

# Best OF THE New Restaurants

OUR TOP 10 NEWCOMERS, FROM A STANDOUT STOP FOR CHEESESTEAKS  
TO A TOP CHEF ALUM'S ECLECTIC DAYTIME CAFÉ

In 2022, when our top 10 new restaurants made their debut, fine dining took a back seat—a sign of our risk-laden, inflationary times. Hotel restaurants were able to pull off ambitious openings (see: Fyr at Hilton Columbus Downtown). But independent owners like chef Avishar Barua of Joya's Café and Josh Dalton of Cove: A Seafood Joint went a more casual route. Meanwhile, Jhapali Kitchen & Bar and Marlow's Steaks hewed true to time-honored traditions, whether through the masalas used in Nepalese cooking or the meaty goodness of a Philly cheesesteak.

All of these newcomers, plus five more, are to be celebrated.

Stories by G.A. Benton, Nicholas Dekker and Erin Edwards • Photos by Tim Johnson

Chef Avishar Barua and his mother, Jayasree Barua



FOOD  
JOYA'S BREAKFAST SANDWICH - 13 MINI-6  
CRISPY CHICKEN MANCHURIAN SANDWICH - 16  
CHEESY DOUBLE CRUNCH - 16  
NOT PAD THAI - 18  
JOYA'S FRIED RICE - 18  
EGG TOAST IN A BOX - 14  
KATI ROLL - 15  
JOYA'S DOUBLE DELUXE - 16

## SIDE DISHES

### Stealth Mode:

Observant diners will notice daily specials in a display case (like excellent vegetarian Scotch-egg riffs and samosas). But Joya's has a "secret kitchen menu," too, with its own Instagram page. The menu showcases limited-run, what-the-staff-eats delights that have included multiculti burritos and tricked-out Cincinnati chili. Printouts of these specials are thoughtfully available for dining luddites.

### Anatomy of a

**Smashburger:** The hard-to-make, easy-to-love Joyaburger—a secret menu item whose popularity catapulted it onto the regular menu—stars two house-ground patties made of chuck eye steak, bacon and bone marrow. Completing the "smash-terpice": a garlic-buttered and griddled house potato bun; pepper jack; steamed-and-grilled shaved onions; hatch chiles; house-made pickles and condiments.

### Dinner Party:

Typically for Joya's, it keeps early hours until it doesn't. See, Joya's has another secret: It's been hosting occasional dinner parties that involve a tasting menu, special beverages, a reconfigured dining room and fancier dinnerware. These soirees should be open to the public in March via tickets sold on Tock.

# Joya's Café

657 High St., Worthington, 614-468-1232

After making a splash as the top chef at Service Bar, which spilled over into national recognition on Bravo's *Top Chef: Portland*, local chef Avishar Barua had plenty of options. He decided to continue having fun while working hard to launch his first restaurant—notably, in his hometown.

Named for Barua's mother, Joya's is a self-described "seriously fun, Bengali-American" café. That actually undersells this perennially packed, hip little Worthington wonder, because its culinary influences also include China, Korea, Thailand and Taco Bell.

Classic dishes are frequently reimagined, through laborious scratch-cooking techniques and creativity, into chile-kicked knockouts whose multiple components and dynamic qualities merit multiple adjectives.

The terrific kati roll—a large, Kolkata-style flatbread wrap with ground-lamb kebabs, egg, "maple chaat yogurt," apple chutney, pickled onions and cilantro crema—is tangy, rich, spicy, tart and sweet.

Joya's huge Toast-In-A-Box is an eccentrically folded, outside-the-box sandwich featuring toasted house-baked bread (a take on Japanese milk bread), a veggie omelet, pepper jack, salty pork roll, chiles, multiple condiments and crunchy garnishes.

Descriptions of Joya's fried rice and the Not Pad Thai—two spirited stir-fries on the evolving, small menu—would include "umami-bomb" and "wok-hei smokiness." Among the fine café drinks, Joya's milk chai (his mother's recipe, by the way) could just be described as "a must."

Chef Avishar Barua is ready to launch his second restaurant concept, called Agni. Expected to open by the time this issue comes out, you can read more about his new Brewery District establishment on Page 68.



Avishar Barua stokes the fire in his Grillworks hearth at Agni.

## Into Avishar's Fire

The *Top Chef* alum talks about the inner workings of his fire-breathing Brewery District restaurant.

By Erin Edwards

**Chef Avishar Barua** jokes that his mom, Jayasree, would scold him for playing with knives and fire as a kid. Knives have long been part of the chef's routine, and now the Columbus native has a new restaurant, Agni, dedicated to playing with fire.

In January, Barua gave us a behind-the-scenes tour at his then under-construction (but likely now open) restaurant in the Brewery District. Snow was on the ground outside; inside, the wood-fired grill was heating up the kitchen. We weren't there to talk about food but rather restaurant design and kitchen gear. Here's a look.

### Moody Interiors

**From Day to Night** Barua's daytime café in Worthington, Joya's (see Page 28), offers a cheerful color palette of orange, peach, pink and cobalt blue. Agni's design team,

including Mary Dietsch Architecture & Design and Jenn Stevens from Mynte Design Co., wanted to create Joya's foil, with a moody palette of dark blues, grays and natural wood elements—a stark contrast that signifies the transition to nighttime dining.

**Embracing Artisans** At the entrance, a tiled host stand greets guests; behind it, there's a small window into the bar from which welcome snacks may be served. The center dining space, opposite the newly refreshed bar by Millwork Elements, features colorful Indian textiles on the wall. In the third dining room at the back, a fire-breathing creature—a bear, perhaps?—looks down from one wall, a piece of artwork by Virginia folk artist Joe Engel that Barua and team procured at the Columbus Arts Festival. Opposite the artwork is a trapezoidal wooden table

for larger groups, custom-made by Common Species.

### Don't Overlook the Bathrooms

**Anime Art** Wild bathrooms are a trend in restaurants of late (just visit Agni's neighbor, Law Bird). The design team joined in the fun by commissioning Hanoi-based Blue Mint Anime (found on Etsy) to create an anime-inspired mural for one of the toilets. The scene depicts the chef around the family dinner table with his parents and brother. On another wall, Barua's famous Cheesy Double Crunch tacos, served at Joya's, look temptingly down from above.

**Potty Fun** Barua has a surprise in store for bathroom visitors. Both restrooms will be equipped with Japanese-style toilets with lots of buttons, bidet function-

PHOTOS: TIM JOHNSON

ality, music and massage settings. Agni is all set if there's ever a toilet paper shortage again.

#### A Versatile Kitchen

**God of Fire** Barua's happy place is making the wood fires for his new Grillworks hearth. He prefers the "romance" of making a fire from scratch rather than using starters like charcoal, organizing his wood in "log cabin" formation. The grill, a \$46,000 Langelier Elite X54 model, is a masterful design, with heat controlled both by manipulating the logs and burnt embers and by adjusting the grill surface height with a pair of hand cranks, which move the chain-driven grates up and down. The grill features cast iron (Barua's preferred cooking surface) and V-channel (for capturing juices) grill surfaces. He can bury vegetables in the embers while he's cooking over the grill, slow-roast chickens with the rotisserie attachment, or bake pizzas inside the super-hot, top oven chamber. "I'm stoked to have the tools to be able to do what we want to," he says. Emphasis on stoked.

**All-Wheel Drive** Seared into Barua's memory is when he and his Service Bar team pivoted to carryout-only business during the early days of the pandemic. "We don't know what the future of the kitchen could be," he says, noting that Agni is designed to be more nimble. Most of the equipment is on wheels, so the kitchen can be rearranged for a purely carryout experience if needed. "I don't want to go through what we went through in 2020 again," he says.

#### Private Dining

**Clean Lines** There's a sauna-like look to Agni's 12-seat private dining room, featuring three skylights and a long, black, custom table by Common Species. For the room's walls, Barua had wanted to use the ancient Japanese architectural technique called shou sugi ban (aka yakisugi), which involves charring wood, often cedar, and rubbing off the soot to achieve a fantastic effect. Alas, it was too expensive. Instead, his team created a special tool to scrape the walls' wood paneling. The result is a happy accident celebrating minimalism and clean lines.

**Counter Service** Barua's architect encouraged Barua to create a more seamless transition from the dining room into the kitchen, at the back of the building. They added a two-person chef's counter at the

kitchen entrance, facing the grill—surely the warmest (and most action-packed) seat in the house. When we spoke, Barua was on the hunt for extra-long marshmallow roasting sticks.

#### Backyard BBQ

**Moments** Though not yet complete, Agni will eventually have an alfresco dining space behind the restaurant, just steps away from its neighbor Antiques on High. "You have these different moments in the restaurant where you have the front porch, which is street side. You have the elevated balcony, which is like sitting [on the porch of] a nice house. And you have

the back, which is like someone's backyard. We wanted every seat to be a different experience," he says.

**Smoke Signals** Bolted near the back patio (and behind Antiques on High) is a beloved piece of Barua's personal equipment: a reverse-flow, offset smoker for making Texas-style barbecue, for smoking condiments and more. The black behemoth, a Lang BBQ Smokers 108" Deluxe, is known in pitmaster parlance as a "stick burner," which means wood is burned in a firebox off to the side of the main cooking chamber. The community-minded chef hopes to eventually make the stick burner available to neighboring businesses. ♦



Clockwise from above, a bathroom's anime illustration of Avishar Barua; a wall detail featuring Indian textiles; a piece by artist Joe Engel hangs in the dining room.

