

**The New York Times**

**New Jersey**

Dining | The Year in Review

# For Tighter Times, the 10 Best Values for Your Tastebuds



Alan Zale for The New York Times

**DIVERSE TASTES** At Mesob in Montclair, far left, an Ethiopian spot, the spongy flatbread injera is the utensil and part of the meal.

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Published: December 23, 2008

“EVERYTHING about the place cries out ‘spare no expense,’ ” I wrote in 2005, about a restaurant that will go unnamed here. “The waiters wear white gloves. ... As you walk to your table, you sink to your ankles in the plush Oriental carpet.”

Well, that was then. As 2008 slouches to a weary, depleted close, expense is the very thing that needs to be spared. Plush carpets, white gloves, the very word “upscale”: all belong to a more

innocent time, when lavish bonuses bought lavish meals and irrational exuberance seemed rational.

And so this roundup of the year's 10 best, reviewed by me and by Karla Cook, will have a different noun from the one we usually employ. Instead of "restaurants," make it "values."

They follow no obvious pattern. Most are relatively new. Several are "ethnic"; others swim in the mainstream. All share a commitment to the creative and careful handling of high-quality ingredients, even if those ingredients do not often include foie gras and truffles.

This is not a list of cheap eats. But these 10 restaurants, listed here in alphabetical order, are [New Jersey](#)'s equivalent of an energy bar: they pack a lot of worthwhile calories into a small space — in this case, your budget.

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### **Mesob, Montclair**

In Ethiopia, diners do not use forks or knives, and so it is at the sweet, homey Mesob, run by two sisters, Berekti and Akberet Mengistu. The delivery vehicle for practically everything is the flat, spongy sourdough bread called injera. You order stews with fetching names like doro key wat (chicken legs; \$18.95), lega tibs (boned leg of lamb; \$20.95), gomen (collard greens; \$12.95) or butcha (puréed chickpeas; \$12.95). They are arranged in individual servings atop one or two large injeras for the entire table. Break off a piece of bread, scoop some filling, and eat. D.C.

Mesob, 515 Bloomfield Avenue, Montclair; (973) 655-9000; mesobrestaurant.com.

Entrees: \$11.95 to \$24.95.