisine in 1980. Eight years later, McCelland took over. The restaurant, which moved six years ago to a sleek space next to the Mandarin Oriental hotel, turns out inventive New England-French cuisine using locally sourced ingredients. McCelland prioritizes developing talent within the next generation of cooks, servers and management. “Young leaders embrace talent,” he says.

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SPAGO, Beverly Hills, Calif.
Wolfgang Puck and designer Barbara Lazaroff opened Spago in 1982 on the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood. Using French techniques, fresh ingredients and an Asian aesthetic, Puck helped invent “California cuisine,” and Spago quickly became a favored haunt of film biz powerbrokers. Spago moved to Beverly Hills in 1997 and underwent a major renovation in 2012. “We want to be relevant,” explains Puck. “We are in the entertainment business. If we did not change, we’d be dead.”

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THE FRENCH LAUNDRY, Yountville, Calif.
The French Laundry is housed in a two-story stone building built in the 1880s to serve as a saloon before becoming a brothel and then, in the 1920s, a French-style steam laundry. In 1974, the mayor of Yountville and his wife turned it into a restaurant, which Thomas Keller visited in 1992 and bought in 1994. The buzz surrounding French Laundry and its nine-course tasting menu began almost immediately and has remained more or less constant ever since. Its influence on high-end American dining is ubiquitous: the European idea of one seating per table, an elaborate tasting-menu-only format, a reliance on local artisanal farmers and a long list of signature dishes.

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About 90 minutes west of the nation’s capital, the Inn at Little Washington is a hotel and restaurant founded in 1978 by Reinhardt Lynch and chef Patrick O’Connell, now the sole owner. The restaurant, with its 30 tables and 14,000-bottle wine cellar, is renowned for its local food and wine programs. “It’s about elevating every aspect”—food, service, atmosphere—to the same level,” says O’Connell. The restaurant changes subtly, he adds, so that returning guests merely feel the difference—even if they can’t put their finger on what it is.

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