Welcome to Philadelphia! It’s a fabulous city with so many great things to do that you’ll be tempted to skip some panels. (Don’t!) But let me recommend some places that tourists enjoy and also some places that are best known to locals. (Thanks to Lisa Kirschenbaum for her excellent input.)

What to See 🌟

As the birthplace of the United States, Philadelphia boasts many key historic landmarks. If you walk east on Market Street, you’ll hit Independence Mall in around ¾ of a mile. At Market and S. 6th, you’ll be by the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, and just a few blocks from the Museum of the American Revolution, the African American Museum in Philadelphia, the Betsy Ross House, the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History, and the Benjamin Franklin Museum. There’s an excellent outdoor exhibit called the “President’s House” at S. 6th and Market - right next to the Liberty Bell - designed to highlight the paradox of America’s bid for freedom and George Washington’s exploitation of enslaved men and women.

Getting Around

Center City Philly, with the Schuylkill River at its west end and the Delaware River at its east, is pretty easy to navigate, with Broad Street the dividing line between east and west, and Market Street designating what’s north and south.

Click here to view all of Laurie Bernstein’s recommendations in a Google Map for easier navigation.
The neighborhood is called “Old City.” Just north of Society Hill, it’s a lovely area to wander around, especially if you can incorporate a walk down Elfreth’s Alley, a narrow lane lined with residences from the early 18th century and billed as the “oldest continuously inhabited street in America.” There are also gardens and other historic buildings in and around Independence Mall, including Philadelphia’s Washington Square Park, just south of Walnut Street and between South 7th and South 6th, with a monument to the unknown soldiers of the American Revolution. If you happen to be in the area, be sure to pop into the Curtis Building at 601 Walnut (entrance on South 6th). Just go into the lobby and marvel at the enormous Maxfield Parrish mosaic, “The Dream Garden” (1916). Also nearby is the Athenaeum, a subscription library that dates back to 1814, i.e., prior to this country’s free library system, whose Central Library on the Parkway is also worth checking out.

There are interesting shops and cafes all over Philly, but you can find a concentration of them above Market on N. 3rd and below South Street on S. 4th. While we’re on the subject, you can “meet me on South Street, oh yeah!” Well, not me, but the latest incarnation of “the hippest street in town” (from the 1963 hit by The Orlons) between Front Street and South 11th remains a magnet for high school kids and stoners. Alongside the fetish, T-shirt, and smoke shops, you’ll find many interesting places, including the numerous walls graced by Isaiah Zagar’s famous mosaic murals. His “Magic Garden” museum is at 1020 South. If you wander around the nearby streets, you’ll come upon Zagar’s mosaics in all kinds of alleys and corners. Incidentally, 84-year-old Mr. Zagar is still alive; his house is on the south side of South between S. 10th and S. 9th.

Perhaps it makes the most sense to rephrase The Orlons’ song’s reprised question, “Where do all the hippies meet?” as “Where do all the hipsters eat?” The answer is Fishtown (to the north) and East Passyunk (to the south), Philly neighborhoods chock full of excellent restaurants (in their own section below). They’re farther away: some 3 miles and 1.5 miles from the Marriott respectively, but well worth the walk or ride.
But let me first draw your attention to the myriad possibilities if and when you venture to nearby Broad Street, the equivalent of a 14th Street if Philly had one. **City Hall**, topped with Alexander Milne Calder’s 1894 statue of **William Penn** (“Billy Penn,” to locals) and Philadelphia’s answer to Paris’s Hôtel de Ville, is just a few blocks from the conference center. If you walk through it, you’ll come upon **Dilworth Park** and, right across S. 15th Street, Philly’s famous **Clothespin** sculpture by Claes Oldenburg.

The part of Broad Street to the south of City Hall has been dubbed **“Avenue of the Arts”**. On it you’ll find the historic **Academy of Music**, a jewel box of a theater; the **Kimmel Cultural Campus**, home of the **Philadelphia Orchestra**; and several other venues for plays and music. The Kimmel is open to the public; walk in and check out its spacious atrium.

Speaking of cultural meccas, just a few blocks west – along Locust Street – you’ll find Philadelphia’s **Curtis Institute of Music**. Beyond it is lovely **Rittenhouse Square**, situated between S. 18th and S. 19th. Rittenhouse Square is a fabulous spot for people-watching and catching local buskers and other performers, e.g., when he was filming **Dispatches from Elsewhere**, the former Outkast rapper, André Benjamin (a.k.a. André 3000), could be found playing his flute in the square. Nearby are the pricey shops and cafés along Chestnut and Walnut streets. Just west of the Square is the quiet and elegant neighborhood the director M. Night Shyamalan often uses for his local productions – much to the horror of locals whose cars disappear for “courtesy tows” to accommodate the filmmaker.

If you head north from the Rittenhouse neighborhood, in a bit more than half a mile, you’ll come to the **Benjamin Franklin Parkway**. The Parkway is a lovely, tree-lined street – and it’s the home of Philadelphia’s excellent museums: the **Franklin Institute**; the **Barnes**; the **Rodin**; and, iconic ever since Rocky ran up and down its impressive staircase, the **Philadelphia Museum of Art**. Just see if you can resist posing for a photo, fists raised above your head, by the **Rocky statue** at the base of the stairs! The **debate** rages on: does it or doesn’t it qualify as art?

The charming neighborhood around the museum is known as **Fairmount**. In it, but off the Parkway, is the amazing **Eastern State Penitentiary**, a former prison (1829-1971) built in the
panopticon mode that is now a museum with art installations and tours, e.g., of the cell that housed Al Capone between 1929 and 1930.

While you’re at the west end of town, please note that there’s a fabulous pedestrian and biking trail along the Center City side of the Schuylkill River. There are Indego bicycle stations all over Philadelphia, which means you can rent a sturdy bike for short rides. The Schuylkill River Trail goes as far south as Christian Street and continues for dozens of miles north. If you’re feeling ambitious, you can ride or walk to Manayunk, a bustling neighborhood on the river with lots of shops and restaurants some six miles up the trail.

Across the river to the west is University City, where you can find the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University. The U Penn campus is definitely worth seeing, as is the Penn Museum, with its archaeological exhibits.

If you’re coming with kids, let me recommend some places they’d enjoy: the Philadelphia Zoo; the Franklin Institute; the Academy of Natural Sciences; and the Please Touch Museum. The Mütter Museum, with its “beautifully preserved collections of anatomical specimens, models, and medical instruments,” is a favorite with kids and adults, but it’s not for little kids and you should be aware of the eww factor: many of the body parts, diseased and healthy, and items on display might inspire questions you’re not ready to answer.

Near the Please Touch Museum is Shofuso, a traditional Japanese house designed by architect Junzo Yoshimura and shipped from Japan for display in the courtyard of New York’s Museum of Modern Art before it was brought to West Fairmount Park a few years later. The house is an oasis within the city, as are the grounds, with their koi pond and gardens.

Farther afield, but worth a trip is the Colored Girls Museum, a North Philly house with installations by Black female artists that defines itself as a “public ritual for the protection, praise & grace of the ordinary Colored Girl.”

Click HERE for a very helpful site with local maps and other tourist-friendly guides.
Even farther is Philadelphia’s “Northeast,” home to many immigrant communities, including émigrés from all over the former Soviet Union. If you’re looking for black bread, kebabs, pel’meni, solyanka, chebureki, ikra, vareniki, pickled everything, and other Slavic and Central Asian foods, this is the area. Uzbekistan (12012 Bustleton Ave), with its large, covered, outdoor terrace, is my favorite. But be advised: if you’re not prepared to endure a very long bus ride, you’ll need a car or a very expensive taxi to get up there.

Top Dining Picks

While we’re on the subject, let me get to the area of my real expertise: restaurants. I’ve lived in this area since 1988, arriving as a Bay Area transplant who was appalled at the dearth of good places to eat and who took off for New York or Washington, D. C. every chance I could when I wanted a good meal. But, boy oh boy, did this change around 20 years ago! Philadelphia now has a well-deserved reputation as a restaurant town, e.g., the 2023 James Beard nominations include Friday Saturday Sunday (Outstanding Restaurant); Fork, a.kitchen, and High Street’s Ellen Yin (Outstanding Restaurateur); and Kalaya’s Chutatip “Nok” Suntaranon (Best Mid-Atlantic Chef).

I promise you: you can eat really well here – and your meals will cost less than you’re used to paying if you eat out in most big American cities.

Here are some of my (totally idiosyncratic and incomplete) recommendations by neighborhood. I’ve eaten in most of these places, though the pandemic put a dent in my restaurant hopping and I can’t necessarily vouch for whether they’ve remained great. Please be advised: some, marked with a >> symbol, are tough to get in. Make your reservations now!

Near the Marriott

Reading Terminal Market (1135 Arch St): where all of Philly comes to eat at the rich variety of food stands. A recent addition is Saami Somi; it’s serving up various kinds of khachapuri and dishing out Georgian dumplings. I also recommend squeezing into a counter seat at Tommy DiNic’s for some of Philly’s best pork and greens sandwiches. The Dutch Eating Place, run by Mennonites, provides enormous breakfasts and, if your dentist needs money, shoo fly pies and apple dumplings. There are also bakeries, juice bars, an oyster bar, a vegan deli, and shops.
Nom Wah (218 N. 13th): an outpost of New York Chinatown’s first dim sum parlor. Great dim sum! There’s also good dim sum at Tom’s (59 N. 11th) and Dim Sum Garden (1020 Race St).

Ray’s Café and Tea House (141 N. 9th): for excellent, but pricey, coffee in a siphon maker and delicious homemade dumplings

Penang (117 N. 10th): for Malaysian food and cocktails

Terakawa Ramen (204 N. 9th): for some of the best ramen in town

Just South of the Marriott in Philly’s ‘Gayborhood’

Barbuzzo (110 S. 13th): part of the Valerie Safran and Marcie Turney empire. These two women turned 13th Street south of Chestnut into one of the hottest blocks in Philadelphia. Barbuzzo and nearby Little Nonna’s have very good Italian food. Especially calorie-worthy is Barbuzzo’s salted caramel budino.

Double Knot (120 S. 13th): Asian fusion food with a café upstairs that has one of the best happy hour menus in Philly and a “secret izakaya in the basement”

>> Vetri Cucina (1312 Spruce St): absolutely exquisite $165/person Italian fixed-price meal

>> Vedge (1221 Locust St): Philly’s famous, fabulous, and pricey vegan restaurant, with dishes cooked by James Beard nominees Rich Landau and Kate Jacoby.

Bud & Marilyn’s (1234 Locust St): nostalgic and very good American food, also courtesy of the power couple Safran and Turney

Middle Child (248 S. 11th): breakfast and lunch – and some of the best sandwiches around

Winkel (1119 Locust St): also breakfast and lunch. What’s not to like about “Deep Fried Bread Pudding French Toast” with lingonberries and candied bacon?

In Society Hill and Old City

>> Zahav (237 St. James Place): the first restaurant in Michael Solomonov’s Philadelphia empire – and still one of the greatest around, with its modern take on Israeli cuisine

Amada (217 Chestnut St): excellent tapas from star chef Jose Garces

Forsythia (233 Chestnut St): one of Philly’s best French restaurants

Bourse Food Hall (111 S. Independence Mall): Once upon a time, this vast, historic space in Philadelphia’s stock exchange held fast-food stands for tourists. It still attracts out-of-towners, but its offerings are now from local, ambitious vendors.

Tomo Sushi and Ramen (228 Arch St): excellent sushi

ICI Macarons (230 Arch St): pastries to die for (and from)

Frieda (320 Walnut St): French pastries and sandwiches in a lovely café
Olea (232 Arch St): Liquor licenses in Philadelphia used to be as rare as wild turkey sightings. Now, turkeys are free ranging in most local parks and most restaurants serve alcohol. Olea is one of the few remaining places that advertise themselves as “BYOB” (Bring your own bottle). Bring one (or two) and enjoy the delicious food.

Sakartvelo (705 Chestnut St): Georgian cuisine and also BYOB

Knead Bagels (725 Walnut St): Philly has become quite the bagel town. I am a bagel snob and purist; just ask Bob Weinberg about the time he brought home a bag of bagels from a suburban bagel place and I smelled the cinnamon from the cinnamon raisin ones. Knead, I promise you, has some of the best real bagels, among which I must now include their new-fangled types with fennel and sea salt.

In Fishtown

Pizzeria Beddia (1313 N. Lee St): well-deserved kudos for its fabulous pies. Lauded by Bon Appétit in 2015 when it was just a hole-in-the-wall corner joint as serving “the best pizza in America,” Pizzeria Beddia has since moved and expanded, but I’d still choose it in a heartbeat as my favorite pizza place in a town with lots of kick-ass pizza. One thing: it’s on a tiny street – really an alley – and hard to find. Use your GPS and look for the green neon peace sign.

>> Suraya (1528 Frankford Ave): where food scholar and fellow Slavicist Darra Goldstein insisted we eat the last time she was in town. This is a beautiful Lebanese café and restaurant with fresh pita, amazing pastries, salads, and main dishes.

Cheu Fishtown (1416 Frankford Ave): for Jewish-themed Asian street food, e.g., brisket ramen with a matzo ball and kimchi. There’s also a smaller branch on E. Passyunk (see below).

>> Hiroki (corner of Lee and Master Streets): for a 21-course $155 omakase menu that’s supposed to be out of this world

Frankford Hall (1210 Frankford Ave): for a sprawling outdoor beer garden with, duh, lots of beer, wursts, and other German dishes. This is just one of local restaurateur Stephen Starr’s many excellent restaurants.

>> Laser Wolf (1301 N. Howard St): from Michael Solomonov and a 2016 “best new restaurant” James Beard award winner, with a sister restaurant in Brooklyn. This place features various grilled meats.

In and around Rittenhouse Square

Gran Caffé L’Aquila (1716 Chestnut St): for the best cappuccino and (homemade) gelato in town. Really! La Colombe, which has cafes and whose coffee is perked all over Philadelphia (and, incidentally, New York City) produces really good beans, as do many of the hipster cafes in and around Center City, but Aquila brews cappuccinos like they do in Italy, i.e., fast, no nonsense, and great.
**Pizzeria Vetri** (1615 Chancellor St): for crisp, wood-fired pizza and delicious salads. There’s also a Pizzeria Vetri off the Ben Franklin Parkway at 1939 Callowhill St.

>> **Parc** (227 S. 18th): a bustling and excellent brasserie, and another hit by Stephen Starr. Parc is open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The bread basket alone will make you swoon.

**The Love** (130 S. 18th): an upscale, top-notch American restaurant, this one a partnership between Aimee Olexy and Starr.

**Dizengoff** (1625 Sansom St): fresh pita, toppings, and sandwiches from Michael Solomonov. Dizengoff, named for one Tel Aviv’s main streets, has deservedly famous hummus.

**Bar Bombon** (133 S. 18th): excellent vegan Mexican and Latin-American food

**Di Bruno Bros.** (1730 Chestnut St): extensive international cheese selection and high-end Italian specialties for takeout. The original Di Bruno’s is in the Italian Market (see below).

**K’Far Café** (110 S. 19th): also from Solomonov, this one a bakery known for its babkas, Jerusalem bagels, borekas, and other Middle Eastern treats. This, too, now has a sister restaurant in Brooklyn.

**Goldie** (1911 Sansom St): another Solomonov café, but with falafel sandwiches and salads. I have a friend from Israel who’s obsessed with their tahini shakes. *(No, I don’t get a commission from Solomonov – or Vetri or Starr. They just happen to create and run excellent restaurants.)*

**Veda** (1920 Chestnut St): excellent, upscale Indian food

**Huda** (32 S. 18th): I live right across the street from Huda. If my food philosophy came from the movie *Sleeper*, I’d eat their fried chicken and brisket sandwiches, served on fresh, homemade milk buns, every day of the week.

**Pumpkin** (1713 South St): consistently good BYOB with a $55 fixed price menu

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**By the **Italian Market**

**Blue Corn** (940 S. 9th): great Mexican brunch - cash only

**Di Bruno Bros.** (930 S. 9th): the first and funkies Di Bruno’s cheese shop. Be advised: you can taste their cheeses to your heart’s content.

>> **Fiorella Pasta** (817 Christian St): my absolute favorite restaurant of the moment. Run by Marc Vetri, it has some of the tastiest pasta I’ve ever eaten – and I’ve eaten my share of pasta.

**Mole Poblano** (1144 S. 9th): some of Philly’s best Mexican food

**Villa di Roma** (936 S. 9th): Philly’s quintessential old-school red gravy joint, known for its meatballs - cash only
Casa Mexico (1134 S. 9th): known for her awards and star appearance on *Chef’s Table*, Cristina Martinez is serving up fresh tortillas made from her own heritage corn along with excellent Mexican food and world-class barbacoa.

Angelo’s Pizzeria South Philly (736 S. 9th): pizza and Philly cheesesteaks, with lines often down the block. This brings us to the Cheesesteak Vopros. I’ve eaten exactly one Philly cheesesteak since I’ve lived in this area, but you may be tempted to check out this internationally renowned sandwich in its home territory. According to a friend who’s a native Philadelphian, you should go to Angelo’s or to: Paesano’s (943 S. 9th). Not in the neighborhood are his other recommendations: John’s Roast Pork (14 E. Snyder Ave) and Shank’s (901 S. Christopher Columbus Blvd). They are, he swears, far superior to the neon-lit cheesesteak sellers in the Italian Market and frequented by tourists, those being, Pat’s King of Steaks (1237 E. Passyunk Ave) and its adjacent rival, Geno’s Steaks (1219 S. 9th).

Of course, the Italian Market, S. 9th between Fitzwater and Federal Streets, is itself an attraction. It features several blocks with covered produce stalls, cafes, and stores. No longer only Italian, its southern end now reflects more recent immigrations, especially from Latin America. And if you walk east or west along Washington Avenue, you’ll find strip malls with East Asian restaurants, bakeries, and supermarkets. A worthy new addition is the giant dim sum parlor, Grand Palace (612 Washington Ave).

On or near E. Passyunk and S. Philly

*Le Virtù* (1927 E. Passyunk Ave): fabulous food from Italy’s Abruzzo region

*Gabriella’s Vietnam* (1837 E. Passyunk Ave): really good Vietnamese cuisine

*Marra’s* (1734 E. Passyunk Ave): old-style pizza that reminds me of the big pies we used to get in Queens way back in the 1960s.

>> *Barcelona Wine Bar* (1709 E. Passyunk Ave): a tapas chain, but a very good one

*Bing Bing Dim Sum* (1648 E. Passyunk Ave): sister restaurant of Cheu Fishtown

*Daankbar* (1911 E. Passyunk Ave): BYOB Northern European food from local chef Joncarl Lachman.

*Famous Fourth Street* (700 S. 4th): for old school deli and some of the biggest pieces of cake you’ve ever encountered (Lisa brings their corned beef to Florida when she visits her parents.)