

The Boston Globe

Tasting menus in Rhode Island: Decadent, even playful adventures, in 3 to 12 courses

With a little blind faith and an enthusiastic palate, tasting menus can be the best way to experience the culinary breath of the Ocean State's chef-driven restaurants



A server checks on a table at Cara restaurant at The Chanler at Cliff Walk in Newport, R.I. HANDOUT

Restaurant tasting menus are like the stock market: You have to invest if you want to play, you should know a thing or two about where you're putting your money, and there are no guarantees. But if you've done the research, and you play the long game while willingly riding the waves of uncertainty, there's a good chance you'll be handsomely rewarded.

Ellen Slattery may have the best perspective when it comes to tasting menus in the Ocean State. The proprietor of Ellie's Bakery and Gracie's restaurant in Providence introduced a tasting menu to the latter in the early 2000s, and to most diners then, it was a foreign concept. "I don't think a lot of people knew what a tasting menu was back then," recalls Slattery. "It's really exciting for us to see the evolution of it."

Today, Slattery says 80 percent of Gracie's diners order the tasting menu, a five- or seven-course experience that can be paired with wine if the guest chooses. The rate was even higher before Trinity Rep across the street resumed live performances, which often brings in diners with less time to linger.

Gracie's menu is a blind tasting, meaning diners put their trust in chef Matthew Varga to deliver a series of perfectly composed dishes that pack an impressive punch of flavor profiles in fun-size portions. Save for any dietary restrictions or foods that are simply off-limits, the diner is typically at the chef's culinary mercy, as is the case with many but not all tasting menus, and the experience can last up to three hours if diners dawdle in the deliciousness of it all. Persnickety palates: be warned.

Once reserved as a decadence for the deep-pocketed, tasting menus have become decidedly more approachable, even playful in recent years, but such epicurean adventures still maintain a degree of exclusivity that sets it apart from à la carte options.

"The tasting menu is something I love doing because nothing on it is on the regular menu," says Champe Speidel, the James Beard Foundation-recognized chef who owns Persimmon in Providence with wife Lisa. "You really get some fun experiences on any given night, and it's never the same experience twice."

Here are some of the Rhode Island restaurants offering tasting menus.



A truffle dish at Cara restaurant at The Chanler at Cliff Walk in Newport, R.I. HANDOUT

Cara at The Chanler at Cliff Walk

Starting at \$155 per guest for five-courses (plus tax and gratuity), Cara at The Chanler in Newport boasts one of the priciest tasting menus around, but it's also one of the most unique. "You should be able to close your eyes and know when you taste something, that we are doing this for you; you're somewhere on the seaside of Rhode Island in a beautiful mansion that has been meticulously restored — that is what we are trying to give to guests when they come," said executive chef Jacob Jasinski. The intimate Forbes Five-Star restaurant is partitioned from the property's cafe by a pair of glass doors, creating an instant air of exclusivity — and curiosity — as course after course is whisked into the private, oceanfront space, with Jasinski or one of his colleagues eager to wax poetic about each dish's complex components. "There is a certain allure about it," said the chef, adding this time of year, the menu has an emphasis on seafood. *Seating one: 5 p.m., five-courses, \$155 per person. Seating two: 8 p.m., eight-courses, \$225 per person. Wine pairing additional. 117 Memorial Blvd., Newport, (401) 847-1300. thechanler.com*