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NEW JERSEY DINING | HIGHLIGHTS OF 2009

## Our Plates Were Full: Of Variety, Imagination, Value

By [KARLA COOK](#) and [DAVID CORCORAN](#)

THIS was to be another end-of-the-year serving of steamed spinach, another austere and dutiful “best values” edition of our annual restaurant roundup. As we noted at this time last year, nobody is in the mood for extravagance: the over-the-top meals that once seemed so pleasurable have become an acrid reminder of indulgences best forgotten.

But something about the makeup of the 40 or so restaurants we reviewed in 2009 convinced us that this year was different. It’s not just that the economy has rebounded a bit. It’s that determined and inventive restaurateurs are finding ways to maintain high standards in tough times — to deliver value without compromising values.

A trattoria in Hoboken offers adventurous wines in two-ounce pours, along with small plates of beautifully conceived comfort food — variety without excess. A bistro in Maplewood produces elegant meals with a minimal staff. In Montclair, an earnest young dog trainer sets up shop in a cramped and narrow diner and creates such a buzz that he soon has to move to bigger quarters.

In a sense, these are all “best values.” So rather than focus strictly on restaurants that deliver the most for the dollar, we’ve adopted categories that recognize a wide array of approaches to high quality. Each of us chose a winner from among the restaurants we had reviewed in each category.

### Best ‘Fresh and Local’

MARKET Joshua Cederbaum, the owner of this ebullient Montclair restaurant, is a dog trainer by day, and he already has this demanding town eating out of his hand. He recently moved [Market](#) from the tiny former diner where I reviewed it to more spacious digs in the home of the old Church Street Kitchen. “Market plates” — appetizer-size, largely [vegetarian](#) dishes — are the way to go here. — D. C.

12 Church Street, Montclair; (973) 744-2244; [marketmontclair.com](http://marketmontclair.com). Market plates, \$5 to \$16. Entrees, \$15 to \$22. B.Y.O. Reviewed Sept. 20.