Beyond the boundaries

By ANDY WANG and ERIN FRAZERNIAN

PHILADELPHIA and Boston aren't exactly better food cities than New York, but their chefs could teach ours a few things about diversity and taking on projects that might seem out of your comfort zone.

Andrew Carmellini has become one of New York's most buzzed-about chefs after going from French food at Café Boulud to Italian at A Voce and Locanda Verde and now to American at the Dutch. For the most part, though, we know what to expect from our top chefs: Scott Conant and Michael White cook Italian, David Chang and Zak Pelaccio riff on Asian flavors, April Bloomfield elevates pub grub.

But in Philadelphia, 2011 James Beard Award winner Michael Solomonov has an Israeli restaurant (Zahav), a Mexican restaurant (Xochil) and a Texas barbecue restaurant (Percy Street Barbecue). And he's about to unveil Federal Donuts, serving Korean fried chicken alongside its donuts. (At a recent tasting, our favorite donut had a cardamom-orange glaze with crushed pistachios.)

Zahav, as we've noted before, is a revelation, with salads resistant of striking spices like fenugreek and harissa — and delicately salty smoked salmon piled on buttery toasted challah bread with an unctuous fried egg. So it's a surprise to visit Percy Street Barbecue and find smoky pork ribs and hot links that wouldn't be laughed out of Austin. And shocker, the pork rinds and tortilla soup at Xochil wouldn't be laughed out of Austin, either.

Also in Philadelphia, chef Marcie Pittman is queen of her own section of 13th Street. She's gone Mexican restaurant (Lola), an Indian restaurant (Blind), a gourmet food shop/catering service (Groggery), a housewares store (Open House) and an accessories shop (Verde) where she sells artisanal chocolates. Her latest spot is Barbuzzo, a Mediterranean hot spot that really does put Italian and Spanish food together in a coherent way while also offering farm-to-table florishes like heirloom pork and a chalkboard listing the serious collection of daily vegetables.

One good way to attack the menu: Start with local greens and then go whole hog — house-cured chicharron, stuffed pork and short-rib meatballs, paucheri with a smoky pork ragu and maybe even a locally sourced pig special.

And get a seasonal dessert: A cherry-prosecco sorbet we recently tried was as summery as fruit pie.

In Boston, Ken Oringer's empire includes a French-American fine dining spot (Clio), an adjacent sandwich bar (Uovo), a Mexican restaurant right by Fenway Park that serves until 2 a.m. on weekends (La Verdad), a steakhouse (KO Prime), a Spanish restaurant (Toro) and an Italian restaurant (Coppa). Oringer is an accomplished veteran (Gourmet magazine named Clio "Best Newcomer" in 2007) who's adjusted with the times and capitalized on different markets.

He sells late-night burritos to dinner outside a baseball stadium and also runs an inventive sandwich bar that combines sea urchin with Peruvian hot peppers and serves yellowtail marinated in a three-month-old tamarind sauce with slivers of lily bulb.

At Toro (a tapas spot with unexpectd delights like a pressed sea urchin sandwich) and Coppa, he's teamed up with Jamie Bissonnette, the off-living fella recently voted Food & Wine magazine's 2011 People's Best New Chef.

Coppa is characterized central, and Bissonnette takes note-to-tail quite literally. There's a pig's head terrine on the Coppa dinner menu, and one of our favorite dishes at a recent Coppa brunch was the roasted pig tail with mustard glaze. But our top tip: Cavalletti with chicken sausage and slow-cooked broccoli sounds boring, but it's actually a hearty ragù and one of the best pasta dishes we've eaten in America.

Like Oringer, Michael Schlow is a longtime Boston chef who's kept himself vital. The former New Yorker opened Radius, his American fine dining spot, to widespread accolades in 1999.