

STORIES RESTAURANT REVIEW

The Year in Restaurants

By Naomi Wise | Published Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2009

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E-MAIL THE EDITOR



Famous Chinese curse: “May you have an interesting life.” It’s been an interesting year, the financial weather a perpetual windstorm battering restaurants around along with the rest of the economy. Newspapers are flapping in that gale, too: my expense budget was cut (a bearable 20 percent) — but given the general mood, I’d have downscaled anyway. This year’s game has been to find the best food for gentler prices. And the lesson it’s brought: it’s easier to find delicious food at either the top of the heap, or else at the bare-bones mom ’n’ pop bottom, than in the middle.

Several of the finest restaurants pushed themselves toward greater accessibility — for their own survival’s sake, since the only people living large lately, besides bailed-out bankers, seem to be footballers, Nick Cage, and the Kardashian clan (who?), plus those perpetual un-reality stars, the Gaslamp club-kids whose money falls from the sky. Even in million-dollar neighborhoods, folks who lost lots on stocks now hide their money in their socks.

Several top-end restaurants (including Bertrand at Mr. A’s, Marine Room, Mille Fleurs, and Quarter Kitchen) introduced generous prix-fixe budget menus and/or extended their Restaurant Week discount dinners for months. These offered wonderful opportunities to sample superb cooking — if not quite a free-range pass to the most venturesome outlands of their menus, still highly rewarding meals. Not coincidentally, the restaurants lowered their formality levels as well. Jackets? Nah — clean jeans go almost everywhere now, leastways on weeknights.

The year’s biggest food fad is...booze. Makes emotional sense, right? (Little ol’ wine-drinker me, I got onto this one late but resolve to do better this year!) Bartenders, renamed “mixologists,” are becoming liquid chefs, magnetic crowd-pullers as they create new libations often more fascinating than some of the solids served at their restaurants. The classic course succession is playing musical chairs: the cocktail is now the appetizer course, and often, the appetizer (or a couple of them) is the main dish. (Hey, they’re usually more exciting than entrées, anyway.) Which brings us to closely related fad number two: Forget your troubles, c’mon get happy! An explosion of deeply discounted happy hours has spearheaded this new way to eat out: drink a little drink, graze a little graze [repeat several times], get down tonight.

Even with these boosts, finding good food at lower prices is too often an oxymoronic quest. Ethnic mom ’n’ pops are the champs at providing quality and excitement for minimal bucks, but more than ever, eaters crave creature comforts, familiar flavors in a neighborhood ambiance rather than exotic adventures at naked tables. Problem is, food costs soared (along with rents, supplies, laundry) even as the economy tanked, and it takes a rare chef to spin the straw of third-rate ingredients into gold — especially with low-paid, minimally trained kitchen crews executing the dishes. Trying to cover more low-moderate restaurants, old and new, bought me a membership in the

Frustration of the Month Food Club. It was a year of swallowing disappointments, mediocre, retrogressive, often ill-cooked grub untouched by the “farm to fork” movement.

Relief came from unexpected sources, higher on the food chain: new or newly revamped hotel restaurants with surprisingly lower prices than in days of yore. Stand-alone restaurants often live on their receipts month by month and go down hard when income can't cover costs (see “Obits” below). Hotels live larger: a prestigious restaurant on-premises may be a magnet to high-end guests even if it doesn't necessarily pay its own way. Exorbitant room rates subsidize fine ingredients and well-staffed kitchens. Several of this year's “bests” are hotel dining rooms with creative chefs stretching their wings — and at all of them, the food-only price (\$35–\$42 for three courses with shared desserts) was no higher than the lousy dinners at some trendy neighborhood joints. (Just watch out for wine prices! Them goblins'll getcha if you don't watch out!)

This year, “molecular gastronomy” finally crept into San Diego on little cat feet. Pet that kitty! It played a major part in my best meal of the year, at El Bizcocho — where it was so unwelcomed by the Rancho Bernardo Inn duffers (not to mention the UT's reviewer) that the chef who introduced it fled back to London in a London minute (according to folklore, that's 12 chimes of Big Ben). But the cat's out of the bag and is sneaking into the best kitchens — Paul McCabe at Kitchen 1540 and Fabrice Hardel at Westgate, for instance, are making fun foods like airy foams, intense gelées, ultra-pure flavor essences. Fear not, it's still real food, beautiful food!

The envelope, please.

Meal of the Year: El Bizcocho. A five-course tasting meal combined “farm to table” with futuristic techniques to showcase fresh ingredients in dazzling new ways. The delicate experiments in molecular gastronomy created garnishes to provide startling little surprises — sudden bursts of intense flavor, unexpected textures, flashes of color — a mini magic show on the plate and in the mouth. The brilliance of a scallop sashimi, with its bejeweled garnishes, for instance, put even our best sushi bars to shame. Until the chef ran away with the spoon.

Best “New” Upscale Restaurant: Kitchen 1540 (L'Auberge Del Mar). The former J. Taylor's was renovated and reopened with a fresher, less-formal dining room under a new name. Chef Paul McCabe remains as top toque. Always a dab hand at creating palatal pleasures, his seasonal and mainly local menu is now branching out technically into both discreet touches of molecular gastronomy and house-made salumi. On the early summer menu, the scallops with exploded popcorn purée were unforgettable — but earthy wild-nettle-and-ramp risotto with tempura-fried morels was equally revelatory.

Best New Ethnic Restaurant: Sab-E-Lee. This is the one that lovers of authentic (non-farang) Thai food have been waiting for. The crowded, no-rez, no-frills, BYOB mom 'n' pop serves the fiery cuisine of Issan (northeast Thailand, on the Laos border), but these aren't the mindless flames of culinary machismo. From under the heat rise symphonies of complex flavors. Even liver (of all things!) is transformed into a treat, and the rich, oniony tom yum soup is world-beating. After El Biz, my second-favorite meal of the year. (BTW, don't all run there at once again, or you'll wait hours and overwhelm the kitchen.)

Best “New” Seafood: Westgate Room. In another remade hotel restaurant, an airier, less-formal ground-floor (and more down-to-earth) space replaces the stuffy old Le Fontainebleau. Beautiful, with superb service, it still feels luxe, *calme, et volupté*, but prices are lower while culinary standards remain exalted. Normandy-born chef Fabrice Hardel, who grew up savoring seafood, is a marvel at preparing it. (And, psst, a little molecular magic provides surprise thrills.) Stay away from old-menu shibboleths, go for the fresh-fish creations.

Best New Vacation-on-a-Plate: Vela. The restaurant’s name means “sail,” and at the new Bayfront Hilton, you feel as if you’re on a luxury yacht, relaxing into a mini-vacation of ease and indulgence. The farm-fresh, seasonal food is as delightful as the waterfront view. Gulf prawns in escabeche were stunningly sweet and tender, and Meyer beef carpaccio had my whole table moaning like Meg Ryan (but quietly). Prix-fixe international “exploration” dinners are treats (for the chef, too — you can taste it), while the appetizer array and affordable wine flights invite grazing dinners. Best yet is the spirit of generosity. They really aim to please.

Best New Italian: Bice. The local offshoot of a hugely successful Milan-based international chain looks slick and modern, but its kitchen follows Italy’s old traditions of artisanal ingredients and farm-fresh produce, “slow food” from the country that invented it. Want to taste some of the foodstuffs you’ve heard Mario Batali rave about? There’s a cheese-and-salumi bar (its offerings available at tables, too), house-made breads and pastas, exquisite not-too-sweet desserts (e.g., a superb panna cotta). And on this huge, inviting menu, most dishes are under \$20! Service is warm but not stifling, intent on providing maximum pleasure. Runner-up: Operacaffe. This welcome throwback to the pre-convention center Gaslamp (when Italian restaurants were small and affordable) rolls back the cost and the tension. It offers unselfconscious Florentine home-style cooking, simple and sensual and *delizioso*, in a hospitable, laid-back atmosphere. “This one is just for San Diegans — no tourists!” say the owners.

Best New Fusion: Jai. Aah, finally, this is what fusion should be! This Wolfgang Puck spin-off is hidden amidst lovely tall trees on the UCSD campus, a gleaming, comfortable modern restaurant instead of a witch’s cottage, with excellent service. Chef Yoshinori Kojima does benign witchcraft of his own with precise, masterful dishes, such as an outstanding tempura soft-shell crab with tender meat, and a miso-glazed butterfish, its sweet flesh robed in a silken sauce. Food-pundits say that fusion’s about to go out of style (as it should, given how screwed-up it often is); even so, Jai deserves to survive as a living monument to the genre at its finest.

Best New “Have It Your Way” Hangout: Cucina Urbana. Restaurateur Tracy Borkum killed her upscale Laurel and replaced it with this racketsy, informal Italian-inspired eatery offering creative and shareable nibbles, for grazing or gobbling, eating (and spending) a little or a lot — at tables, at the bar, at a huge communal table favored by singletons. An attached wine shop offers all bottles at \$7 corkage over retail price. The primary flaw is the price of success: how can you hang out at a hangout where reservations and even bar-seats are horribly hard to score?

Best Greek: Apollonia Greek Bistro. In a town filled with Greek restaurants of highly variable quality, Apollonia has the most complete and nearest-to-authentic menu (including seafood — remember, Greece consists of islands!). The greaseless moussaka is exceptional; other joys include wonderful taramasalata (cod roe mousse) and lush stuffed eggplant, imam bayaldi.

Best New Upscale Mexican: El Vitral. The creative mainland Mexican nueva cocina is wildly uneven here dish to dish — plus they foolishly withhold their four fabulous salsas from the table, providing them only with certain entrées. But when it's good, it's very good: try the rich sopa de elotes (corn soup), handmade quesadillas (totally fabuloso), scallops, duck mini-enchiladas, cochinita pibil (Mayan-style “pulled pork”), duck fettuccine with mole, and above all, a dessert of churros with coconut sauce. The “Smokin’ Tippler” spicy margarita makes a mighty tipple, and dining on the patio with its toes on Petco is fun.

Best New Inexpensive Mexican: Cantina Mayahuel. In a tiny but attractive space, the short menu is authentically mainland, a limited selection of soft “street tacos” plus salads, “bowls,” and weekly specials, including Friday night’s extraordinary chicken moles — a choice of house-made poblano or imported Oaxacan black mole or half and half. Margaritas are big and cheap (\$5); food prices top out at ten bucks.

Best New Middle Eastern: Mystic Grill and Bakery. Still looks like the cheap pizza joint it used to be. Still serves cheap pizza. (Don’t go there.) But the Jordanian chefs are proud professionals. If you’ve given up on felafel and kibbe, try again here. They’ll blow your mind. Top ingredients (halal Prime beef, fresh baby chickens) and skilled cooking “from scratch” set this one well above the norm. Don’t skip the house-made, not-oversweet desserts, including three variations on baklava.

Best Happy Hour: Candelas, Coronado. The best happy hours don’t just drown your troubles, they carry you away from them. At Candelas, a generous menu of exquisite, sometimes exotic upscale-Mexican creative appetizers at half-price, paired with half-price drinks in a stunning bay-view location, makes this the ultimate happy-hour heaven to wash all your blues away. Runner-up: Puerto La Boca. Argentina’s dinner hour starts at 11:00 p.m., so the cuisine includes a rich array of tasty “teatime” tapas to enjoy along with South American wines. Puerto La Boca isn’t a splashy bar scene but an instant escape to some artists’ café in Buenos Aires, a sophisticated epicurean experience at deeply discounted prices.

Best New Gastropub: All American Grill. In a hipper location, this huge pub might challenge crowded Cucina Urbana (not to mention Jayne’s Gastropub, et al.) as a casual foodie hangout. But it’s way off the trodden gastronomy trail that runs from Mission Hills to Kensington. Down the cliff in Route 8 mall country, it occupies a former Trophy’s in Hazard Center. (Yes, the TVs remain, usually muted but springing to life during Sunday games.) Nonetheless, talented chef Timothy Au is transforming pub grub into genuinely good grub, using fresh local ingredients and a wood-fired grill to make creative mini-pizzas, classy burgers, gorgeous roasted Carlsbad mussels, steaks, ribs, et al. And creative cocktails (with juices, not cloying commercial mixes) cost about the same as a glass of

wine.

Most Welcomed Sushi in the City: Hane. Finally, an urban branch of Sushi Ota, with skilled, friendly chefs who (unlike Ota-San himself) all speak English. Alas, it's usually jam-packed now that word's out. (I still haven't tried Kaito Sushi in Encinitas, which from many reports is giving Ota a run for his money as the best local sushi. It's on my list for 2010.)

Best Cornbread and Gumbo: Bull's BBQ. After trying five new barbecues, sorry, good old Barnes' BBQ is still the king. Bull's was my favorite of the new crop (for smoky, tender meats), but its most riveting dishes were sides: a deep, dark, voodoo gumbo, best in town since Juke Joint closed and as good as any in NOLA, served with light, sweet, moist corn muffins subtly flecked with jalapeño. Runner-up BBQ side dishes: Genuine Hill Country Texas link sausages in a rich, cheesy sandwich at Brett's BBQ; authentic bean-free Texas chili at West Coast BBQ.

Creative Cocktails: Bite. The chef's prosecco cocktails made with fruit essences, flower syrups, and sorbets are light, cool, and enchanting. The one with aromatic rose syrup drives me mad.

Other memorable dishes: Arterra's cauliflower soup with braised beef; Alchemy's pork-stuffed piquillo peppers, and vegetarian lasagna; Himalayan Cuisine's Tibetan lamb momos; Iris's chocolate brownie cake; Milles Fleurs' Chino tomato-and-eggplant salad and smoked-eel appetizer; Muzita's fried okra coated in Ethiopian teff grain; Quarter Kitchen's wine-braised short ribs and T-Day special of chestnut soup with sweetbread croutons.

Obits (partial list): Most heartbreaking, Better Half (last year's "best new moderate") went down to defeat. So did Apertivo (heartless rent increase), Batter Up (but owner-chef Mel Johnson's gone over to Lil' Piggy's Bar-B-Q, which bodes well for Q in Coronado: he's the very man to liven up the side dishes), Café Noir, Café One-Three, California Cuisine, Crescent Grill (another short-lived star from last year's "bests"), Dakota Grill, Epazote (replaced by a steakhouse, same owners), Fix Me a Plate Cafe, the Guild, Illume, La Vache, Milles Feuilles (ouch! another short-lived "best"), Modus, Mukashi, Ole Madrid, Parallel 33, Rainwater's (say goodbye to the last great Beef Wellington), Sluggers.

Stibo ("Obits" spelled backward): The delightful Chilango came back from the dead! Stay alive, we're rooting for you!

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COMMENTS

#1.

While I appreciate this year-end summary/analysis, I am disappointed to see Cantina Mayahuel named the "best new inexpensive Mexican" restaurant.