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PHOENIX

85 *Best* Restaurants

Your ultimate guide to the Valley's
best places to chow down!

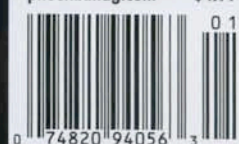
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85 **Best** Restaurants

Bliss/ReBar

901 N. Fourth St., Phoenix, 602-795-1792,
blissonfourth.com

So they're actually two destinations, but they're joined at the hip – as in hip, baby, for the stylish New American Bliss and the rustic contemporary bar that is ReBar. Opened last August from a few Fez restaurant talents, the concept is basic belly-filling food with a bit of flair: Nachos are loaded in braised beef and red cabbage, mac-and-cheese is buried in chicken and bacon, and there's Mama's Pot Roast Dinner done with mashed cauliflower instead of potatoes. For dessert, wander across the patio to the bar for a coffee and cream martini or an Absolut Boston tea party (think Arnold Palmer with a kick). Bliss: 11 a.m.-midnight M-F, 10 a.m.-midnight Sa-Su; Rebar: 11 a.m.-midnight nightly. \$-\$\$

French Café Bink

36889 N. Tom Darlington Dr., Carefree, 480-488-9796,
cafebink.com

The casual, French-inspired sibling to modern American Binkley's Restaurant, Café Bink serves bistro classics with an upscale American twist inside a narrow, cozy dining room and on the *très* chic patio overlooking Black Mountain. Try the brown sugar corned beef sandwich or a classic French dip at lunch, or for dinner, try Amy's Bolognese, a hearty veal and tomato stew served over creamy polenta, or the delicate trout *meunière*. Herb-dusted *frites* with a trio of dipping sauces are a must at lunch or dinner. Seasonal soups are divine, as is a fluffy, crustless quiche. Don't skip dessert, especially the chocolate soufflé with Valrhona sauce. Lunch and dinner, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tu-Su; closed M. \$\$-\$\$\$

Christopher's

2502 E. Camelback Rd., Phoenix, 602-522-2344,
christophersaz.com

Chef Christopher Gross's eponymous restaurant at Biltmore Fashion Park has changed locations over the years, but it's never changed its stylish vibe or the quality of its French-influenced cuisine. A James Beard award-winner, Gross puts a flavorful spin on everything, from a poached egg frisée salad to braised veal cheeks to his famous wild mushroom soup with *foie gras*. Settle in at the U-shaped bar framing the exhibition kitchen or the chic dining room swathed in orange and reclaimed wood, and savor French classics like Alsatian onion tart

or *cote de boeuf*. Oenophiles will adore the adjoining Crush lounge and its deep, thoughtful wine list specializing in French appellations. Lunch and dinner, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. M-Th, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. F-Sa, noon-7 p.m. Su. \$\$\$

Sophie's Bistro

2320 E. Osborn Rd., Phoenix, 602-956-8897,
sophiesbistro.com

Tucked in a cheery cottage house with old wooden floors and pale, icy, mint-colored walls, Sophie's might be the most authentic French bistro in town, owned by French-born Serge Boukatch. In the front room, a wood-paneled bar is charming – the perfect spot to sip an aperitif before dinner. Certainly the garlicky mussels, Parisian-style rolled crêpes (the ham and cheese is exquisite) and



Bliss/ReBar

Braised beef-loaded nachos

Cafe ZuZu

6850 E. Main St. (Hotel Valley Ho), Scottsdale, 480-421-7997,
hotelvalleyho.com

Zuzu puts a few sexy twists into favorites like burgers and shakes, oatmeal and eggs, chicken and steaks. That's because chef Chuck Wiley knows the best local farmers and boutique purveyors, so ingredients are ultra-fresh and fancy, even for an iceberg wedge salad. This grub stop is also retro-chic, set in a luxury hotel. Sit at the classic counter in front of the soda fountain, and fill up on snazzy sustenance like the breakfast casserole brimming with sweet Italian sausage, roasted potatoes and a flurry of veggies under cheddar and a poached egg; or the dreamy, tender braised beef short ribs over creamy grits. Breakfast, 6 a.m.-11:15 a.m. daily; lunch, 11:15 a.m.-2:30 p.m. daily; dinner, 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m. Su-Th. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Eat Beat

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Review

Bliss

Grilled chicken and seasonal veggie skewers

A lively crowd, friendly staff and crazy good cocktails make Bliss one of the best new spots to munch and mingle in Downtown Phoenix.

BY GERI KOEPPPEL | PHOTOS BY DAVID MOORE

EVEN IF BLISS DIDN'T SERVE ADDICTIVE comfort food, even if it didn't exist in an adorable old bungalow that oozes charm, and even if it didn't have some of the best drink specials in town, it would still be one of the hippest hangouts in Downtown Phoenix.

One reason is because the wait staff makes it irresistible from the get-go. The Valley has no shortage of immature and inexperienced servers, but not here. Instead, the staff ranges from friendly and professional to downright chummy and chatty (in the best possible way). They even veered into warm, bubbly, vivacious and entertaining at times.

Then there's the crowd at Bliss – a lively, eclectic, urban mix that loves dance music, brunch and historic buildings. It's always full of young, fit, fabulous, exuberant men in snug T-shirts and lots of hair gel.

The ownership pedigree includes Mark Howard, who's also a part owner of Fez on Central, and partners Jackson Kelly and Kevin Kelly. Bliss and Fez share an executive chef, John Cook.

Bliss owners also own and operate the adjacent ReBar, which has a happening scene with a nice-sized patio. Both places are hugged by trees and offer that indoor/outdoor, under-the-stars ambience we crave in the cooler months. Bliss food is served in ReBar, too, and all of the drinks for Bliss come from ReBar, so servers dart back and forth effortlessly.

The menu isn't large, but it's packed with possibilities. If you like it hot, get the spicy sriracha Caesar salad (\$9). It's a kicky take on the old standard. The rocket salad (\$9), topped with a crunchy slab of fried goat cheese, mandarin oranges and red peppers, is a bright combination of sweet, salty and slightly bitter. The baby spinach Cobb salad (\$9) isn't bad, but it paled in comparison to its siblings due to flabby bacon and dull diced tomatoes.

The burger comes loaded (\$10) with homemade cheese sauce and bacon, or naked (\$8) with lettuce, tomato, onion and your choice of sauce (they make several in-house, from spicy aioli to *pico de gallo*, and you can mix-and-match on the dishes). The naked version with just ketchup was terrific – juicy, flavorful and served on

Eat Beat Main Course

a puffy pretzel bun that added dimension. The shoestring fries were an ideal interpretation, with plenty of potato flavor despite their skinny stature.

Another winner was the tempura shrimp BLTA (\$10), with crispy shrimp and the usual BLT fixings accented by smooth avocado. The sauce on the BBQ chicken sandwich (\$8) was overly sweet, but it was still decent thanks to a good char on the meat and, again, that puffy, golden pretzel bun.

Entrées are comfort food with a bit of attitude, like Mama's Pot Roast dinner (\$15) made with perfectly caramelized roast in a sauce of wine, beef stock and pomegranate syrup. Sides of creamy, cauliflower-studded mashed potatoes and plump, peppery sautéed mushrooms with shredded carrots were ideal dance partners.

Another fave was the mac and cheese loaded (\$12), served with a pile of smoky chicken and bacon. Again, the bacon could be better, but in this dish, the quality wasn't as noticeable. Grilled chicken and seasonal veggie skewers over orange rice pilaf (\$13) sounded boring, but it shocked me – juicy hunks of meat and sweet grilled peppers and onions burst with flavor, thanks to a house-made barbecue sauce.

The double-cut pork chop dinner (\$15) in a garlicky, tangy tomato concassé was a strong runner-up, with a fine rendition of creamy but not gooey potatoes *au gratin*. Soft tacos (\$9, one each of beef, chicken and shrimp) weren't terrible, but I wouldn't order them again based on other standout choices. Baked cod (\$15) was boring and tasted freezer-burned.



From left: Mama's pot roast dinner; walnut brownie sundae; Bliss

Usually, I find appetizers to be the most intriguing selections on the menu, but not here. Chicken lettuce wraps (\$7) were wraps in theory only: We couldn't get the oversized chicken chunks, walnut pieces, big broccoli, carrots and gummy sauce to stay put in our tender butter lettuce. Braised beef loaded nachos (\$9) on flour chips were oily and salty. Minor missteps, though, in the grand scheme.

In fact, if you're just in the mood for munchies, on Mondays Bliss offers a screaming deal: a bottle of house wine and a platter of tempura vegetables, mini-grilled cheese sandwiches with sliced pears, coconut chicken strips and fried sausage ravioli for \$20. I wasn't keen on the tough, chewy ravioli, but even if you pass it up, this easily makes a meal for two.

In addition to that special, drinks here are some of the best deals around. They run a \$3 cocktail of the day and great drink specials every day, but weekend brunch – both Saturday and Sunday – is especially tempting, with \$3 Champagne cocktails and \$4 Bloody Marys (both excellent), as well as \$3

mimosas or \$10 for a bottle of champagne and carafe of orange juice. Too bad the French toast (\$9) was slimy, but why bother with it when you can get the loaded omelet (\$9 for anything you can stuff into it)? No stingy limit to the number of meats or veggies; just listen to your palate and go for it.

There are only two desserts, but they're both delightful: Bliss homemade walnut brownie sundae and cobbler of the day, both \$6. Simple, to-the-point, comfort goodies. We did lament a lack of crust on our deconstructed apple cobbler, but when our server heard this, he ran straight to the kitchen and had them quickly bake an extra.

It's this kind of attitude and the almost prescient ability of the wait staff that makes the experience here superior. Comfort food rarely knocks anyone's socks off, especially now that you can't swing a pot roast without hitting a tub of mac and cheese in the restaurant scene. But the food here has a few quirks to keep it interesting, and the staff and customers have even more.

— Geri Koepfel can be reached at phxmag@citieswestpub.com.



DETAILS

Bliss

Cuisine: American

Address: 901 N. Fourth St., Phoenix

Phone: 602-795-1792 • Website: blissonfourth.com

Hours: 11 a.m. to midnight Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday

Highlights: Loaded omelet (\$9), spicy sriracha Caesar salad (\$9), rocket salad (\$9), tempura shrimp BLTA (\$10), burger (\$10), grilled chicken and seasonal veggie skewers (\$13), Mama's pot roast dinner (\$15), mac and cheese loaded (\$12), walnut brownie sundae (\$6)