

Gourmand N.E. getaways: 10 country inns for foodies

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The Inn at Thorn Hill overlooks Jackson Village, N.H., and features a comfortable lounge and dining room.

After the end-of-year flurry of activity, we like nothing better than checking into a country inn with luxurious lodgings and fine dining. At these properties, there's no need to leave your luscious digs to dine in the best restaurant in town. Why not pamper yourself — and start the New Year right — with one of these gourmand getaways?

STONEHEDGE INN, Tyngsborough About an hour's drive is all it takes to transport you from bustling Boston to the European countryside. Flickering lanterns beckoned in distant fields as we followed the tree-lined driveway and rolling fieldstone walls to the entrance of this enchanting hideaway. Surrounded by woodlands and horse pastures, we felt as if we'd arrived at a friend's country estate. Our room was spacious and comfortable, decorated with rich, floral fabrics and French country furnishings; an inviting whirlpool tub was tucked into a cozy alcove. The inn has 30 guest rooms, some with spa tubs, fireplaces, and balconies. But, it's the Left Bank restaurant, home to New England's largest wine collection, that truly impresses. A soaring wine tower, housing some of the 60,000-bottle collection, dominates the softly-lighted dining room, where French-trained chef Florent Boutet offers modern takes on classic cuisine, like the glazed leek tart, pan-seared red tuna, and tender braised beef short ribs. Be sure to check out the new, underground wine cellar, and consider a treatment at the inn's Vinotherapy Spa.

160 Pawtucket Blvd., 978-649-4400, www.stonehedgeinnandspa.com, rooms \$245- \$330, entrees \$27-\$41

OLD INN ON THE GREEN, New Marlborough It's hard not to be charmed by the Colonial dining room in this flawlessly restored, circa 1760 inn, with its wood-burning fireplace, paneled walls, and period antiques. The cozy dining room, where Windsor-style chairs hug white linen-topped tables, is lighted entirely by candles. The food is as elegant and comforting as the surroundings. Start with appetizers like crispy veal sweetbreads or lobster risotto, followed by the braised lamb shank with creamy mushroom polenta or the moist halibut filet with a parsnip puree. After dinner, climb the skinny stairs to your room; the five rooms at the inn, with original woodwork and antique furnishings, are historically charming without being too froufrou. Or opt for one of the more modern and spacious rooms in the Thayer House next door, some with fireplaces and spa tubs.

Route 57 Village Green, 413-229-7924, www.oldinn.com, \$249-\$260, entrees \$29-\$38, Saturday prix fixe \$75

THE CHANLER AT CLIFF WALK, Newport, R.I. If you're extravagantly romantic, you'll love the opulent rooms at this no-expense-spared inn overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The Gilded Age mansion houses 14 unique guest rooms, and there are six private villas, individually-themed and decorated, with antique furnishings, hand-painted murals, original art, fireplaces, walk-in rain showers, and spa tubs. Expect yards of drape-y fabrics, marble and gold, and bathrooms bigger than most city apartments. Elegant glamour continues at the perfection-driven Spiced Pear restaurant, where dishes are as picture-pretty as they are tasty. Splurge with the six- or nine-course tasting menu that might include escargot served with a quail egg, wild mushrooms and a smear of foie gras emulsion, a fig and medjool salad, butter-poached lobster with red shrimp and wild mussels, or a free-range buffalo ribeye served with a root vegetable gratin and vanilla infused spaghetti squash. While you're finishing the not-to-be-missed soufflé (we shared a cinnamon-flavored one drenched with a warm, peach bourbon anglaise), the butler will be drawing your bath, lighting candles, and sprinkling rose petals in your room.

117 Memorial Blvd., 401-847-1300, www.thechanler.com, from \$229, tasting menu \$98-\$145, a la carte entrees \$38-\$42

WHITE BARN INN, Kennebunkport, Maine Who said formal, white tablecloth restaurants were dead? Dress-up, special occasion dining is alive and relevant at this inn's five-star, five-diamond restaurant. We love the contrast: a big, rustic barn, with wood floors and soaring beams, where diners are doted on with hushed, haute service and sophisticated fare. A bevy of well-trained servers bring out dishes like the rich and creamy lobster bisque, duck consommé with a foie gras dumpling, polenta glazed scallops, and venison loin wrapped in a fluffy hazelnut crepe. Pampering continues when you check into newly-renovated rooms, with clean, contemporary design, some with marble baths, steam showers, and gas fireplaces.

37 Beach Ave. 207-967-2321, www.whitebarninn.com; \$320-\$1,800, three-course prix fixe \$106

HARTSTONE INN, Camden, Maine Anyone who's cooked for Julia Child can cook for us. Owner-chef Michael Salmon hosted the grande culinary dame on Aug. 10, 2001, when she complimented the dinner and autographed Salmon's 1966 edition of "Mastering the Art of French Cooking." But Salmon hasn't rested on those laurels. Each evening he prepares a five-course menu of simply-prepared, often locally-sourced dishes, served in two cozy dining areas. We happily gave up complete control as Salmon and his wife, Mary Jo, along with their waitstaff, brought us bacon-wrapped quail, sweet potato and green apple soup, seared cod filet with garlic smashed potatoes, and chocolate-macadamia nut soufflé. The disarmingly friendly inn has 14 homey rooms and suites, with traditional furnishings and fabrics, and is walking distance to downtown shops. For total gourmand immersion, sign up for Salmon's cooking classes, offered throughout the winter.

41 Elm St., 207-236-4259, www.hartstoneinn.com, winter rates \$115-\$195, five-course prix fixe \$48.50

INN AT THORN HILL, Jackson, N.H. Yes, the rooms are spacious and more contemporary than country (think spa tubs, gas fireplaces, and steam showers), and the location is superb, perched on a hill overlooking pretty Jackson Village. There are sleigh rides, skiing, snowshoeing, and outlet shopping nearby. But, we confess: We barely ventured beyond the lounge and dining room on a recent visit.

Settle into the slouching leather couch near the fireplace, and listen to live piano music while you nosh on creative small plates that might include corn fritters with sweet chili soy sauce or crispy shrimp over spicy udon noodles. The smart, award-winning wine list includes 25-30 choices by the glass. Then, ramble over to the more formal dining room, where you can nibble, perhaps on charcuterie or burgundy-soaked frog legs, before diving into main courses like the crab-crusting tenderloin, Peking duck on a scallion pancake, or grilled swordfish served Portuguese style with chorizo sausage.

Thorn Hill Road, 603-383-4242, www.innatthornhill.com, \$169-\$440, double occupancy including multi-course dinner, full breakfast, and afternoon tea

SUGAR HILL INN, Sugar Hill, N.H. This rambling, romantic farmhouse, surrounded by woodlands and mountains, is known for its lingering, four-course prix fixe dinners. Chef Val Fortin's creative and sophisticated fare, with a focus on local sourcing, has won the hearts (or should we say stomachs?) of New Englanders and garnered a fair share of national accolades. When winter arrives, he turns to down-to-earth, hearty, comfort fare, like the braised pork osso bucco, horseradish crusted tenderloin (they do their own butchering and make all their own sauces and stocks), and roasted Vermont quail and venison. Comfort continues in the Tavern, where you can cozy up to a fireplace, and in the 14 rooms, cottages, and suites, with fluffy bed linens and cheery country decor.

116 Route 117, 603-823-5621, www.sugarhill.com, \$170-\$410, four-course prix fixe \$60

INN AT WEATHERSFIELD, Perkinsville, Vt. We panicked when we heard that this inn had been recently sold. Luckily, award-winning chef Jason Tostrup, a pioneer in New England farm-to-table cuisine and nose-to-tail cooking, has stayed on, and new owners Richard and Marilee Spanjian are as dedicated as ever to offering arguably some of the best dining in the state. The menu reads like a map of Vermont and changes weekly, but may include dishes like the Moroccan-style stuffed squash, Szechuan peppercorn crusted Wagyu beef, and roasted shoulder clod with smoked parsnips. House-made breads are warmed in the original fireplace of the 1792 small-town inn. Upstairs, 12 nest-like rooms have luscious linens and surprising high-tech touches, like iPod docking stations, Wi-Fi, and DVD players.

1342 Route 106, 802-263-9217, www.weathersfieldinn.com, \$149-\$299, entrees \$17-\$28, four-course tasting menu \$52

RABBIT HILL INN, Lower Waterford, Vt. Splurge for a luxury room where two can soak in a large spa tub and sit next to a glowing fire. Slip from under your heap of luxury linens for candlelight breakfast; sip afternoon tea in the parlor, and perhaps, go snowshoeing on nearby trails. When the sun sets over the mountains, head to the dining room where chef John Corliss works his magic. Corliss expertly marries seasonal sensibility with artfully simple and refined dishes, like littleneck clams over black linguine, deeply-flavored veal stew with root vegetables, and the signature "pumpple cake," apple pie baked in pumpkin cake, served with cheddar cheese and grape walnut salad.

48 Lower Waterford Road, 800-762-8669, www.rabbithillinn.com, \$200-\$365 with full breakfast and after-noon pastries, three-course prix fixe \$53

OLD LYME INN, Old Lyme, Conn. Gone are the dark carpets, stuffy furnishings, and grandma's house decor; after a yearlong restoration, this freshly-painted, redesigned inn still retains original, historical detail, but is now bright and airy, with gleaming wood floors and colorful local art. Ask for one of the eight rooms that have been redone (five are still being restored), with gas fireplaces and marble baths. There are two dining options: the casual tavern space, where locals hunker up to the bar or snag tables around the fireplace, and a more formal — but still relaxing — dining room. No matter the choice, you'll see the same menu, featuring simple, traditional dishes with chef Dennis Young's modern twists. Red snapper spiked with chorizo, calves liver Milanese with creamy, caramelized onion sauce, lamb loin chops with tandoor spices are popular choices, and the Damn Good Shrimp 'n' Grits lives up to its name.

85 Lyme St., 860-434-2600, www.oldlymeinn.com, \$135-\$265, entrees \$13-\$26