Best Shopping (Mall/Plaza)

Stuyvesant Plaza

As malls go, Stuyvesant is a tasteful one. Sure, it’s a big horseshoe with a vast parking lot in the middle, but it has a classy collection of shops and restaurants, it’s pleasant to walk around, and it never gives you that cheesy mall feeling.

Best Shopping (Downtown)

Great Barrington, Mass.

We do love Saratoga Springs . . . except for the end of it that, like in a horror movie, is being taken over by a creeping mass of . . . MALL STORES! RUN, KIDS! You won't find that in Great Barrington. What you will find is several walkable blocks of independent shops, restaurants, an excellent food co-op, a beautifully restored theater and an art-house movie triplex right smack in the middle of it all. Its reputation as a tony retreat for New Yorkers aside, Great Barrington and its restaurants and shops actually run the gamut from pricey to quite affordable. It's only an hour’s drive from Albany—and a lovely drive at that—so if you live here, make a day trip of it.

Best Men’s Clothing

Mark Thomas Men’s Apparel

5 Metro Park Road, Colonie

A repeat winner. Mark Thomas Men's Apparel is the place to shop in Albany when you've made it, or if you're on the way there. This is shopping the way it should be: A relaxed high-end, high-quality men's clothing store where the customer is treated like a family
member. Owner Mark Goldfarb and partner Tom Fagan have created an atmosphere that harkens back to another era. Experience the joy of trying on a Pal Zileri suit. It is like sitting in a new Mercedes Benz. Once you shop at Mark Thomas, say goodbye to Macy's.

Best Women's Boutique (Day to Night)

Main Street

322 Main St., Great Barrington, Mass.

Here's a Metroland fashion-shoot secret: Our models go gaga over the clothes submitted by Main Street. So much so, that we fear a catfight over who gets to wear which darling dress by MM Couture by Miss Me, or which up-to-the-minute Barami suit. So much so, that, rumor has it, they make the hour-long trek west to spend the big bucks they made posing and voguing in this ultra-charming retail oasis. Hot labels and dazzling styles that appeal to women of all ages and pocketbooks; bonus points for power bags and unique jewelry.

Best Women's Boutique (Funky)

Some Girls

17 Colvin Ave., Albany; 13 2nd St., Troy

Department-store shopping is as "tired" as last year's low-rise jeans. If you're longing to be "OMG fierce," Some Girls Boutique continues to be the dream store for you. The two Capital Region stores carry of-the-moment clothing, shoes, bags, and accessories from names like Bizz, See You Monday, Miss Me Shoes, and Oboe—pieces that are as original and one-of-a-kind as you are, and as late Some Girls founder Diva DeLoayza. Diva's love of fun, quirky one-of-a-kind style and discerning eye lives on through the staff and great boutiques. You go, Ms. Fabulous!

Best Optician

Buenau’s Opticians

228 Delaware Ave., Delmar

Phonetically pronounced “bee-news,” they really should be called ¡Buenos! That's exactly what your experience will be from the minute you through the door. MB, Jeff, Roz, Faith and company love what they do, and are more than happy to help you pick just the right pair of glasses to frame your face. They also have the
ultra-cool Smart Mirror, a computerized camera that allows you to visualize your appearance in frame selections—very cutting-edge. Buenau's is muy bueno!

Best Jewelry

Elissa Halloran Designs

229 Lark St., Albany

We know, we know—been there, done that. But seriously, is there any competition to Elissa Halloran's individualistic, often quirky and always quality baubles? Hers are the pieces that warrant notice, from Lark Street to Park Avenue (believe us). Halloran's talent and range have grown with her business, and her spanking brand new digs suitably showcase her prowess with amazonite, rhodonite, and fresh water pearls.

Best Tattoo (Ensemble)

Dead Presidents Lounge

1092 Madison Ave., Albany

Sick tatties? That's all you're gonna get here. Tattoo shops have been popping up like weeds over the past few years, but this one was opened by four well-known area artists, all under the age of 30! DPL is a truly impressive shop, chock full of ridiculous talent. Plus, it doubles as an art gallery from time to time.

Best Tattoo (Solo)

Don Demers

Full Effect Tattooing, 460 Broadway, Troy

Don Demers is the man. Ask anyone.

Best Home Theater

Hippo's Home Entertainment

Stuyvesant Plaza

Over the years, Hippo's has retreated from being a something-for-everyone electronics store and concentrated on what they do best: Selling high-quality electronic
entertainment systems with an emphasis on knowledge, service, and expert installation. If you want it done right, Hippo’s is for you. If you want it done on the cheap, they’ll just send you to Best Buy.

Best Florist

My Favorite Things

454 Broadway, Saratoga Springs

To keep things fresh, like the flowers, My Favorite Things has evolved and is blossoming in the downtown marketplace of beautiful, historic Saratoga. Still maintaining their space in Albany as a work studio, Chris Grigas and Donald Matthews continue to awe and inspire with their innovative and ever-so-pleasing floral design. This dynamic duo continues to take the area by storm, one bouquet at a time. Today Saratoga, tomorrow the world!

Best Art Supply Store

Arlene’s Artist Materials

57 Fuller Road, Albany

Always and forever our favorite, Arlene’s is your local Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory for the artist crowd. You name it: easels, canvas (stretched or by the yard), aisles and aisles of brushes, paints and palates, inks, pastels, artisan papers, technical pens, templates, printing blocks, clays, wire—everything you need to make your art come true. They’ll even help you make it look great when it’s done, with the assistance of their custom framing department and the largest variety of open-stock mat board in the area. Their selection, prices and knowledgeable staff can’t be beat.

Best Costume Shop

The Costumer

1995 Central Ave., Albany; 1020-1030 Barrett St., Schenectady

We’re reporters. Sometimes we need to go undercover; sometimes we need to throw an opulent masquerade ball. Whatever we’re up to, when it comes to finding a proper costume for the occasion, this is where we do it. They have a huge selection (they’re one of the country’s top costume companies), offering wigs, makeup, prosthetics, costumes, rentals and accessories. So watch out—that nun with plastic nun chucks, space boots, and a handlebar moustache just might be a Metroland reporter.
Best Bookstore

The Book House

**Stuyvesant Plaza**

The Book House wins every year because, well, they have a wide (and smart) selection of books in almost every genre and format. Their staff is knowledgable and helpful, and the overall experience is relaxing. FYI: Rumor has it that, come fall, they will have outlasted yet another of the big chain stores. You just can’t beat ‘em.

Best Children’s Bookstore

The Little Book House

**Stuyvesant Plaza**

For your favorite little lit-lover, the Little Book House right next door offers the best of the best in children’s literature, education and fun. With a perfect balance of classic and contemporary books for the kiddos, the knowledgeable and staff will help you or your little reader find just the right book. All in a fanciful atmosphere that should remind even the stuffiest grown-ups that books are a magical, colorful wonderland.

Best Bookstore (Antiquarian)

Lyrical Ballad Bookstore

7 Phila St., Saratoga Springs

If you want to get lost in time, then wander through the underground vault that is Lyrical Ballad. They have a wide selection of antiquarian books, maps and ephemera, including the vaunted locked room of first editions. No “day out” in Saratoga is complete without a visit.

Best Bookstore (Time Warp)

I Love Books

380 Delaware Ave., Albany

Sure, we love the new-fangled technologies, the nanobots and all that. But sometimes we wax nostalgic for the bright familiarity of days gone by. And when we do, I Love Books is
the only place to get our book and nostalgia fix. Yes, it’s a bookstore, and a good one at that, but it’s also one-stop shopping a la a 1950s pharmacy (just with books instead of codeine). Their selection of toys and gifts is fantastically kitchy, their jewelry artistic, and their greeting cards selection is one of the best around. They even have big glass jars full of candy sticks. Go on, be a kid again.

Best Used Bookstore (Bohemian)

Dove & Hudson Books

296 Hudson Ave., Albany

There’s always something new-old at Dove & Hudson, a literary hipster’s oasis in Albany’s Center Square neighborhood. Their selection is top-notch—probably because they’re so selective about what the buy to sell.

Best Used Bookstore (Selection and Value)

The Book Barn

200 Troy Schenectady Road, Latham

Dan Riggs has stocked his spacious used-book store to the gills with a huge selection of volumes for his bibliophile clientele, and he’s priced the books to move, so the stock is always changing. Antiquarian and foreign-language volumes, literature, reference, cookbooks, how-to manuals, history, cinema, gardening, sci-fi, cookbooks, drama, it’s all there. And he has one of the best selections of used kids’ books we’ve seen. Last time we were there we picked up an Arabic typing manual and a hardbound 1961 edition of Winnie the Pooh. We love this place.

Best Comic Book Store

Aquilonia Comics

412 Fulton St., Troy

Aquilonia is a comic-book shop for people who actually like to read comics. Yes, people still do that these days, because many comics are well-written satires of modern culture. And if you don’t buy that line take a trip to Aqui and ask for a recommendation or two. You will be hooked on the latest edgy series from Mark Millar, Warren Ellis, Brian Wood, Robert Kirkman or Geoff Johns. Aqui also offers weekly tournaments for gamers, and it’s in close proximity to other businesses that help sustain them (like Shalimar and First Choice).
Best Record Store (Shopping)

Last Vestige Music Shop

173 Quail St. Albany

It's the only game in town. And it's awesomer than 52 FYEs combined. 'Nuff said.

Best Record Store (Hangout)

The Beat Shop

197 River St., Troy

This is your dad's record store, but your dad is Jim Barrett, and Barrett is cool. He's been cool longer than most of you've been alive. And just like him, his shop is laid-back and casual, and welcoming to anyone who just wants to hang out or browse.

Best Hardcore/Punk Clothing

Punk Rock Reptile

340 Central Ave. Albany

Looking for an Icepick shirt, maybe a Stigmata hoodie, or a Section 8 CD? Punk Rock Reptile has swept in to offer a hearty selection of punk, hardcore and metal apparel, as well as hard to find discs and scary movies. Their wardrobe racks make us salivate like we're 12 years old again, hanging out at Music Shack. Word has it they also have the occasional live show.

Best Pet Supply Store

Benson's Pet Center

197 Wolf Road, Albany; 12 Fire Road, Clifton park; 3083 Route 50, Saratoga Springs; 118 Quaker Road, Queensbury

We sure do love our pets, and when it comes time to shop for food, toys, and assorted supplies, this is where we do it. Benson's offers a huge selection of pet needs for fish, reptiles, birds, small mammals, cats and dogs. Their pet-food supply is unbeatable, offering a premium array of healthy, natural and organic lines, and nutritional supplements. Is Bubbles a finicky eater, terrified of thunderstorms? Does Mr. Biscuits pee on your carpet or demolish toys? The knowledgeable staff will help you find the perfect foods, toys, treats and behavioral aids for your precious (or problem) pet. And their
rewards program offers you future savings for every dollar you spend.

Best Antique Store (Upscale)

Living Room Antiques

**274 River St., Troy**

You know how some houses are full of antiques and they just feel cluttered and old, and some houses have that perfect antique treasure to highlight their contemporary, bohemian décor? Well, Living Room owner Elizabeth Young will help you shape your house into the latter, pairing her eclectic selection of exquisite antiques, with her interior design services. Young has a truly artistic eye, and a step into her shop with prove it.

Best Antique Store (Eclectic)

Coxackie Antique Center

**12400 Route 9W, West Coxsackie**

If you're looking for something, but you don't know exactly what, you can probably find it here. With antiques available from 100 dealers, this 15,000-square-foot warehouse has something for everyone: vintage clothes, war memorabilia, furniture, toys, jewelry, records, books, gadgets, you name it. Come prepared to rummage; that's half the fun.

Best Gift Store

American Pie

**41 Main St., Chatham**

Gifts, jewelry and accessories, cards, kitchenware. . . . It's almost a mini-department store with a gift-shop feel, artfully arranged, easy to navigate, with lots of eye-catching stuff to stop you on the way. The kind of store you pop into to buy a birthday card and end up browsing for a half-hour, forgetting the card but leaving with a bagful of other things.

Best Hand-Crafted Gifts

The Paper Sparrow

**288 River St., Troy**
A newcomer to the downtown Troy boutique scene, the Paper Sparrow has already carved a distinct niche for itself, and become a huge hit with Trojan shoppers. The bright shop is stocked with a wide array of handcrafted items: jewelry, handbags, baby clothes, soaps, artwork, toys, home décor, even local honey. Meticulously selected from the works of local and national artisans by proprietor Kate Eggleston (whose handiwork makes up much of the stock), the merchandise is contemporary, artistic and distinctive. Eggleston presents monthly exhibits by local artists in the shop’s back-room gallery, and even offers classes for those inspired to explore their own creative streak. If you’re on the hunt for a one-of-a-kind gift for that hard-to-buy-for someone, or just a special treasure for yourself—this is the place to find it.

Best Bike Shop

Downtube Cycle Shop

466 Madison Ave., Albany

Our perennial favorite, the Downtube offers all your cycling needs, whether you’re headed down a mountain or down the highway. Downtube’s knowledgeable staff will help you find the perfect ride—they’ll even let you take a test-drive through Washington park. And once you’ve found the bike of your dreams, they’ll help you fit it just right, and suit you up with all the best accessories. Need a tune-up? The Downtube offers extensive repair and maintenance services, as well as classes so you can care for your two-wheeled baby at home or on the road.

Best Wine Store (Selection and Price)

Empire Wine

Target Plaza, Colonie

We knew Brad Junco was itching to display and sell more wine that his great little store in Center Square could handle, and when he moved into his spacious new quarters in the Target plaza—wow. Wine as far as the eye can see—and carefully chosen wine at that. Best of all for the consumer, Junco seems to have started a pricing trend that has everybody lowering their markups to keep decent wine affordable.

Best Wine Store (Service and Knowledge)

Nejaime’s Wine Cellars

444 Pittsfield Road, Lenox, Mass.

Note that there are two other locations as well—in the villages of Lenox and Stockbridge—but this is the location where owner Jim Nejaime seems to be found most
often, and he sets a high standard of service and knowledge for his staff to aspire to. There is hardly a bottle in the store he doesn’t know, his descriptions of the wine's style are concise, not cliched, and—best of all—if you visit with any regularity, he remembers what you like and makes suggestions accordingly.

Best Wine Store (Personality)
The Wine Shop

265 New Scotland Ave., Albany

This cozy shop is the place to go for a great $10 bottle of ice-cold Spanish sparkling wine—or a $90 bottle of exquisite French Champagne. A neighborhood institution, the Wine Shop has a small, but carefully chosen, selection of wines, liquors and liqueurs at all price levels. There are bottles lining the walls from floor to ceiling, and the friendly owners will help you find just what you’re looking for.

Best Wine store (New York)
The Wine Seller at Harmony House Market Place

184-190 Remsen St., Cohoes

Think global, drink local. That’s our motto. And there’s no better place to stock up on local wines than at the Wine Seller at Harmony House Market Place, a pivotal part of Remsen Street’s ongoing renaissance. The Wine Seller stocks more than 350 labels, all of them from New York state wineries. Proprietors Jane LaCivita Clemente and Diane Conroy LaCivita offer their friendly expertise, along with monthly exhibits by local artists, and wine tastings every Friday. Last Friday we happily tasted a wine made from indigenous New York grapes—and then drank a bottle of it at home.

Best Cigar Store
Habana Premium Cigar Shoppe

1537 Central Ave, Albany; 426 State St., Schenectady; Parade Ground Village, Malta

Scotty at Habana has had a busy year: He opened a beautiful Downtown Schenectady location, with a fourth location in East Greenbush due to open in late August; he also hosts The Good Life on talk-radio station 1300 AM, every Saturday afternoon. With all this going on, he still manages to kick back, do some “research,” and indulge in one of life’s best pleasures: a cigar. His own, and his staff’s, knowledge of product is unparalleled, with price and flavor to satisfy any taste.
Best Tobacco Store

EdLeez Tobacco

**Stuyvesant Plaza**

A favorite of the roll-your-own crowd, because the selection is outstanding and the staff are very customer-oriented and knowledgeable about all things tobacco-related—they’ll even fix your lighter if you ask. They also have a good selection of imported cigarettes.

Best Massage/Massage School

Center for Natural Wellness School of Massage Therapy

**3 Cerone Commercial Drive, Albany**

Did you know that when you make an appointment at the Center for Natural Wellness School of Massage Therapy, you not only get a fantastic one-hour massage at a reasonable rate, but you help improve the skills of very talented, fledgling massage-therapy students? It’s true! The CFNW isn’t just a full- or part-time school for those looking to embark on a more tactile career; it’s a breeding ground for eager future “magic hands.” Take advantage of them while they’re still hungry. Your body, and the students, will thank you.

Best Wellness Day Trip

Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health

**57 Interlaken Road, Stockbridge, Mass.**

Just over the mountain and through the woods (sort of) is a peaceful oasis, the kind of hideaway it’s easy to miss, even if you’re a regular at nearby Tanglewood. Appropriately located at the top of a big hill overlooking Stockbridge Bowl, Kripalu is sort of like a pinnacle of wellness, offering classes in yoga, pilates, dance, drumming, and a plethora of “who knew?” opportunities such as The Spirit of India: a Bollywood and Henna Workshop and The Universal Experience: An Intimate Encounter with Your Own Death. The fellow partakers of all that Kripalu has to offer run the gamut from crunchy Birkenstockers to the Kate Spade doggy bag-carrying ladies who lunch. All, presumably, stock up not just on the spiritual benefits to be had, but the highly nutritious and amazingly yummy buffet.
Best Holistic/Wellness Store

Peaceful Inspirations

**384 Kenwood Ave., Delmar**

The metaphysical journey is a long one. So many questions, so much to ponder. But Anne at Peaceful Inspirations can help you get from here to there, wherever “there” may be. And if you’ve already reached enlightenment, why not celebrate and treat yourself to a nice gift? Drums, books (for you and your children), fair-trade items, and jewelry are only a small sampling of the many earthly pleasures you can indulge in here.

Best Fresh Food Market

Guido’s Fresh Marketplace

**1020 South St., Pittsfield, Mass.; 760 S. Main St., Great Barrington, Mass.**

If you get to the Berkshires but have never checked out either of the two Guido’s locations. you owe it to yourself to see why we pick this market year after year. Bigger and more comprehensive that a neighborhood market, but more relaxing and human-scale than a contemporary supermarket, Guido’s dazzles with all manner of dependably fresh produce, as well as fresh fish, all-natural meats, bakery bread and other fresh baked goods, a deli counter, and aisles of thoughtfully chosen, minimally processed packaged foods. There’s no other market quite like Guido’s in the region, which is why it is loved by locals and weekenders alike.

Best Natural Foods/Vitamins

Paradise Natural Foods

**1823 Western Ave., Albany**

If you need flax-seed-oil supplements, some gluten-free food, or perhaps an ounce of mugwort, check out Paradise Natural Foods. They have a great selection of all things natural, including supplements, health and beauty products, foods, teas, and herbs. They’ve been open for almost two decades and have a friendly, knowledgeable staff. Happy health!
Best Food Co-Op

Honest Weight Food Co-Op

484 Central Ave., Albany

All the natural and organic items one could imagine stock the shelves at Honest Weight, as they have for years and years. Their selection of juices, for one thing, goes unparalleled in the Capital Region; and they stock loads of items from within a 100-mile radius of Albany. Also: great sandwiches.

Best Farmers Market

Troy Waterfront Farmers Market

Hedley Park Place, River Street, Troy

This is the perfect way to spend a lazy Saturday morning: shopping for fresh produce and baked goods, discovering unique specialty items, listening to live musicians, and chatting with friends. The Capital Region offers a large selection of fantastic farmers’ markets, but what makes Troy’s so special is the large, diverse community that has grown dependent upon this year-round treasure.

Best Bazaar

At the Warehouse

20 Learned St., Albany

At the Warehouse is more than just an indoor farmers market and it is constantly growing and evolving. It’s the perfect weekend destination, rain or shine, to get inspired, hear some live music, grab a bite, support local artisans, or just plain ol’ connect and absorb some of those good vibrations that accompany cool people doing cool things. Vendors range from architectural salvage to sexy, vintage-style, custom-built aprons; from beeswax products to Tarot-card readings, and everything in between. Bring your lover, bring your neighbor, bring the kids—heck, bring the dog! You’ll be delighted you did.
Best Restaurant

The Inn at Erlowest

3178 Lake Shore Drive, Lake George

Dale Miller pursues perfection as only an artist can, and his culinary artistry extends well beyond the perfection he puts on a plate. The servingware, the dining room, the inn itself—all reflect his excellent taste. And the meal itself is a journey through ingredients and flavors that becomes in itself an exotic vacation.

Best New Restaurant

Max London’s

466 Broadway, Saratoga Springs

Home-grown chef Max London brings a Mediterranean sensibility to his long-overdue restaurant, where you enjoy a tapas approach to dining in relaxed but elegant surroundings. Enjoy anything from a small plate of white anchovies to a personal pizza to a hanger steak, inside or at a patio table on Saratoga’s Broadway.

Best American

New World Home Cooking Co.
**1411 Route 212, Saugerties**

We’ve yet to figure out what, exactly, American food is, but we’re confident that New World Home Cooking Co. continues to define it. And the influences extend beyond our borders as chef-owner Ric Orlando zings his dishes with exotic peppers and fruits. Great place for vegan and vegetarian items, too.

Best Steakhouse

The Bears’ Steakhouse

**Route 7, Duanesburg**

Make a reservation. More than 40 years of serving the area’s best steaks without ever buying an ad means that the Payne family has it nailed. It’s about excellent meat, cooked right—and served in you’re-part-of-the-family surroundings. You’ll leave with leftovers because you’re going to save room for dessert.

Best Continental

Beekman Street Bistro

**62 Beekman St., Saratoga Springs**

Chef-owner Tim Meaney’s farm-to-table approach guarantees the best flavors; his cooking approach takes the traditional—like a pork chop or chicken breast or eggplant slice—and brings out unexpected aspects of its flavor, all of it handsomely presented in an artistically appointed dining room.

Best French

Chez Sophie

**Saratoga Hotel, 534 Broadway, Saratoga Springs**

Subscribe to the restaurant’s e-mailed newsletter and you’ll get a weekly temptation like no other as owners Cheryl Clark and (chef) Paul Parker describe what’s in store for the coming week, inspired by fresh (and as local as possible) ingredients and an old-world culinary flair reimagined for contemporary palates.
Best International

Avenue A

544 Delaware Ave., Albany

Chef Un-Hui Filomeno has a passion for bold flavors, and her restaurant runs the geographical gamut, serving Japanese miso soup alongside Portuguese *caldo verde*, New Orleans jambalaya and Barcelonan *paella*, Franco-American steak *au poivre* and a killer Korean *chap chae*.

Best Tasting Menu

The Basement Bistro

774 Route 45, Earlton

Want to be a culinary guinea pig? If you can even get a reservation this summer, you'll enjoy chef Damon Baehrel's creative excellence as course after he'll-choose-it-for-you course arrives, small bites of flavor that add up to a richly satisfying meal. Boasting fresh garden ingredients and locally sourced meats, the meal is a daily inspiration.

Best Bistro

Cella Bistro

2015 Rosa Road, Schenectady

If you think of a bistro as a small restaurant with simple fare, you rule out many so-named restaurants. Here, chef Michael Cella offers a Mediterranean-inspired menu for a party with friends, intimate dining or tapas at the bar, with an excellent wine list to complement your pleasure.

Best Wine Bar

The Wine Bar and Bistro

200 Lark St., Albany

It's like being in the wine cellar itself, with snug, sort-of- underground rooms in which to tope, and an innovative tapas menu for gustatory accompaniment. There even are
some outdoor tables if you seek the open air. The selection is extensive, with many specials, and the servers are happy to help you choose.

Best Restaurant when Someone Else Is Paying

Angelo’s 677 Prime

677 Broadway, Albany

Prime at Saratoga National

458 Union Ave., Saratoga Springs

These high-end steakhouses invite you to dine in elegant surroundings as you enjoy prime cuts of rib-eye, sirloin, tenderloin and, if you’re truly dining à deux, a 40-ounce porterhouse for not quite a hundred bucks. The Albany restaurant offers Japanese Kobe beef for $15 per ounce; both restaurants will start you off with imported caviar and fresh raw bar selections.

Best Restaurant Worth a Drive

Church & Main

Church and Main streets, Canajoharie

Rose & Kettle

4 Lancaster St., Cherry Valley

A forgotten city, an artistic town. Canajoharie’s Church and Main and Cherry Valley’s Rose & Kettle are both run by husband-and-wife teams who take advantage of the rural surroundings to offer the freshest food. And each dining experience is enhanced by historic old buildings that house these restaurants, well worth the travel time—and worth exploring the surroundings once you’re there.

Best Chinese

Emperor’s

10 Wolf Road, Colonie

Our longtime favorite dominates a rapidly dwindling field. The ambiance is so-so, but the food ventures far beyond the usual chop-suey-house fare and includes one of the best vegetarian menus in the area. And the prices have remained at an unusually sensible rate.
Best Thai

Capital Thai

997 Central Ave., Albany

You’re dining in a strip-mall site that offers the ambiance of a fast-food joint—and then your bowl of *khao soi* arrives and you’re transported. Along with such mainstays as *pad Thai* and an array of colorful curries are sushi and other pan-Asian dishes, prepared with commendable skill and attractively presented.

Best Vietnamese

Van’s Vietnamese Restaurant

307 Central Ave, Albany, NY

Van’s creates Vietnamese cuisine the way it should be: subtle. Without overwhelming spices or décor (it resembles more of a strip mall than Asian paradise), Van’s delivers elegant flavors with fresh ingredients. Try the Pho (noodle soup with various protein options), or the three-meat-delight: perfectly seasoned grilled shrimp, fried summer rolls, and sliced pork on a mountain of vermicelli, with ginger and peanuts.

Best Pan-Asian

Plum Blossom

685 Hoosick Road, Brunswick

We’ve witnessed many years of Steve Chang’s architectural work-in-progress that has become a garden retreat in the midst of East Troy. In addition to a Chinese menu that includes the area’s best hot-and-sour soup are dishes from Vietnam, Japan, Korea, Thailand and other Asian countries, and you can even enjoy a faux-Polynesian pu pu platter here.

Best Japanese

Saso’s Japanese Noodle House

218 Central Ave., Albany
We find an oasis here. When life proves oppressive, we refresh ourselves with a bowl of nabeyaki udon, a glorious noodle soup bursting with chicken and vegetables and shrimp tempura. All the traditional dishes—teriyaki preparations, rice compotes, yakisoba and more—are carefully crafted. And there’s terrific sushi, of course, assembled by Saso himself.

Best Japanese Steakhouse

Koto

260 Wolf Road, Colonie

Japanese steakhouses have exploded around us, with their attendant displays of spatula tossing and onion-ring volcanoes. Koto places it in the context of an elegant series of dining rooms, with a reliable menu of other Japanese fare, including some of the handsomest bento boxes around.

Best Sushi

Mari’s Japanese Cuisine

2049 Van Vranken Ave., Schenectady

Last year’s winner for Best Japanese is now this year’s winner for Best Sushi. Twenty-three years of artistry by the assured (should be insured) hands of sushi chef Jiro Omiya add up to exactly what it’s meant to be—simple, fresh and consistent. Rolls, sushi and sashimi are traditional, and the presentation is tastefully minimal, letting the banquet before you speak for itself. Try a Dragon Roll, a Union, or a refreshing Salad Roll, just to name a few. If it’s pieces you’re into, the Hamachi (yellowtail) is always buttery and on point. And if you’re lucky enough to visit the friendly family and staff on days when they happen to have Shiro Maguro (white tuna) or Bonito (a seasonal—early fall—small tuna seared and accompanied with a touch of ginger and scallion), you can consider yourself on cloud nine.

Best Italian (Northern)

Café Capriccio

49 Grand St., Albany

Owner Jim Rua presides in the upstairs banquet room; his son Franco is the chef downstairs. Together they carry on a quarter-century tradition of offering the area’s best Tuscan-inspired fare, served with a personality unique to this restaurant.
Best Italian (Southern)

Testo’s

**853 4th Ave., Troy**

Talk about institutions! You know Testo’s from the restaurant’s locally marketed sauce. At the restaurant, John and Chuck Testo run a 32-year-old family business that assures you of the friendliest, most family-oriented dinners—at great prices, too. The ziti Alfredo with broccoli will cure any ill.

Best Pizza

DeFazio’s Pizzeria

**266 4th St., Troy**

A perennial winner, and for good reason. They make their own sauce (and sell it next door). They make a killer crust (they’ve been perfecting it for well over half a century). And they bake it in a wood-fired oven that gives the pizza an unmistakeably excellent flavor.

Fireside Pizzeria

**1631 Eastern Parkway, Schenectady**

One of the institutions that make life in Schenectady bearable, the Fireside couldn’t be more accommodating. Old-school pizza, but some exotica (like ham, mesquite chicken, Genoa salami) has crept in. Large dining rooms upstairs and down and a full menu besides.

Fresco’s

**569 Route 20, New Lebanon**

“When in doubt, order pizza,” suggests a sign on the wall, and as you watch the thin-crust pies fly in and out of the wood-fired oven, you'll have no trouble deciding that that's the way to go. A white pizza with barbecued chicken is one of the best, and don’t overlook the calzones and stromboli.

Smith’s Tavern
**112 Maple Ave., Voorheesville**

Thick, delicious crust piled with hearty toppings and fresh cheese, this pizza is like a Tolstoy novel: dense, complex, and profoundly fulfilling (but easier to wash down with Budweiser). It’s a pizza that separates the men from the boys.

Best German

Spa Brauhaus

**200 E. High St., Ballston Spa**

It’s not just a trip back in time, although you’ll swear Ike is still in office when you walk through the door. It’s one of the few places where you can start with an order of superb potato pancakes, then go on to a knockwurst plate, or enjoy the schlacht, schnitzel, spätzle and more.

Best Greek

A Taste of Greece

**193 Lark St., Albany**

A perennial winner, A Taste of Greece has established itself as a Lark Street institution. This comfortable, friendly restaurant has always been known for top-shelf service, and Greek cuisine that includes all the classics including spanakopita, souvlaki and moussaka as well as gyros, delicious salads, dips and appetizers. You must try the grilled octopus, one of our favorites. Opa!
Best Mexican

Casa Oaxaca

54 Philip St., Albany

Intimate is the watchword here. Casual. Owner James Santaski and chef Francisco Vazquez, himself Oaxacan, offer a small but authentic menu of south-of-the-border specialties, the best of which is the superb mole, a labor-intensive puree of nuts and peppers finished with native chocolate.

Best Indian

Karavalli

9B Johnson Road, Latham; 47 Caroline St., Saratoga Springs; 2788 Hamburg St., Schenectady

The Karavalli empire has spread, thank goodness, and the varied menu that’s offered ranges throughout the regions of India. The ubiquitous lunch buffet is given classier touches, and the place is justly famous for its rice-and-lentil dosai.

Best Middle Eastern

Al Baraki

184 River St., Troy; 185 Lark St., Albany

This hole-in-the-wall Lebanese Troy mainstay now has an Albany hole in the wall on Lark St., and it’s got the best hummus, excellent falafel, and array of native salads and stews and an amazing garlic paste to enjoy on crisped pita wafers.

Best Mediterranean

Ali Baba

2243 15th St., Troy

Yes, the prices have crept up—whose haven’t?—but Ali Baba’s delightful Turkish menu includes wonderful kebabs, authentic gyros (known here as a durum wrap), and a big puffy bread called lavash to enjoy with a garlic-yoghurt dip. Also try the curried chicken pizza!
Best Afghan

Afghan Grill

**952 Troy Schenectady Road, Latham**

Okra, cauliflower and eggplant have never tasted as good as they do here in their respective entrees, and that doesn’t begin to cover the grilled kebabs, the rice palows, the Afghan pasta dishes. A friendly place unexpectedly located in a Latham mall, Afghan Grill also does a lunch buffet with a selection of favorite items.

Best Saratoga Caribbean

Lime

**7 Caroline St., Saratoga Springs**

Will Yund’s honeymoon trip to Barbados was a culinary eye-opener, and inspired a menu of Caribbean-themed cookery that includes jerk chicken and pork, chicken Barbados (served with a banana, coconut and curaçao orange sauce) and even coconut mashed potatoes.

Best Caribbean Caribbean

First Choice Caribbean

**451 Fulton St., Troy**

Get to know the cuisine—and addictive versions of jerk or curried chicken—at the bargain-priced lunch buffet. Then try the oxtail, the tripe and beans, the curried shrimp or the many other creations of Jamaican native Ricardo Brown, whose friendly restaurant also has one of the liveliest soundtracks in town.

Best Fusion

The Hidden Café

**Delaware Plaza, Delaware Ave., Delmar**

It used to be merely Middle Eastern (and superbly so), but chef-owner Joseph Soliman has synthesized into his menu dishes inspired by the cuisines of Italy, Greece, France and regional America, served in ever more elegant surroundings. Once you find the place.
Best Vegetarian

Antipasto’s

1028 Route 146, Clifton Park

Once you start assembling your pizza, you’ll be a mildly aware that you’re not piling meat on top of it, and you’ll barely miss the meat as you turn to the other menu items. It’s not really a vegetarian restaurant: it’s an Italian restaurant that left out the meat. Great wine selection, too.

Best-Kept Secret

Garlic Lover’s Corner

235 North Greenbush Road, North Greenbush

Don’t let the name intimidate you. The hummus is garlicky, yes, but that’s as it should be. Beyond that is a Mediterranean menu with Italian touches that chef-owner Bill Assad prepares with palate-pleasing dexterity. Don’t forget an order of GLC chips: potato chips with lemon and feta.

Best Barbecue

Capital Q Smokehouse

329 Ontario St., Albany

Sean Custer is a French-trained chef who went to the other side of the tracks, so to speak, and now serves up the region’s best pulled pork, beef brisket and more in what used to be Emil Meister’s market. And grab yourself some sweet potatoes and collards greens as well.

Best Late-Night Dining

Justin’s

301 Lark St., Albany

We like Justin’s for lunch. And dinner. The weekend brunch is pretty awesome too. But Justin’s simply has no peer between the hours of 11 PM and 1 AM, when its café menu offers a varied selection that pleases showgoers and late-shifters looking for
something more interesting than pub fare. Sure, there are burgers, sandwiches and salads, but also corn fritters, crab cakes, tempura shrimp, baked goat cheese with greens, and the ultimate comfort combo, meatloaf and mac and cheese. And we've never known the kitchen to close early, so this is food you can count on at an hour when your choices are otherwise slim.

Best Way-Late-Night Dining

Café 217

217 Delaware Ave, Albany, NY

Lark Street has been waiting for a place like Café 217 for ages: a place with tasty food, on the cheap, at very late hours. If it’s 5:30 a.m., you want something more than a coffee and donut, head to Café 217, with hours starting around dinner and ending after the breakfast crowd. Between vegetarian eggs benedict, chipotle sweet potato hash, BLTs with turkey bacon, even meatloaf, Café 217 serves up tasty comfort food for late-shifters.

Best Wine List

Village Pizzeria & Ristorante

2727 Route 29, East Galway

They’ve just been tapped for a Wine Spectator Award of Excellence, which you don’t expect at a pizza joint. But there’s much more than just pizza here. A full-fledged Italian-themed menu is accompanied by a wine list that features nearly 300 well-chosen vintages, many available by the glass, classified by area and/or by grape.
on their faces.

Best Pub Food

The Ale House

680 River St., Troy

To offer the best pub food, it’s got to be a great pub. The Ale House does this unselfconsciously and with gusto, with a classic bar in front and the dining room lurking almost as an afterthought beyond. Chicken wings, ribs, burgers and daily specials are featured along with a changing menu of specials. Also live music and lots of good beer.

Best Power Lunch

Angelo’s 677 Prime

677 Broadway

Where else can you tuck into a juicy steak (and habit-forming fries) and a generous pour, while rubbing elbows with the rich and famous, or at least expense-accounted, glitterati of the Capital District? On any given afternoon, you’re likely to see Sen. Bruno, Mayor Jennings, or any number of pinstriped legal eagles, lobbyists and association execs. Chef Jamie Ortiz masterfully handles the menu, which, while not exactly innovative, delivers just what you want to serve alongside your powerbroking, namely, expertly-cooked choice cuts of red meat, crisp salads and . . . Did we mention the stellar wine list?

Best Lunch

The Iron Gate

182 Washington Ave., Albany

Behind an iron gate and down the walk to front door set well back from busy Washington Avenue, you’ll find top-quality freshly made soups, salads, sandwiches, wraps and creative specials, with plenty of vegetarian options. The food is great, the prices are reasonable, and to top it off, the staff work so efficiently that even when there’s a long line ahead of you, you’ll be surprised at how quickly you get served.

Best Diner
Blue Ribbon Diner

**1801 State St., Schenectady**

Long the favorite source of cheesecake in Schenectady, the Blue Ribbon also has one of those you-can-order-anything menus that promises no-frills food that’s efficiently prepared and served with no budget breaking involved. Welcoming and reliable with an unusual emphasis on service.

Best Burger

Oliver’s Cafe

**181 Freeman’s Bridge Road, Glenville**

No premixed, portion-controlled, frozen ingredients is the motto here, and it’s reflected no better than in the hand-hewn burgers, whether dressed up as daily specials (Cajun, blue cheese) or redirected into meat loaf. This will remind you why a burger and fries used to taste so good.

Best Deli

Gershon’s Deli & Caterers

**1600 Union Ave., Schenectady**

Arrive at lunchtime and you’re swept into a line, your order is determined and your sandwich is assembled in record time—all while the folks behind the counter are clearly enjoying themselves. A Brooklyn-born friend of ours swears the hot pastrami here is even better than in Brooklyn.

Best Gourmet Takeout

Mezzo Marketplace & Eatery

**34 Hamilton St., Albany**

A repeat winner, this cozy little joint tucked away on quiet Hamilton Street does have a few tables and a lovely patio for eating on the premises, but it’s also a great place to grab a delicious gourmet meal to go. Get there early for the gourmet sandwiches on ciabatta bread, and check out the sumptuous array of prepared foods—grilled salmon, crab cakes, salads, eggplant lasagne, pasta pesto, roasted vegetables, and so on. Or start your day with a good strong pressure-brewed coffee and an egg-and-cheese sandwich on a croissant—there’s none better in the region.
Best Subs

Andy & Sons Importing Co.

256 Delaware Ave., Albany

If you order a sub from Andy's, you better be prepared. A generous (almost to a fault) portion of top-level meats and veggies, with the fixings and dressings of your choice, on a delicious homemade roll. Plenty of specialty subs, too. A lunch or dinner fit for a lumberjack—or a very hungry state worker.

Best Little Hot Dogs

Famous Lunch

111 Congress St., Troy

Troy may be famous for those delicious little hot dogs, but they don't get any more famous than at Famous Lunch. The greasy hole-in-the-wall has 75 years of ween-dog-making experience to its name—these puppies have even been shipped around the world. Top the dogs (and burgers and fries) with a ladle of zippy sauce, and finish it off with a cup of famous rice pudding. Not to mention, you'll feel like you're eating lunch with a throng of your grandpa's cantankerous buddies—and all for under five bucks.

Best Breakfast

Peter Pause Restaurant

535 Nott St., Schenectady

We've long resisted sharing this place, but it's a secret too good to keep. Peter Pause puts out a traditional breakfast each weekday from 6 to 11 (lunch from 11 to 2) that includes a $5 three-egg special (sausage, home fries, toast). Pancakes are excellent, and you can get French toast made with their homemade Italian bread.

Best Brunch

Café Madison
1108 Madison Ave., Albany

The weekday breakfast menu is tasty enough, but on weekends it expands to embrace such tempting creations as pesto benedict with grilled tomatoes and zucchini, berry- and pecan-stuffed French toast, and plenty more. Through fires, ownership changes and renovations, the quality, consistency and overall scrumptiousness of the Café Madison brunch has remained a constant. And while you’re here, check out the dinner menu.

Best Brunch Buffet

Tosca Grille

200 Broadway, Troy

If you start at the omelet station, you might miss the Belgian waffle station, especially if you took advantage of the fresh bread and Danish display. And then there’s the chef’s carving station to consider, the bounty of fresh fruit, cold meat, vegetables, cheese. Which doesn’t even take into account the eggs Benedict, the blintzes, the seafood, the beef . . .

Best Bagels

Uncommon Grounds

1225 Western Ave., Albany; 402 Broadway, Saratoga Springs

Just because they’re round, it doesn’t make them bagels. When we count out the supermarket offerings, it gets down to boiled versus steamed. Uncommon Grounds bagels are steamed. Not as crispy, perhaps, but they’re huge, moist, and when they label it a garlic bagel, be assured you’re going to find plenty of garlic. Or onions. Or sesame seeds. Or . . . everything.

Best Coffeehouse

Uncommon Grounds

402 Broadway, Saratoga Springs

The mighty Starbucks starts folding its tents; Uncommon Grounds lives on. That’s because real people serve real, freshly roasted coffee in a space that begs you to settle in and start that conversation. Or finish that novel. We like the expanded Saratoga store with the added lounge space, but the Albany branch also maintains its charm.
Best Desserts

Mrs. London’s

464 Broadway, Saratoga Spring

Nothing we tell you here can adequately prepare you for the experience of that first mouthful of a Mrs. London’s dessert. Sure, it looks great behind the counter, whether it’s a lemon meringue tartlette, cherry clafoutis, eclair, napoleon, savarins or any of the many other freshly crafted confections that beckon. Pastries and the world’s best bread also are available, and you can enjoy them in the store’s café.

Best Cheesecake

Cheesecake Machismo

293 Hamilton St., Albany

If you love downtown Albany, cheesecake, and kitsch, you can’t do better than this small establishment in Robinson Square. Their hours are generous, and for $5 you can enjoy a piece of cheesecake and a beverage at one of two small tables. You can choose from enumerable flavors such as Purple Nurple, Frankencake, and Chocolate Stout. Often there are off-menu choices listed on the chalkboard or you can order a 10-inch cake of your own concoction. Yum!

Best Edible Art Gallery

Crisan Bakery

197 Lark St., Albany

In this sunny, recently renovated bakery, there’s artwork on the walls—and in the display cases. Among the selection of sugary confections—from puff pastries with nuts and cheeses to lusciously layered cakes and torts—are edible artworks such as yellow-fondat chicks created by artist-baker Claudia Crisan. There also are 13 flavors of homemade gelato, and at a dollar per scoop, you can taste-test to your sweet tooth’s delight.

Best Ice Cream

Moxie’s

1344 Spring Ave., Wynantskill
For true gourmandizers of hard ice cream, there is no better destination than Moxie’s. Try their fabled Blue Moon ice cream and venture a guess at the secret ingredients. The red-and-white landmark has been a summer destination for generations of Capital Region dessert hounds, and Moxie’s takes great pride in its homemade scoops and homespun atmosphere. As a testament to how seriously they take their ice cream: Moxie’s has five different types of vanilla, differentiated by the bean’s geographical origin. You can try all of the vanilla varieties in an “around the world” flight, which is tastefully served up with a dollop of blue moon and a bottle of water—to “cleanse your palate.” Nice.

Best Soft Ice Cream

The Ice Cream Man

417 Route 29, Easton

Rare is the representation of real frozen custard, and the Ice Cream Man makes a custard that is pure tongue velvet. The chocolate is dreamy, and the vanilla is a tonic that will slap your cynicism into submission. Both flavors seem to drip thicker as they luxuriously melt than soft ice creams made from mixes. The Ice Cream Man, which knows its way around hard ice cream, too, serves up nonfat custard as well, but skipping on fat when it comes to ice cream is akin to not inhaling.

Best Gelato

Aromi D'Italia

2050 Western Ave., Guilderland

You would not expect, tucked away in a suburban shopping plaza, a small, tastefully decorated restaurant with an eclectic menu to also boast the best gelato around. But it’s true. Served with tiny shovel-like spoons, the gelato at the front of Aromi D’Italia stops diners in their tracks—and luckily reminds them to save room for dessert. Try the Romeo and Juliet: vanilla gelato with tiny flecks of chocolate.

Best Smoothies

Shake Shake Mamas

258 Broadway, Troy

How lucky are we? The smoothies are a cool, healthy, luscious afternoon respite, and the Mamas make us weak in the knees.
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Best Museum

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute

225 South St., Williamstown, Mass.

Situated on 140 acres of sprawling Berkshire countryside, the internationally renowned Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute is just about as good as it gets. The constantly growing collection includes a truly impressive selection of 19th-century American and European masterpieces: Homer, Sargent, Inness, Cassat, Degas, Remington, Renoir, Monet, Gauguin, the list goes on. Comprehensive and engaging programming—particularly their top-notch lecture series—enrich the museum experience, and frequent traveling exhibitions keep things fresh for the frequent visitor. A major center for arts scholarship, the Clark boasts one of the largest art libraries in the country. Both the library and the new state-of-the-art Stone Hill Center designed by architect Tado Ando, which serves as an intimate gallery space and headquarters for the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, are open for public exploration. As always, we count ourselves lucky to have the Clark right in our own backyard.

Best Gallery

Albany International Airport Gallery

Albany International Airport

For 10 years, the Albany International Airport Gallery has been committed to showcasing the artistic and cultural resources of the Capital Region. The exhibitions are consistently good and expertly installed. Not only is there a designated gallery space for changing exhibitions that can be accessed without having to pass through security, there also are continuously changing displays and site-specific installations throughout the building. There is so much to look at that you might not even mind that your flight is delayed.

Best College Museum
Hessel Museum of Art and CCS Galleries

*Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson*

While there are other great college museums in the area, the Hessel Museum and CCS Galleries “aim to encourage and explore experimental approaches to the presentation of contemporary visual arts.” With the addition two years ago of the 17,000-square-foot building dedicated to the 1,700 works in the Marieluise Hessel collection, there is that much more cutting-edge contemporary art on display in the region. And that is a good thing.

Best Contemporary Museum

MASS MoCA

*87 Marshall St., North Adams, Mass.*

In terms of scale and scope, there’s nothing else like it. The vast exhibition spaces make it possible for world-renowned avant-garde artists to create cutting-edge works. How’s that for an old industrial town like North Adams?

Best Museum (Mansion)

The Hyde Collection

*161 Warren St., Glens Falls*

The Hyde is a classy museum and gallery with a world-class permanent collection, fascinating history, and also some jazzy current exhibits. And the terrific De Blasiis chamber-music series calls the Hyde home.

Best Museum (Manor House)

Olana

*5720 Route 9G, Hudson*

Every resident of the Capital Region should tour the home of Hudson River School painter Frederic Church. Looming high on a hill over the Hudson, Olana and its Middle Eastern-style architecture on one hand seem out of place in Upstate New York, but on another are perfect for whisking any visitor away to another era and a different state of mind.
Best Museum (Eclectic)

New York State Museum

*Empire State Plaza, Albany*

Start at the top, with the 4th floor atrium gallery: There is collection of fascinating artifacts, architecture and ephemera from all over New York state; there is a temporary exhibit of spectacular, large-scale modern art in honor of Gov. Nelson Rockefeller; and there’s a merry-go-round for the kids. You can then extrapolate this out to the entire New York State Museum, which is an eclectic, rewarding mix of art, history, education and fun.

Best Museum Expansion (East)

Berkshire Museum

*39 South St., Pittsfield, Mass.*

One of our region’s best small museums just got better with an extensive renovation and the addition of the 3,000-square-foot Feigenbaum Hall of Innovation, which educates visitors on Berkshire County’s rich history of innovation in science, technology, business, politics, culture, and the arts, and invites them to explore the process of turning ideas into progress. Add that to the museum’s already fine exhibits ranging from natural history to American art to the aquarium in the basement, and the excellent programming of traveling exhibits, and you have what is easily one of the best family-oriented museums in the region.

Best Museum Expansion (West)

Arkell Museum

*Canajoharie*

The small canal town of Canajoharie might not be the most obvious home for a significant collection of great American paintings, but Beech-Nut founder Bartlett Arkell compiled just such a collection (including works by Homer, Wyeth, Sargent, Remington, O’Keeffe, Hopper, and others) for public display in his hometown. After a $10 million expansion, smartly executed by Boston-based designLAB architects, the impressive collection has a deserving home. And the new space allows for expanded programming, including workshops, lecture and film series, and community events.

Best Museum Save (So Far)

The Mount
2 Plunkett St., Lenox, Mass.

Despite all the controversy surrounding the Edith Wharton Estate and Gardens, it's still a National Historic Landmark that shouldn't be missed. Anyone who has read Wharton can appreciate her desire to reside in the Berkshires and to design her own home. It's open through October, but it still faces threat of foreclosure: So go before it's too late.

Best Artist

Mark Greenwold

To quote Roberta Smith, his "small-scale painterliness ... keeps Mr. Greenwold's art fresh, as does his sharpening of the tensions always at large in figurative painting." Could we really argue with that?

Best Emerging Artist

Michael Millspaugh

Over the past year Millspaugh has been showing all over the place. Not only has he had one-night shows in vacant spaces, but he's shown at Kismet, Albany Center Galleries, and at the Saratoga County Arts Center. His work is whimsical, personal, satirical, and timely. And best of all, it's still affordable.

Best New-Media Artist

Fernando Orellana

New-media art is a growing trend in contemporary art. In 2005, Orellana joined the faculty of Union College, where he is developing a cross-disciplinary digital arts program between visual arts and computer science. Over the past few years we have been able to see his work locally at the Mandeville Gallery, at St. Anthony's Church, at the Tang Teaching Museum, and in Hudson. The work is both funny and sobering, and it's encouraging to see that this area continues to support experimental artists (despite the odd controversy).
Best Movie Theater

Spectrum 8 Theatres

290 Delaware Ave., Albany

You know what’s funny? No one has ever even tried to imitate what they do at the Spectrum 8 Theatres. Balancing mainstream hits with independent films—and offering the best snack bar in town—has made the Spectrum the cinematic king.

Best Multiplex

Bowtie Cinemas Movieland

State Street, Schenectady

A key part of the new downtown arts scene, Schenectady’s Bowtie Cinemas Movieland is a terrific multiplex. And you can have a beer, too.

Best Film Series

Palace Theatre

19 Clinton Ave., Albany

The programming at the Palace has been fantastic, as they’ve been booking films that were made to be seen on a giant screen. In fact, 2001: A Space Odyssey at the Palace was the cinematic event of the year. (Right, Dave?)

Best Theater (Transformers)

GE Theatre @ Proctors

432 State St., Schenectady
It’s the Eighth Step Coffeehouse. It’s an iwerks 70mm-format film theater. It’s a comedy club. It’s a high-definition video theater for independent cinema and opera from La Scala. It’s a venue for small theatrical productions. As the sun never set on the British Empire, the lights are (almost) always on at the GE Theatre @ Proctors.

Best Theater (Petite)

Spa Little Theater

**Saratoga Spa State Park, Saratoga Springs**

This delightful venue is home to the Lake George Opera, Home Made Theater, the Saratoga Chamber Music Festival and many worthwhile performances.

Best Classical Venue

Ozawa Hall

*Tanglewood, Lenox, Mass.*

Everyone talks about the Shed, but it’s the acoustically (and architecturally) wonderful Ozawa Hall that’s the real jewel of Tanglewood.

Best Orchestra

Albany Symphony Orchestra

**David Alan Miller, Director**

They’re not only the best local orchestra, they’re the best-programmed orchestra: Balancing the modern with the traditional, the Albany Symphony has something for everyone.

Best Chamber Ensemble

Musicians of Ma’alwyck

This elastic collection of superb musicians is equally at home with Purcell and Schoenberg. And that’s something.
Best Dance Venue

Jacob’s Pillow

358 George Carter Road, Becket, Mass.

With multiple performance stages in a setting of almost ridiculous beauty, Jacob’s Pillow is arguably the most attractive of any regional summer performance venue.

Best Dance Festival

Dance Flurry

Saratoga Springs

Flurry? It’s more like a tsunami when the Dance Flurry comes to Saratoga Springs every year. Live music and a dizzying array of dance styles and genres make this an event that’s nationally renowned.

Best Theater Company

Berkshire Theatre Festival

Main Street, Stockbridge, Mass.

Summer theater is in full swing and the Berkshire Theatre Festival is shining particularly brightly among theater’s regional gems. Helmed by artistic director and CEO Kate Maguire, BTF has amassed a remarkably talented crew of actors and technicians. And to celebrate their 80th anniversary, this year they’ve scheduled one of the most challenging, engaging, balanced and important seasons of theatre we’ve seen in years. Next up on their two stages: A Man for All Seasons and Waiting for Godot.

Best Theater Company Artistic Director

Julianne Boyd

Barrington Stage, Pittsfield, Mass.

Julianne Boyd wears two hats in the regional theater community—we’re talking those bright, big-brimmed Saratoga numbers—and she balances them with talent and grace. As the artistic director of Barrington Stage, Boyd continues to assemble exceptional talent, producing top-notch theater season-round. And as a gifted director in her own right, in January, Boyd’s interpretation of West Side Story was unanimously dubbed the best play of the year by Metroland critics (who aren’t unanimous about much). Keep an
eye out for her upcoming production of *Private Lives*.

Best Actor

**Vince Gatton**

Mustering the energy, charisma and psychological complexity to perform a one-man show is a true theatrical challenge. But tackling *two* one-man shows in a single season, creating *two* wildly diverse characters with honesty, and force? That is a spectacular feat. Kudos to Gatton for taking on the challenge, and further kudos still for doing so masterfully. His solo performances in Barrington Stage’s *I Am My Own Wife* and *Fully Committed* blew us away. He is a talent to be reckoned with. Expect to see him back soon.

Best New Venue to See a New Show

**Stage II Theatre at Barrington Stage Company**

36 Linden St., Pittsfield, Mass.

Utilizing the most unexpected of buildings, a VFW (the vets still meet in the basement), Julie Boyd has made Linden Street (of all places!) Pittsfield’s own off-Broadway in the Berkshires. Intimate stadium seating and a highly efficient stage make it a pleasure to visit. Part of the time it presents new cutting-edge plays like *I Am My Own Wife*. The rest of the time it is home to BSC’s Musical Theatre Lab, where new shows are seriously being workshopped, developed into full productions, and sent on their way to places like that other off-Broadway and Broadway (hint: *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*).

Best Underutilized Space

**Kitty Carlisle Hart Theatre, The Egg**

*Empire State Plaza, Albany*

It’s not that we don’t appreciate the programming that goes on at the Egg. They offer a quality array of music, dance and family events. But with virtually endless fly space, on-site scene and costume shops, a sprawling backstage area, 400-unit lighting plot, superb sightlines, one of the best sound systems in the country, and even an elaborate trapdoor system, the Egg’s 982-seat Hart Theatre is, unequivocally, the most technically comprehensive theater facility in the area. While regional theater companies struggle to find suitable venues, the Egg’s full potential remains untapped.

Best Historic Replica
Half Moon

Looking at the Half Moon, a full-scale replica of the Dutch ship on which Henry Hudson sailed across the Atlantic and up the Hudson, you can’t help but wonder how the tiny ship and its crew made it so far. Stepping aboard, visitors accurately see the navigational tools, sleeping quarters, and colorful flags of the 1609 expedition. Today the ship sails mostly from New York City to Albany, teaching kids about ecology, and re-enactors how to properly sail without modern day technology.

Best Literary Series

New York State Writers Institute

University at Albany, Skidmore College

Year after year—and, more importantly, all year round—the New York State Writers Institute attracts the among best authors of fiction, nonfiction and poetry in the world.

Best Local Author

Russell Banks

Even for Russell Banks, this has been a great year. His Adirondack novel The Reserve earned widespread acclaim, and his new collection of essays on America has entered the national conversation.

Best poet

Naton Leslie

Professor of writing and literature at Siena College and prize-winning author Naton Leslie has penned, to date, six volumes of poetry, a book of narrative nonfiction and a collection of short fiction. His latest book of poetry, Emma Saves Her Life, offers a tender, nostalgic, honest, plucky, personal and insightful window into the unchanging truths of human nature within a rapidly transforming world—all woven together by the letters, scrapbooks and mementos his grandmother left behind.

Best Magician

Jeffrey Jene

As local festivalgoers can attest, magician Jeffrey Jene is on a par with the biggest names in the magic biz, and he’s a Houdini Award winner for both close-up magic and stage
magic. His repertoire ranges from mesmerizing sleight-of-hand with coins, cards and ropes to stage extravaganzas featuring large-scale illusions. His superlative cups-and-balls routine is a major draw at Larkfest and Troy’s River Street Festival, among other street festivals, and his spellbinding dove and fire tricks have entertained audiences on theater stages and company parties around the region.

Best Arts Night

Troy Night Out

We love 1st Friday in Albany. We love Art Night in Schenectady. We love all the arts nights, in Ballston Spa and Pittsfield, Mass., and Saratoga Springs. (We’ll have to check out that one in Glens Falls, too.) But Troy Night Out, partially thanks to the geography of Troy, is the best.

Best Venue (Microscopic)

Club Helsinki

284 Main St., Great Barrington, Mass.

This tiny (capacity: 85), ultra-funky club in the middle of Great Barrington constantly brings in acts that play venues 10 times larger in other place, like Albany. Nellie McKay, Greg Brown, Colin Hay, Omar Sosa, Rhett Miller—all just in the last year. Throw in great food and people-watching (hello there, young shiny Berkshirites and touristas!), the short drive over the border can be a great adventure.

Best Venue (Backroom)

The Ale House

680 River St., Troy

The Ale House adheres to a rugged set of principles. First, don’t expect the tables to be moved, so squeeze in where you can (against a window, in the doorway to the barroom). Second, sup some of the myriad brands of beers and finest pub grub this side of the Hudson River. Third, expect to have your world rocked or honky-tonked by some of the finest, most critically acclaimed rock & roll and Americana out there. Wayne “the Train” Hancock? Check. Rosie Flores? Check. Eddie Angel? Check. Bill Kirchen? Yeah, we got your Bill Kirchen. Now, go squeeze into the other room and try to find a sightline around the center beam.

Best Venue (Big Room)
The Linda—WAMC’s Performing Arts Studio

339 Central Ave., Albany

Despite being re-branded with a most unwieldy moniker, the Linda has continued to impress from the inside out, with ever-improving sound, and some wholly unexpected, and entirely welcome, talent-booking. Robyn Hitchcock, Nick Lowe, Graham Parker, Jimmy Webb—this place has got the legendary pop songwriters on lockdown.

Best Venue (Showroom)

Colonial Theatre

111 South St., Pittsfield, Mass.

Just walking in to this impeccably restored and gilded-up-the-wazoo little theater is an event in itself. In a region blessed with a bunch of nicely restored theaters, nothing else really comes close to the Colonial in terms of a visceral jolt. Now if they could only hip up the bookings . . .

Best Venue (Whole Lotta Room)

Saratoga Performing Arts Center

Saratoga Spa State Park, Saratoga Springs

They’re about to give the place a big, modern makeover, so who knows what’s gonna happen next season. All we know is, right now, SPAC is as good as its ever been—the old shed still looks and sounds great, and this summer’s special-events schedule is one of the best they’ve put together in years. Brava!

Best Venue (Coulda Been A Contender)

Jack Rabbit Slims

Closed

The former Noche nightspot seemed to have everything going for it when its doors opened early this year. The sound system was great; the stage was high and wide; the booking was a smart mix of old and new; and the long Noche bar stayed put, meaning you could order a drink from practically anywhere in the place. Not six months later, the place was kaput. What happened?
Best Free Music Series

Monday Nights in the Park

Washington Park, Albany

This longstanding area tradition returned last year after a half-decade hiatus. This year, the organizers exceeded all expectations by nabbing legendary indie-folk-pop chanteuse Aimee Mann for one of the Lakehouse shows—the only free show on Mann’s entire tour. Dear Albany: Send a thank-you note to the BID for this one.

Best Band

The Red Lions

Eric Margan’s songs and aesthetic are from another time: His musical influences seem drawn entirely from before he was born. Which isn’t hard; the kid’s, well, a kid. But his jazz-leaning, ornate, orchestral pop is unlike anything that’s come out of the Capital Region in as long as we can remember, and the band’s busy gig schedule has amassed them a devoted, even defensive, fan base. Trust us: This band will be going places.

Best New Band

Charlie Everywhere

Balancing the synthesized textures of hip-hop and house music with distinctly human elements (soft, co-ed harmonies; electric guitars), this Saratoga duo don’t just make excellent electronic music—their music is just plain excellent. Think Portishead, but less gloomy. (By a lot.) Watch for their debut disc later this year.
Best Rock Band

28N

Employing electronics in a whole different way—to fill in for the lack of a full-time bassist—Nate Stengrevics and Lowell Stringer sound like twice the band they actually are. Judging by the radio-friendly alt-rock sound of their latest CD, Where Tenses Meet, 28N are about one crossover hit away from the Top 40.

Best Metal Band

Empire State Troopers

They put out a kick-ass release this year, Upstate Again, a too-short album produced by Jason Loewenstein that leaps out of the speakers with a pounding rhythm and reckless abandon. Lovers of the Empire State and all its natural resources, and inspired by '70s hard rock and obscure British metal, EST are the best stoner-metal-punk-rock-underground band from here to Ballston Lake and back again.

Best Punk Band

Suzy Wong and the Honkeys

"Mohawk'ed punks might not call them punk, but I would," quoth a local fan. Wherever their music falls in the old-school-versus-new-school punk rock rating game, we like it. It’s snarling and saucy, with tons of energy and scream-o female vocals in the vein of Poly Styrene from X-Ray Spex.

Best Non-Goth Goth Band

Severe Severe

With a sound based in dark atmospherics—high-register bass-guitar strumming, delay-laden electric-guitar melodies, brash synthesizers, and tom-heavy drum patterns—it would be easy to lump Severe Severe in with the clove-cigarette-smoking, fishnet-glove-wearing crowd. But last year’s pick for Best Transplanted Band sound like nothing from the last 20 years on their new disc, Beyond the Pink; indeed they show shades of the Cure and Joy Division (by their own confession), but theirs is music for dancing, not brooding. Severe Severe’s songs would fit right in at the Fuze Box’s ’80s night, and if you know us, you know we consider that to be a very good thing.

Best . . . well, what-would-you-call-it music?
Sara Ayers

For more than 20 years, Castleton’s Ayers has quietly been producing a steady stream of brilliant electronic and vocal music, and has steadily built an international following of fans and collaborators. She’s just released an album collaboration with Japanese ambient artist Ryuta.K; her stuff is showing up in movies; people are remixing her tracks and grabbing samples left and right; and she’s been giging around town with psychedelic experimentalists Axe Iron Suns.

Best Songwriter (Female)

Katie Haverly

It’s been a few years since we’ve heard from Katie Haverly, but she’s back in a big way with her recent album Around the Bend. Haverly has always been a singer in the purest sense, with sparkling, clear tones, and limber and rangy dynamics. But in the intervening years her songcraft has deepened beyond mere folkiness. “Fire in the Kitchen” is a brooding emotional maelstrom with a touch of psychedelia, while “Real Good” is a spare emotional exploration at the other end of the spectrum. She is our songwriter of the year because of her keen poetical sensibilities, deft musical touch, and convincing emotional delivery. Hers is a “mature” brand of alt-folk, in the best sense of that word.

Best Songwriter (Male)

Aaron Smith

Chief cartographer for hometown heroes the Scientific Maps, Smith packs volumes into his three- to four-minute garage-pop gems—midnight cemetery raids, love requited and otherwise, and a touch of the mysterious behind the mundane. His bittersweet, sometimes inscrutable lyrics are underscored by arcing trumpets, buzzing guitar solos, and a rare gift for the devastating chord change. Smith’s tweaking of conventions belies a near mastery of the form—meaning total galactic domination by Smith and the Maps is at this point inevitable. Just remember who told you so when it finally happens.

Best Secret Weapon
Frank Moscowitz

Because he engineers excellent recordings by a wide variety of bands. Because, when he does it, he’s one of the better front-of-house guys you’ll find in the area. Because he’s part of the engagingly off-kilter folk-rock act Princess Mabel. And because he’s a top-notch instrumentalist. Moscowitz makes any band he works or sits-in with (on guitar, keyboard, what have you) that much better.

Best Psychedelic Jam Collective

Burnt Hills

One band can take up a whole basement. One song can fill an entire album. One noise can shift the cosmos. Best improvisational, freaked-out, primordial noise collective around, hands down.

Best Electro Pop

Ben Karis-Nix

Back when Karis-Nix’s band the Orange ruled the local club and concert scene, they were known to pack quite the heavy rock wallop behind their fun-loving songs about amphibians. Hence the pleasant surprise of Ben’s current venture (with wife Olivia at his side) as a sort of electronic music maven. Of course, the pop savant hasn’t gone all Moby on us, but live and on his newest CD *We Are Giants Now*, Karis-Nix fortifies his celebrations of life, love and the natural world with subtle synth patches and sampled beats that coexist with his acoustic guitar and pliant, sometimes plaintive vocals. His skilled mix of the organic and the digital makes his underlying “respect the Earth” aesthetic all the more convincing, as well as musically gratifying.

Best Pop Electro

Snakes Say Hisss

Who knows how long they’ll be around here, but this pair of Skidmore students have made an impression during their time in Saratoga Springs, packing their college gigs with loads of youngsters grooving to their clever and snarky electro-glam pop. We’re sure they’ve got places to go in the future, and we’ll keep an eye out for where that takes ‘em (MTV, the cover of *Spin*, jail?).

Best National Treasure

Super 400
We always get the feeling that Super 400 are on the verge of being a 10-year overnight success, and that seems more likely than ever now—the power trio are touring more than ever before, with word of mouth (on the Internet, natch) reaching a fever pitch this year. Word has it they just signed to a big management deal, in addition to partnering with a bunch of promotions companies, so if this doesn’t end up being their year, watch out in 2009!

**Best Country-Rock Band**

*Grainbelt*

Did you know they were No. 5 in sales on the roots-rock music site Miles of Music back in December? Of course you didn’t, because the most rocking country band around these parts just doesn’t get enough love. Their last release, Trouble Coming Down, was filled with a host of great tunes, but this is a band you really ought to catch live for the full effect: Check them out the next time they rock the house at the Garden Grill.

**Best Americana Band**

*Two Gun Man*

Two Gun Man from Hudson, a four-piece with members who relocated here from the Pacific Northwest, play the sort of melodic, heartfelt twang you get a hankering for when tears are falling in your beer, and the beer comes in a metallic-tasting can. As American as Schaefer.

**Best Old-Time String Band**

*The Stillhouse Rounders*

As a young man, Nassau native Mark Schimdt journeyed to rural North Carolina to study traditional Appalachian fiddling with the legendary Tommy Jarrell. That’s about like getting blues guitar lessons from Robert Johnson. Today, his outfit the Stillhouse Rounders keep alive the roughhewn, exuberant sound first recorded in the 1920s by groups like Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers and Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers. In these parts, nobody does it better.

**Best Acoustic Band**

*Annie and the Hedonists*

work, this local quartet offer one-stop listening in more tasty genres than you can shake a pick at. That’s why they take the acoustic cake.

Best High-School Band (Head of the Class)

Number One Dad

Number One Dad beat out a full slate of high school bands at a Colonie battle of the bands contest judged by three Metroland music writers last month. When a bunch of music critics judge a battle-of-the-bands contest, chances are the band geeks will get the glory while the popular-kid cover-band go home empty-handed. Number One Dad are filled with the wise-ass, talented kids who hang out in the band room every day after school, and their music is clever as a result. Music critics love that.

Best High-School Band (Advanced Placement)

Venomentality

Venomentality’s 15-year-old singer-songwriter Valerie Webb is on the fast track to making a career out of music before her senior year. The band released their debut CD, Heart and Dagger, last fall; they’re currently shopping demos in search of a label contract. And wise-beyond-her-years Webb recently scored a publishing deal with New York-based company Mamapublooza. Kids these days . . .

Best Band Who Never Play Out

Brent Gorton and the Tender Breasts

A few years ago, Gorton began performing with a backing band that started out as a subtle accent to his smartly quirky indie-pop tunes. Somewhere along the way, the act developed into something altogether different; as the trio experimented with new sounds, and grew into a foursome, their sound became more strident, reminding us of the Velvet Underground and the Stooges. And then, they just kinda stopped. Word has it there’s a new record on the way. We say, hurry up!

Best Record label

Collar City Records

This isn’t an award we usually present, but the Collar City gang have gone above and in 2008—they released no less than four records in the month of June, at least as many as most local indies released all of last year. But it’s not the quantity, it’s the quality: Look through this year’s list and you’ll see more than one act who have released product via
the Troy-based label. Keep up the good, hard work, boys.

Best of
THE CAPITAL REGION
2008

PEOPLE & PLACES

Best New Political Opportunity

Sen. Joe Bruno’s Retirement

It must be the fact his name is on so much of it, but in Rensselaer County, Sen. Joe Bruno has carried a near-mythic import. Not anymore. His retirement is only days away, and the Republican machine he spent so much taxpayer money building will be losing its head. Couple that with the fact that, for the first time ever, the county Democrats are boasting higher registration numbers than Republicans, and we see the perfect chance for some people to be served their comeuppance, and for others a chance to grab the reigns of power.

Best Lingering Questions

Sen. Joe Bruno’s Future

How is the powerful senator going to go out? With a federal indictment, a plush gig at a lobbying firm, or a cowed agreement to spend his last years poking around on his beloved farm?

Best Political Self-Destruction

Former Gov. Eliot Spitzer

Wow.
Best Preemptive Political Strategy

Gov. David Paterson

“Look, my marriage isn’t perfect. I cheated on my wife. She cheated on me. I used to party, even bumped the yayo. Whatever. At least I’m not a hypocrite with an $80,000 hooker habit. Next!”

Best Nefarious Political Comeback

Roger Stone

Only a hatchet man with the smug visage of the great political weasel Richard Nixon tattooed on his back could have made a career comeback out of the downfall of Client #9.

Best Reason For Yet Another chief of Police

Albany Police Chief James Tuffey

Yes, stability in leadership would be a good thing for the Albany Police Department. It is something the department has lacked for quite some time. However, the problem with Tuffey is that a lot of the officers he is in charge of really, well, loathe him. On top of that, Tuffey has dismantled community policing based around neighborhood beat cops, closed down the Arbor Hill police station, and loudly declared that he knows best—while ignoring the opinions of the people who live in Albany’s most troubled communities.

Best Repeat Offender

Aaron Dare

What do you do after you’re caught embezzling and robbing the poor, and accused of corruption and causing financial havoc for the citizens of the city you pretended to help? Do more of it! Over and over again. And get your girlfriend involved. Stay classy Dare, stay classy. We hear that karma thing is a bitch.

Best Where’s Waldo?

Troy Corporation Counsel David Mitchell

_address unclear_
If anyone knows where this man hosts his summer backyard barbecues, give us a call.

Best New Broom

District Attorney Richard McNally

Rensselaer County

The first six months haven't been wine and roses for the new Rensselaer district attorney, but we need to cut the man some slack. He adopted an office left in shambles after a decade of mismanagement and a backlog of many misdirected cases. Now, after long days of hard work and a few embarrassing losses, McNally appears to have his house in order. Watch out, bad guys!

Best Political Irritant

Charlie (CB) Smith

North Greenbush

What drives CB Smith to work so hard at being so loathed by so many of his political rivals? It's simple: He believes in what he says, and he believes in saying it. Whether he is right or wrong, tactful or not, that's for you to decide. But we think the guy is tops. We only wish more of you were as feisty as him.

Best Reason to Lock up Your Daughters

Albany County Legislator Brian Scavo

It's not just that Scavo offers to take any female Metroland staffer who interviews him on a date. It's that he likes to ask out women of all ages while he's out on the campaign trail . . . and when he's doing just about anything else. He also spends evenings in Borders in Crossgates Mall, looking to be a knight in shining armor for any poor stranded young lady who might find herself stuck without a ride home. Not to worry 'bout that stalking case brought against Scavo. We're sure it's just a simple misunderstanding . . . 40 to 90 incidents of misunderstanding, according to the accuser. Who voted for this guy, seriously? Anyone want to cop to this? Didn't think so.
Best Public Servant

Albany Common Councilman Corey Ellis

Thanks to his outspokenness and firm commitment to researching and proposing solutions to the problems that plague his ward, Ellis has become a shining example of how an outsider politician can still make a difference in Albany. Ellis’ grassroots work with Save Our Neighborhoods has given frustrated community members an outlet, while his work at the Albany Obama headquarters has helped give West Hill something to be proud of. And while Ellis already has made substantial changes in his community, he hopes to one day change the structure by which the game of politics in Albany is played.

Best Public Advocate

Alice Green

Green is no stranger to controversy, but her much-needed outcry against the complacency of the Albany Citizen’s Police Review Board, and of alleged rights abuses by the APD, has garnered her new attackers. But Green has been paying attention to these issues for far longer than flash-in-the-pan conservative-talk-radio hosts, or skeptical pundits—and her wisdom on the subjects is brilliantly clear.

Best Corruption-Fighting Alligator Man

José Lopez

José Lopez is constantly scouring Albany for signs of corruption, and when he ferrets it out, the gloves come off. He has officially called for the resignation of nearly all of the capital city’s chief politicos, and is a perpetual candidate for public office, running on his singular anti-corruption, pro-crocodilian platform. Lopez, self-dubbed “The Alligator Man,” is the proud owner of (at last count) three caimans and one alligator, and (when he’s not busy sticking it to corruption) he teaches regular seminars on his favorite endangered reptiles at the Albany Public Library. He is, to our best knowledge, the only candidate ever to bring an alligator to a political debate. And rumor has it he has his eye on a Senate seat.

Best Place to Get Seasick on Land

Those Roundabouts in New Scotland and Bethlehem

OK, sure roundabouts are nice and quaint . . . in places they actually help alleviate a traffic problem. But on the stretch of Route 85 in Bethlehem and New Scotland, the series of 5 or 6 (seriously?) roundabouts simply make us sick. Seriously. Like we barf out the window while we take the third loop and then we barf again when we are nearly
killed by that old lady in the Cadillac who needs three or four tries to find her way out of the roundabout. Whoever designed these things, a letter explaining yourselves.

Best Park (Nature)

Five Rivers Environmental Education Center

**56 Game Farm Road, Delmar**

Close enough to escape to for an hour, but far enough off the beaten path to offer reprieve from the hustle-bustle of everyday business, Five Rivers Environmental Education Center is a haven for wildlife and humans alike. Miles of gentle trails wend through 446 acres of deep woods and vast fields, past ponds and rivers. The education center and self-guided trails offer hands-on learning for curious kids willing to keep their eyes peeled for wild turkeys, beavers and bullfrogs, and the place is a birdwatcher’s delight. One Metrolander claims to have seen an albino deer in the back fields (though the claim resulted in relentless mocking), and during firefly season, the wheelchair-accessible Woodlot trail transforms into one of the most magical places on Earth. But let’s keep that our little secret.

Best Park (Recreation)

The Crossings

**Albany Shaker Road, Colonie**

This gorgeous piece of tranquility nestled behind Wolf Road and off Albany Shaker Road in Colonie is an oasis for all to enjoy. Have kids and want to wear them out? Let them swing and jump over the massive jungle gym that always seems to be packed with kids, all looking to be the next Olympian. If running, biking or rollerblading is your thing, welcome to six-plus miles of paved trails that take one past a farm and its herd of cows, beautiful manmade lakes and great views of the Heldeberg Mountains. Planning a family picnic, wedding or a benefit walk? No problem. The Crossings can accommodate you with their great facilities. And this year they added a farmers market, which seems to be growing every week.
Best Park (Best-Kept-Secret)

Peebles Island State Park

Access off Ontario Street, Cohoes

Nestled between Waterford and Cohoes, at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, all 138 of Peebles Island’s acres are State parkland. Trails wind through hills and deep woods, past tranquil and rapid river views. It’s an ideal place for hiking, picnics, fishing, cross-country skiing, or walk with your leashed pet. The park is also steeped in history, and you’ll find it everywhere—even underfoot. Part of the rolling landscape is manmade: an untouched earthworks defense system build in 1777 (by none other than unpronounceable engineer and bridge namesake Thaddeus Kosciuszko) to protect colonial troops from British attack. This park is also the headquarters of the Bureau of Historic Sites and Bureau of Historic Preservation Field Services, and a museum, situated in the old Cluett Peabody and Company collar factory, also serves as a visitors center.

Best Dog Park

Normanskill Farm Dog Park

Mill Road, Albany

The city of Albany oversees four municipal fenced dog parks, but this one takes the cake—or the biscuit if you will. Tucked at the bottom of a hill beside the Normanskill, the tumbled foundations and remaining buildings of the historic Normanskill farm are flanked by rolling hills. An idyllic walk along the river, past beekeepers’ boxes, grazing police horses and community gardens leads to the fenced park, complete with a picnic table for the humans. There’s a beach for water-loving canines; the barns offer top-quality sniffing, and the fenced area provides a place for the pups to run and wrestle. Be sure to bring water!

Best Bike Trail

Saratoga National Battlefield

Stillwater

We love the Hudson and Mohawk bike paths, but if you really want to be a part of something special, get out to Stillwater and ride one on the most sacred and underappreciated pieces of property in our country. The Historic Battlefield is not only a spectacular bike ride with an overabundance of natural beauty and wildlife, but also one so packed with historical significance that you’d think you’re a part of a History Channel special. Ride the full 12 miles of road trail (and many more off-roads), if
you want to really want to explore. Features include a museum and gift shop, as well as a series of talking history markers along the way. Take a side trip down to the Hudson River and jump in for a refreshing skinny dip if you are so inclined.

Best Hiking

John Boyd Thacher State Park

_Hailes Cave Road, Voorheesville_

It just doesn’t get much more stunningly panoramic than at Thacher Park. The park’s trails run along six miles of the Helderberg escarpment’s limestone cliff-face, rocky slopes, waterfalls, fields and forests. The famed Indian Ladder Trail hits all those highlights in one gorgeous swoop, and the park’s quieter trails are equally spectacular, with picnic stops and beautiful views of the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys and the Adirondack and Green Mountains. And be sure to keep an eye out for fossils in the cliffs!

Best Swimming Pool

Peerless Pool

_Saratoga Spa State Park_

A repeat winner. The more family-oriented of Saratoga Spa State park’s two pools, this one has two giant corkscrew slides, a kiddie pool, and a main pool that is both huge and kid-friendly: One entire end is a gentle slope so you can wade in with your toddler.

Best Swimming Hole

Ore Pit Pond

_Route 344, Copake Falls_

Even in the middle of August, the waters here is always cool, cuz it’s deep. There are lifeguards and bathrooms, and it’s all free. The newly upgraded kids’ pond can’t be beat. Nor can its location: within the Taconic State Park, at the head of the Harlem Valley Rail and just down the road from Bash Bish Falls.

Best Snowshoeing and cross country skiing

Capital Hills at Albany

_65 O’Neil Road, Albany_
If you are one of the determined champions who musters the motivation to explore outdoor activities in winter, the golf course of Capital Hills at Albany is the spot for you. Whether snowshoeing or cross-country skiing, either sport is an enjoyable challenge in this picturesque setting. Watch the kids sleigh ride before you dip into Martel’s Restaurant for a bite to recharge and a drink to warm-up.

Best Outdoor Ice Skating

Empire State Plaza

Albany

For a free skate with the most dramatic backdrop around, head to the Empire State Plaza from December through March. The state not only supplies the ice—on certain nights, they invite bundled up rock or blues bands to play alongside the rink, a welcome addition to the ongoing piped-in classics. Locker rooms and skate rentals are available underground. Yes, it may be the windiest spot in the region, but bring a scarf and you’ll be fine.

Best Golf Course

Mohawk Country Club

1849 Union St., Schenectady

At Mohawk Country Club, the greens are kept in pristine shape, with real sand filling the bunkers. Most important, the course is interesting and challenging. And the newly renovated Clubhouse offers great food, and a relaxing and classic bar.

Best Mini-golf

Mystic Lagoon at Funplex Funpark

589 Columbia Turnpike (Rts. 9&20), East Greenbush

Mini-golf is a summer staple around here, and Funplex Funpark is the putt-putt haven we keep going back to. Their “Mystic Lagoon” is an 18-hole course filled with old shipwrecks, alligators and seashore obstacles. It’s always clean, the clubs in great shape, and a night game of golf under the lights is verging on romantic. Best of all, it’s cheap, so the loser can afford to buy the ice cream at Lickety Split, just 10 steps away.

Best Bowling
Playdium Bowling Center

363 Ontario St., Albany

What’s not to love about $2 bowling night?! Nothing goes together like cheap bowling, booze and greasy food. And there is no better place to go bowling while catching a buzz and eating delicious cheese fries. If you are really ambitious, you can do your laundry next door too.

Best Bar

Ryan’s Wake

403 River St., Troy

Right after opening its doors, Chris Ryan’s classy, sharp tavern took hold as the place to drink for trendy Trojans—and for good reason. Ryan runs a tight ship, with top-notch service and great beers on tap. The tin ceiling and fine woodwork can go overlooked on packed weekend nights, but the ambiance is fantastic, and it owes so much to Ryan’s discerning taste. And the deck, overlooking the Hudson River, is one of the chillest places in the Capital Region.

Best Gay Bar

Water Works

76 Central Ave., Albany

Waterworks has been flying its flag in Albany for 25 years now, which makes this local pub and dance club the oldest gay-oriented community bar in Albany. In the pub, play some pool or darts, grab a booth and watch the projection TV, or play just about any song you could ever want to hear on the online jukebox. Upstairs, the Waterworks Club offers a second bar, and a booming club atmosphere with a 10,000-watt sound system and a laser-light system. So, no matter what team you play for, even if it’s the bowling league of Water Works’ new Wii, there’s something to offer (almost) everyone.

Best Hook-Up Bar District

North Pearl Street, Albany

Pure, Pearl, Blue 82, The Bayou Cafe, Jillian’s, and Envy . . . . This is Albany’s go-to district for the young and restless, and if you can’t find a “new friend” there, then your game needs some serious retooling.
Best Strip Club

DiCarlo’s

1165 Central Ave., Albany

The mother of all local strip clubs, DiCarlo’s is still the standard by which others are judged. Hot girls, great pub food, great music, and great people watching—all in a great location. It’s is the strip club everyone talks about. Now if only Mike Tyson would start hanging out there again.

Best Bartender

Josh Downs

Jose Malone's, Troy

He looks just like an all-grewed-up Harry Potter in a Hawaiian shirt. His laugh is so infectious he could get a condemned man to chuckle. Those perfect margaritas are an easy pour, but he is always up for a challenge. Ask for a Moscow mule or a woo-woo. He’ll happily make a drink he’s never heard of before—and he’ll make it tasty. There are so many reasons to dig this guy that we’re confident you’ll dig him, too.