

# O, HOW DELICIOUS

A handful of new Orlando-area restaurants are making a strong case to drive up I-4 for dinner that's well worth the miles.

By Laura Reiley  
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They had me at "new grilled cheese restaurant."

A couple of times a year it's valuable to take a peek at what's going on in our neighboring Central Florida cities. After all, many of us have reason on occasion to head east to Orlando (cue *It's a Small World*), so I like to keep abreast of the restaurant scene there.

It didn't take much sleuthing to determine that Winter Park, that lovely historic burg northeast of downtown Orlando, is spilling over with exciting new finds. The Alford Inn recently opened Hamilton's Kitchen, an open-kitchen affair with rustic farmers' tables and a menu that is a paean to the history of Florida agriculture. Toasted, the grilled cheesery, prompted me to gas up, make sure my GPS was working and hit the road.

A girl can get mighty hungry on a 90-minute drive, so I ditched I-4 a little early so I could swing by **Tako Cheena** (932 N Mills Ave., Orlando; (321) 236-7457; takocheena.com), an Asian taco hole-in-the-wall that has been making waves this past year. Co-owner Pom Moongauklang first shook things up with Pom Pom's Teahouse & Sandwicheria and now she's done it again with a super-inexpensive hipster taco spot that pushes the envelope at every turn.

The turns I took included a flour-tortilla taco (I refuse to call them takos, okay?) cradling crispy tofu, shredded cabbage and a gorgeous Indian yellow curry sauce, and another one of Thai peanut chicken crunchy with cilantro, scallion and cabbage, perfectly married with a side sauce of tomatillo doctored with kaffir lime. While I didn't moon after the Korean and Japanese-inspired dogs, I was momentarily sad that the previous evening's late-night crowd (open until 4 a.m. weekends) had snarfed all the East-West empanadas.

Shooting up Mills Avenue to Winter Park just \$10 poorer, I considered my first stop more appetizer than Lunch No. 1. Onward to Jeff Yarmuth and daughter Megan's ingenious **Toasted** (1945 Aloma Ave., Winter Park; (407) 960-3922; igettoasted.com). Jeff was the former president and COO of Sonny's Real Pit Bar-B-Q; his daughter



Luma on Park is offering a prix fixe deal this month. Gary Bogdon photo

spent time in the fashion business in New York. It was there that she fell in love with that city's myriad one-trick-pony restaurants, places that do one or two things and do them well.

And who doesn't like a good grilled cheese? With one wall devoted to a cheese "periodic table" and another one a yellow lunar landscape that takes you a second to realize is Swiss cheese, the tiny fast-casual spot embraces its theme (there are even scones made of metal cheese graters, light filtering through in lovely patterns).

Order at the counter, definitely the fig and goat with Havarti, basil and honey, and probably the "blackberry melt" with fontina, applewood-smoked bacon, blackberry mash and arugula if you're sensible. These aren't huge sandwiches, but the crusts are golden and buttery, the ingredients impeccable. They also offer burgers, salads and tremendous fries with truffle oil and rosemary, but for me, make it grilled cheese, please. All are \$5 to \$7.

I contemplated a third lunch (predinner?) at the new **B&B Junction** (2103 W Fairbanks Ave., Winter Park; (407) 513-4134; bbjunction.com) opened not long ago at the former 4 Rivers Smokehouse location, but felt I couldn't do their 100 percent local grass-fed beef burgers justice. Next time. Instead I wandered Winter Park Village (which has its own very

respectable lineup of restaurants, from Ruth's Chris to P.F. Chang's and Menchie's Frozen Yogurt with its cult following).

Julie and James Petrakis were nominated for a James Beard award on the strength of their flagship Winter Park restaurant, Ravenous Pig. But at the end of last year they started getting serious attention for their sophomore effort, **Cask and Larder** (565 W Fairbanks Ave., Winter Park; (321) 280-4200; caskandlarder.com).

golden raisins.

This is Southern food in the vein of Yardbird in Miami or Husk in Charleston, S.C., edgy and exciting, with show stoppers like duck ham and country-fried rabbit. After capping things off with an order of beer doughnuts paired with a soft caramel pudding, I eased myself slowly into the driver's seat for the 90-minute drive west, cataloging the day's ambitious and globe-trotting dishes. Perhaps it's not such a small world after all.

## Three courses, \$33

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In the early 1900s, hotels offered "table d'hote" or "prix fixe" menus to guests as a form of loss leader. The hotels didn't necessarily make money on these lower-priced, multicourse inclusive meals, often served at communal tables, but they made up for it on the booze.

Prohibition may have contributed to a gradual shift toward a la carte pricing in American restaurants (no booze, thus no buoying booze sales), but surely this trend also reflects the dining public's insistence on options.

This time of year, the pendulum has a tendency to swing back the other way. During the summer many American cities host annual restaurant weeks (or months) in which participating restaurants offer inexpensive prix fixe menus. It's a win-win. Restaurants are full during traditionally slow weeks and diners get to try out unfamiliar restaurants relatively risk-free, keeping more cash in their pockets.

In Orlando, for the eighth year, the Magical Dining Month takes place all of September, with more than 60 restaurants participating, offering three-course, prix fixe dinners for an eyebrow-raising \$33 (with a buck of every meal benefiting the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Central Florida).

This includes heavy hitters like celebrity chef-driven Emeril's Tchoup Chop, La Luce by Donna Scala or Todd English's Bluezoo, as well as all the sophisticated independent restaurants that crowd Orlando's trendy Thornton Park neighborhood and Winter Park, such as Luma on Park.

Go to [visitorlando.com/magicaldining](http://visitorlando.com/magicaldining) for more.



The braised-brisket grilled cheese at Toasted, Winter Park. Joe Brooks photo