



WORTH EVERY DIME

▶ **Nine pricey dishes too good to pass up.**

Has a night out of dining ceased to be special? In these days of recession, bailouts, job cuts and ad nauseum bad economic news, dining trends indicate that we're more likely to head out to a casual place that wears its value on its awning. I'm as sure as the next guy that the best meal is usually a pizza and a beer. But that's usually, and a usual meal won't get your stiletto boots out of the closet. And after pizza and beer, your date's probably not going to be in the mood to, you know. A glistening raw oyster, a portion of sushi precious as a jewel, an aged steak worthy of an investment banker (yeah, I said it): Sometimes only these will do.

1. Lobster Agolotti, Grand Café

There's nothing sexy about cracking cartilage at the table. Instead, leave the work to chef Jon Radle, who hand-makes agolotti daily (a beautiful name for a ravioli that's shaped like it's giving itself a hug), filling it with whatever is currently inspiring. Right now, it's lobster claw paired with wild mushroom, asparagus and sweet corn all napped in a sauce of that lush chef's brew of butter, wine and stock. \$12 for a rich beginning to your meal. 3804 Grand Ave. S., Mpls.; 612.822.8260; grandcafempls.com

2. Sushi Bento, Nami

Most of the dozens of eateries calling themselves sushi bars aren't worth the chopsticks that come with your McSushi roll. Instead, find a trustworthy sushi chef and then follow him with the conviction you would with any bad habit. Chef Hide Tozowa is my guy. I can rest

assured that anything coming out of his kitchen is pristine. For a show-stopping treat, try the sushi bento: \$35 dollars gets you chef's selection of delectables. A recent selection: chicken satay, shrimp balls, kimchee, soft shell crab and, of course, sashimi, cut to precision. 251 First Ave. N., Mpls.; 612.333.1999; namiminneapolis.com

3. Charcuterie Plate, Craftsman

Any chef making in-house charcuterie is a chef worth your attention. It means that he's not content to leave certain aspects of food preparation to the other guys, when that would be easy enough to do. Chef Mike Phillips seems altogether obsessed with the art of sausage-making, pâté, terrine, confit and curing. And that obsession comes through on the plate. At the risk of sounding overly enthusiastic, this is the best \$15 I've spent all

year: rabbit terrine, chicken liver mousse light as whipped cream, house-cured ham sweet as a dream and spicy sopressata all served with house-pickled veggies and hand-made (noticing a theme?) crackers. 4300 E. Lake St., Mpls.; 612.722.0175; craftsmanrestaurant.com

4. Raw Oyster, Sea Change

To know that you're eating seafood at Sea Change by James Beard award-winning chef Tim McKee is to know that you're eating the best seafood available today in the Twin Cities. And while many of McKee's creations are certainly breathtaking, it could be argued that the essence of seafood can be found in an oyster. In the middle of landlocked Minnesota on a blustery winter day, that sip of briny seawater is a transporting moment worth much more than

the \$2.50-per-slurp price tag. 818 S. 2nd St., Mpls.; 612.225.6499; seachangempls.com

5. Seven-Course Dinner, Heidi's

Chef Stewart Woodman could be Minnesota's most interesting chef, and not just because of the food on the plate. His reputation precedes him as something of an enfant terrible, and tales of his histrionics are nothing short of legend in this town. Besides that, he is amongst the cream of the local talent pool, and a chance to get him to cook seven courses—each one ringing in at less than the cost of a bad deli sandwich—is a luxury you can't afford not to indulge in. Reserve this \$69 dinner at the chef's kitchen table, and you might get some performance art with your "barely seared Scottish salmon." 819 W. 50th St., Mpls.; 612.354.3512; heidismpls.com



6. Chef's Cut of the Day, Dakota
Renowned chef Jack Reibel's stunning New American cuisine may be overshadowed by the Dakota's penchant for bringing world-class music to the Twin Cities. Which is a shame, because every time I sit down to a meal at the Dakota, I remind myself that this is one of the finest to be had around. The Chef's Cut of the Day will usually run around \$30, and will be something quite special, such as a recent Wagyu beef with "deconstructed scalloped potatoes": individual potato medallions embossed with a single sage leaf then enrobed in cheese.
1010 Nicollet Mall Mpls., 612.332.1010; dakotacooks.com

8. North Star Bison, Lucia's
Before Lenny Russo, CSAs and the Mill City Farmer's Market, there was Lucia Watson and her particularly committed brand of cooking. Braised Wisconsin bison from Northstar Ranch embodies her almost-to-a-fault devotion to straightforward Midwestern ingredients, and when the grassfed meat is paired with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms and mashed local potatoes, you can nearly smell the farm, the woods and the prairie.
1432 W. 31st St., Mpls.; 612.823.7125; lucias.com

9. Inspiration of the Moment, Vincent
When a classical French chef says there is something inspiring him in the kitchen, that's a perfect time to take heed. Vincent's "Inspirations of the Moment" might be anything at all, but chances are it will be something

terribly decadent and French, such as a foie gras terrine or a recent sweetbreads paired with sweet corn risotto and roasted red pepper coulis. An inspiration will run you around \$15.
1100 Nicollet Ave., Mpls.; 612.630.1189; vincentarestaurant.com

9. Handmade Pasta, Tosca
Most anything coming out of young Adam Vickerman's kitchen will be worthy of attention (he's got a way with a scallop), but if you're going Italian, you might as well go spaghetti. Or trenne, garganelli, bucatini, or any of the other dozens of varieties you'll find on the weekly changing menu. Always al dente, never ordinary and paired with things like brodo and Grana Padano, Italian lessons never tasted so good or came so cheaply (around \$10 for a half order and \$15 for a whole).
3415 W. 44th St. Mpls., 612.924.1900; trattoriotosca.com

The can't-go-wrong list

Manny's
Other beef emporiums have come and gone, but Manny's just keeps getting bigger and better. Home of the "bludgeon of beef," Manny's is your surefire bet when you need to hit 'em over the head with something extravagant.
825 Marquette Ave., Mpls., 612.339.9900; mannysteakhouse.com

La Belle Vie
Perhaps only one restaurant comes to mind when truly world-class dining is in question around here, and you know which one it is. La Belle Vie won't ever fail you when The Beautiful Life is what you're looking to invoke.
510 Groveland Ave., Mpls., 612.874.6440; labellevie.us

Bradstreet
A few precious ounces is all you'll get in every \$10 libation at Bradstreet, and each sip is liquid

art. There isn't a more elegant beverage to be had in town.
601 1st Ave. N., Mpls., 612.312.1821; bradstreetcrafthouse.com

Origami
The grandfather of Minnesota sushi bars, Origami could be as close as you'll get to real-deal Japanese without a plane ticket. Ask for "omakase" if you're after something truly special.
30 N. 1st St., Mpls., 612.333.8430; origamirestaurant.com

Alma
For 10 years now, Alex Roberts has run elegant Alma, a true New American kitchen best defined by its absolute dedication to excellence. Choose whatever you like. You can't go wrong.
528 University Ave. SE, Mpls., 612.379.4909; restaurantalma.com