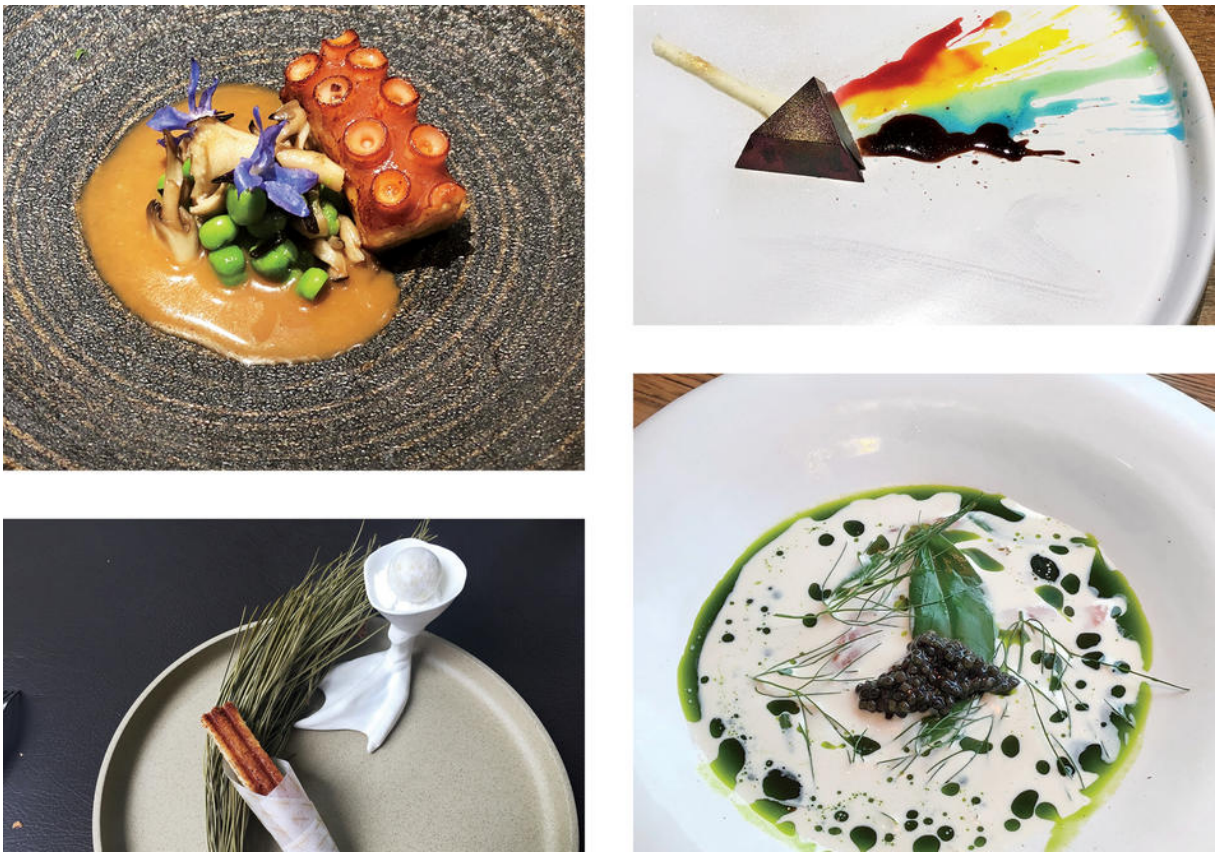
Alumni

Around the World in 100 Restaurants

By
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|
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Clockwise from top left: dishes from Haku in Hong Kong; Gaggan in Bangkok; Hide in London; Corner House in Singapore. Photos courtesy of Paul Grinberg.

Every June since 2002, a group of a thousand culinary professionals and food critics have gathered in some far-flung, idyllic location — this year it was Spain's Basque country — to vote on a list of the world's hundred best restaurants. For chefs and restaurateurs, a place on the list is a deeply coveted honor. For gastronomes, it's the ultimate fantasy roster. But because the list spans thirty countries and showcases meals that cost more than an average mortgage payment, no one has

actually eaten at every restaurant on it. In fact, no one has even come close — except for Paul Grinberg ’89BUS.

In 2017, Grinberg ate at ninety-nine of the world’s hundred best restaurants. This year, he expects that he’ll complete the list — tackling the one that eluded him last year, as well as the few 2018 additions. But Grinberg isn’t a food critic or a chef himself — he’s a finance executive, based in the Bay Area. And until a few years ago, he wouldn’t have called himself an adventurous eater.

“I was actually pretty picky, a total meat-and-potatoes guy,” he says. “I didn’t know much about restaurants, or care about them. I just ordered steak wherever I went.”

While preparing for a vacation to Spain in 2012, though, Grinberg realized that two of the world’s top fifty restaurants were in towns that he planned to visit. He decided to make reservations, and, as he says, “a hobby was born.” Grinberg says he was particularly taken by the concept of the tasting menu.

“For someone who didn’t actually know a lot about food, it was an incredible introduction,” he says. “You’re putting yourself in the chef’s hands. So I was eating things that I never would have ordered.”

Grinberg travels frequently for work and takes several international vacations a year, so he started making a point of checking the list whenever he was in a new city. Then he found that he was planning trips around it.

“It didn’t start out as a goal; I never thought I’d get anywhere near the whole list,” Grinberg says. “But eventually, I suppose, my competitive nature took over.”



Paul Grinberg

With the top fifty in his sights, Grinberg says, “things got a little weird.” On his mission, he’s flown twelve hours for a single dinner reservation. He’s eaten two dinners in one evening (“I was only in Adelaide, Australia, for one night, and I needed to hit two restaurants”). He ate at ten of France’s three-Michelin-star restaurants in a five-day span. And he once ate sushi for so many days in a row that his mercury levels temporarily rose to eight times those of a normal man his age.

“I know this sounds ridiculous, but it isn’t always fun or easy. There are some trips where I just can’t face the thought of lifting another fork or spoon to my mouth,” Grinberg says. To combat the fatigue — and the massive caloric intake — he says that he eats simply at home and works out for up to two hours every day.

In 2017, Grinberg set a goal to visit the full top one hundred. And while most restaurants were helpful with reservations, sometimes even staying open past their usual hours to accommodate Grinberg, there was one that wasn’t impressed — Tokyo’s Sushi Saito. With only eight seats, Sushi Saito is notoriously difficult to visit,

especially since they only open their reservation line once a month. Grinberg was determined; he worked all his business connections and once recruited sixteen friends to man the phones on a reservation day, but to no avail. After news of his almost-feat started circulating in food media and beyond, Grinberg eventually did get a reservation — but he was thwarted again. An impending typhoon in Japan, as well as a death in Grinberg's family, made it impossible for him to make the dinner.

The 2018 list was released this past June, and Grinberg now has five additional restaurants to visit; he says he intends to get to them all. And while his nemesis, Sushi Saito, actually fell off the list this year, Grinberg plans to dine there this coming spring so he'll have fully completed both the 2017 and 2018 lists.

"It's my white whale," he says. "The quest won't be complete until I slay it."

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