

Best Museum Restaurants in the U.S.

Across the country, ambitious empire builders have turned boring museum cafeterias into destination restaurants. From a New Orleans soda shop in an American history museum to the Pittsburgh conservatory garden café, which grows its own ingredients, here are country's best places to pair cultural excursions with fantastic food.—Tommy WernerClose

The Soda Shop, National WWII Museum; New Orleans

F&W BNC 1999 John Besh's diner honors 1940s and '50s era soda fountains. Patrons perch on red vinyl bar stools to watch bow-tied soda jerks make seasonal sodas in flavors like melon and the NOLA classic nectar (vanilla, almond, egg white and cream). At breakfast, the Build-a-Biscuit sandwiches come with filling choices from Benton's bacon to house-made Spam. nationalww2museum.org



Untitled, The Whitney Museum of American Art; New York

Opened in 2011, Danny Meyer's second museum restaurant features farm-to-table takes on New York diner classics, like Reuben sandwiches and matzo ball soup made by chef Chris Bradley, a veteran of Gramercy Tavern and Café Boulud. The café also serves local products like Four & Twenty Blackbirds pies and Bien Cuit bread. It's open for lunch Wednesday through Friday, and for brunch on Saturday and Sunday; dinner is served only on Fridays. untitledatthewhitney.com



TASTE, Seattle Art Museum; Seattle



Chef Craig Hetherington oversees one of Seattle's most obsessively locavore restaurants. Almost 90 percent of the menu comes from within 150 miles of the restaurant, sourced from upwards of 50 vendors. Hetherington regularly updates the menu to reflect current exhibitions. For a Peruvian art show running into early 2014, he has added an earthy quinoa salad with roasted local chanterelles, and a tangy tuna ceviche. tastesam.com

Café Modern, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Fort Worth, TX

Designed by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando, this beautiful museum comprises a central reflecting pool and five pavilions with floor-to-ceiling windows. The café's chef, Dena Peterson, serves a globally inspired lunch and Friday night dinner, but is known for her down-home brunch, complete with a rockabilly sound track. Texas-style crowd-pleasers include dulce de leche French toast and Barbacoa Benedict: tender braised brisket and cage-free local eggs on toasted English muffins with roasted tomato-cilantro salsa. themodern.org/cafe



Café NOMA, New Orleans Museum of Art; New Orleans



This café by celebrated NOLA restaurateur Ralph Brennan serves quick bistro dishes like flatbread pizzas and salads from chef Chris Montero. The bright modern space is a lively contrast to the century-old neoclassical museum. Floor-to-ceiling windows face the lagoons and Spanish moss of City Park. A recent lecture series celebrated New Orleans's food culture, and included an appearance by a NOLA legend, Leah Chase. cafenoma.com

Terzo Piano, The Art Institute of Chicago; Chicago

This small café in the art museum's modern wing has views of Chicago's skyline and Lake Michigan. Overseen by superstar Tony Mantuano of Spiaggia, chef Megan Neubeck makes everything from scratch, down to the sodas. She features local ingredients in Mediterranean dishes like smoky clam and bacon flatbread pizza, and eggplant fries with tzatziki. terzopianochicago.com



**Academy Café, California Academy of Sciences;
San Francisco**

Just like this brilliantly interactive museum, this Olle Lundberg/Cathy Simon—designed café, with its steel tables and traffic cone—orange plastic chairs, appeals to visitors of all ages. Café owner Charles Phan is best known for his Vietnamese flagship, the Slanted Door. The café serves a global menu including steamed pork buns, organic black bean tacos and Moroccan lemon chicken, proving slow food can be served at a fast-food pace. Echoing museum architect Renzo Piano's innovative green design, the menu also highlights local and sustainable ingredients. themossroom.com/academy-cafe



**Laurel Kitchen/Art Bar, Puerto Rico Museum
of Art; San Juan**

Puerto Rican TV star chef Mario Pagán has also competed on Food Network's *Next Iron Chef*. For this restaurant at one of the biggest art museums in the Caribbean, he melds Puerto Rican ingredients and French influences. The menu features delicious swordfish over breadfruit mousse and crispy yellowtail in Ibérico ham broth. laurelkitchenartbar.com



Café à la C'Art, Tucson Museum of Art; Tucson



The complex of buildings that houses this museum includes an entire block of historic homes; one of them, the Hiram Stevens house, an adobe built in the 1860s by a local politician, is the site of this casual café. Each of its four rooms has a working fireplace and bright, hand-painted doorframes with Southwestern floral or bird patterns. Café ownership and operation is a true family affair in the hands of Tucson native Judith Michelet, her son, chef Mark Jorbin, and his wife, Shirley. The menu includes hearty fare such as ancho chile—braised lamb shank and a citrusy achiote pork sandwich topped with avocado and pepper Jack cheese. cafealacarttucson.com

The Modern, The Museum of Modern Art; New York City

For his first museum restaurant, Danny Meyer commissioned the architects Bentel & Bentel to create a Bauhaus-inspired space. Using a frosted glass wall and colorful floral designs as dividers, the firm cleverly divided The Modern into a chic bar setting and a higher-end restaurant. Founding chef Gabriel Kreuther's Alsace-inspired menu includes shareable dishes like a popular tarte flambée and a multicourse tasting menus. themodernnyc.com



The Buffet Restaurant, Kimbell Art Museum; Fort Worth



Michelangelo's earliest-known painting, "The Torment of St. Anthony," stands out among the Kimbell's small but special collection. The sunlit vaulted café is part of the original museum building designed by Louis Kahn (the museum has a new Renzo Piano–designed wing). The café is set up just as its name suggests: Diners choose one of three plate sizes, and fill them with chef Shelby Schafer's light dishes, like her nutty quinoa tabbouleh or a creamy spinach–and–roasted garlic quiche. Friday evenings, musicians perform in the adjacent enclosed courtyard. kimbellart.org/visit/dining

Palettes, Denver Art Museum; Denver

Chef Kevin Taylor opened this café in 1997. His New American menu spans from Anaheim chiles rellenos to a silken corn soup with barbecued shrimp. Some dishes play on the restaurant's name: Ingredients in the Cobb salad are arrayed like a painter's palette. Others are riffs on the museum's exhibitions: During a recent Yves Saint Laurent show, the menu included chic takes on retro French staples like trout amandine and steak frites. ktrg.net/palettes



Nasher Museum Café, Duke University; Durham, NC

Students like to hang out at this café, which serves casual Mediterranean food like caprese panini and adds menu items that match the exhibitions. For example, expect to see Middle Eastern offerings on the menu during a forthcoming Islamic art show based on Doris Duke's expansive collection.

nasher.duke.edu/cafe



Mitsitam Café, Museum of the American Indian; Washington, DC



Mesa-like curves make this the Smithsonian's most visually striking museum. The understated indoor café, whose name is Delaware/Piscataway for "let's eat," draws from a variety of indigenous Native American cuisines. Chef Richard Hetzler offers a brilliant buffet with five stations: South America, Mesoamerica, Northern Woodlands, Northwest Coast and the Great Plains. Can't decide where to eat? The café offers a five-region sampler, which might include a savory wild rice salad or lightly smoked salmon on a cedar plank. mitsitamcafe.com/home/default.asp

Café Phipps, Phipps Conservatory and Gardens; Pittsburgh

A local favorite, this café is situated in the public garden's LEED-certified visitors' center, and finds clever ways to advance the mission of its host, to encourage sustainability. For the health-focused menu, chef Stephanie Gelberd often sources ingredients from the conservatory's edible garden. Instead of commercial sodas, the menu includes Phipps Splashes: fresh fruit juices poured over seltzer. The café recycles 500 wine corks a month, for reuse as flooring, insulation and more.

phipps.conservatory.org



Ray's and Stark Bar, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Designed by Renzo Piano, this restaurant is a contemporary work of art unto itself. Floor-to-ceiling windows make it look like a jewel box; inside, glass displays of teacups spanning 1850 to 1950 zigzag throughout the space. Outside, artist Chris Burden's "Urban Light" installation of 202 decommissioned L.A.-area street lamps makes for a striking backdrop. In August 2013 the restaurant and bar sparked headlines by launching a water menu. But there's nothing gimmicky about chef Kris Morningstar's bold food. The wood-fired ovens turn out rustic pizzas with luxe toppings like bone marrow, and pastas including the staff favorite squid ink bucatini, layered with cooling mint, fiery Calabrian chiles and soy sauce for extra umami. patinagroup.com



New American Café, Museum of Fine Arts; Boston



This restaurant opened in 2010 as part of the Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro Family Courtyard, a cathedral-size, 12,000-square-foot glass-enclosed atrium. The café is now a focal point for visitors as they pass from the Art of Europe gallery to the John Singer Sargent portraits in the American wing. The New American menu showcases New England favorites like seared cod cakes and Angus burgers with Grafton cheese. mfa.org/visit/dining

The Source by Wolfgang Puck, Newseum; Washington, DC

Wolfgang Puck brings his original brand of Asian fusion to this tribute to all things media. Chef Scott Drewno keeps his menu in sync with the seasons; this fall he added a squash hot-and-sour soup with warming Sichuan peppercorns, bright ginger and curried shrimp dumplings. wolfgangpuck.com

