



## [Restaurant Review](#) |||

### Best Bites of 2005

By [Naomi Wise](#) | Published Thursday, Dec. 29, 2005

Another year, another hundred-plus restaurant meals under my belt -- some great, some mediocre, and some so unspeakable they couldn't be reviewed while the libel laws stand.

This year I tackled a bunch of well-reputed "Gold Coast" restaurants that were last reviewed here before the turn of our century, to see if they could still cut the mustard (mainly, yes), along with some interesting new ones in that shining land beyond the Merge of Death. Some of the oldies (there and elsewhere) were true goodies. Roving chefs also kept me busy with revisits, and some of their "remade" restaurants reached new heights of performance. At the same time, many of the year's debuts have centered in and near the new downtown hotels and cater to conventioners with pricey steaks, seafood, and cookie-cutter Cal-French-Mediterranean-Pacific Rim-influenced hotel menus. I never want to see another crab cake, Caesar salad, whatever-crust-ed seared ahi or molten chocolate cake again -- unless, of course, they're *fabulous* crab cakes, etc.

Here, then, are the highlights of my year in dining. Just as last year, I can't and won't choose a single "Best Restaurant" or "Best Chef." There are too many varieties of restaurants and cuisines to make direct comparisons.

**Best New Restaurant:** Magnolias (Market Creek Square, 342 Euclid Avenue, near Market Street, Lincoln Park, 619-262-6005). Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans? The Bushman went to Jackson Square and made big promises, but he and his buddies in Congress are still lollygagging about sending real money, while they throw \$5.6 billion *a month* at Iraq. (Latest promise is about two weeks' worth of the war budget to fix the levees. Five weeks' worth would actually do it.) What's endangered, among other cultural treasures, is America's most distinctive and exuberant cuisine, as so many line cooks and sous chefs were washed out of the Ninth Ward and can't come home again. So I'm glad that we have Bessie Johnson from Lake Charles, Louisiana, keeping it real here at Magnolias. In addition to great gumbos, scrumptious etouffée, and a perfect jambalaya -- not to mention a fabulous crab cake -- she turns out the most delicious Southern-fried chicken I've tasted *anywhere*.

**; Best Remake:** Nine Ten Restaurant (Grande Colonial Hotel, 910 Prospect Street, La Jolla, 858-964-5400). This was the site of the most exciting, exquisite dinner I ate this year. Two major changes transformed the restaurant: Competent new people, from the house manager on down, were hired for the front of the house, replacing the former crew of headless chickens. Even more important, ingenious pastry chef Jack Fisher rejoined the kitchen, and his collaboration with executive chef Jason Knibb has been the catalyst for

extraordinary inventiveness. For example, last summer, Fisher's house-made mozzarella cheese and experimental balsamic "gelée" (cut in cubes that resemble melting garnets) sparked Knibb's reinvention of *insalata caprese* as a fresh, thrilling dish. Ingredients are tops, and the chefs know the latest avant-garde techniques and aren't afraid to use them.

**; Best-Kept Secret:** Molly's (Marriott Hotel Marina, 333 West Harbor Drive at Front Street, North Tower, sub-lobby level 1, downtown, 619-230-8909). This is another outstanding remake, where a new hotel manager brought in a San Francisco chef (a veteran of luxury-grade Italian restaurants up north) worthy of heading the resort's "fine dining" restaurant. The menu descriptions look like ordinary Cal-Mediterranean dishes, but the superb produce and deep-flavored combinations on every plate tattle that Brian Sinnott's cooking is done with intelligence and care. Unexpected ingredients present culinary crosswords to enjoy, taste-teasing mysteries to solve. And Sinnott is one of very few local chefs who rolls house-made pastas as thin as they ought to be. Local food-lovers, arise, and liberate this treasure from the conventioneer occupation forces!

**; Best Fusion Cuisine:** Asia Vous (417 West Grand Avenue, Escondido, 760-747-5000). This restaurant straddles two years -- because the second dinner for review had to wait past the hectic holidays -- "best new restaurant" last year, and one of the best meals of this year. What elevates Riko Bartolomei's version of "fusion" is his thorough understanding of Pacific flavors and grasp of the tastes and textures that work best together. His combinations are bold, unexpected, and sometimes revelatory. (I'm still happily agape over the pairing of sweetbreads with Chinese sausage.) Riko's also one of the few chefs whose desserts are as expert as the earlier courses, a one-man band whose appetizers and entrées are equally delicious and whose ethereal sweets fit perfectly into his exotic flavor-rainbow.

**; Best "Gourmet Gulch" Berkeley Restaurant in San Diego:** A.R. Valentien (the Lodge at Torrey Pines, 11480 North Torrey Pines Road, La Jolla, 858-777-6635). Chef Jeff Jackson uses gorgeous ingredients, including local produce, matches them up intelligently, cooks them expertly, and serves them with no heavy sauces to disguise them (and no unnecessary calorie-loading). The food speaks for itself, eloquently. You could be eating at Berkeley's legendary Chez Pansse -- but Torrey Pines' scenery is prettier.

**; Best New Ethnic Restaurant:** Puerto La Boca (2060 India Street at Hawthorn, Little Italy, 619-234-4900). This lively, cosmopolitan restaurant serves the purest Argentine cooking in the San Diego area. The menu includes terrific beef empanadas, flavorful seafoods, and an honest mixed grill (*parillada*) with grass-fed steak, short ribs, zesty South American sausages, and organ meats cooked to your specification, served with a vibrant *chimichurri* salsa. Several of the appetizers (e.g., *matambre* and a shrimp-avocado salad) are rare this side of the equator. The staff are determined not to compromise their cuisine to gringo tastes -- and they don't have to. The local South American expat community has adopted this restaurant as a taste of home.

**; Best Mexicans of the Year:** Casa Reveles (Harvest Farms Village, 29000 Lilac Road, Valley Center, 760-749-8041). Chef-owner Sergio Reveles comes from Zacatecas, in the Valley of Mexico between Mazatlán and the capital, and his fare is what his grandmother cooked -- especially his 16 house specialties from the Mexican heartland. These include world-beating *carnitas*, moist and tender, and a deluxe *machaca con huevo* (shredded beef-and-egg scramble). Even tortilla-wrap dishes like *enchiladas suizas* are cooked with care that you can taste, making them Mexican haute cuisine. Metro-area runner up: Chilango's (142 University Avenue near Second Avenue, Hillcrest, 619-294-8646). Here the style is Mexico City proper, meaning a sophisticated compendium of the regional cuisines of the nation. There are no tortilla-wrap "combos" at dinner (they're available at lunch, the meal where they belong), just plates laden with zesty

flavors, including a fruit-riot version of the rarely found specialty *chiles en nogada* (stuffed poblano chiles with walnut-cream sauce). A common element to both restaurants: guacamole mashed by hand, not by an infernal machine.

**; Sushis of the Year:** Samurai Sushi (Loma Santa Fe Plaza, Garden Section, 979 Lomas Santa Fe Drive, one block east of I-5, Solana Beach, 858-481-0032). When sushi first came to the U.S., its most striking feature was its aesthetic component -- exquisite or amusing miniature landscape-sculptures vanishing down the gullet. (How Zen!) It's easy to forget this, now that every supermarket carries packaged sushi and kids gobble it for schoolday lunches. Samurai still cleaves to the aesthetic. Let the chefs loose there (even the younger guys), and their sushi compositions look as beautiful as they taste. Nearby Nobu (315 South Highway 101 near Dahlia Drive, Solana Beach, 858-755-7787) is a close runner-up. Both restaurants perform consistently even when the head chef's away. (And it's easier to get a bar-chair than at jam-packed Ota in P.B.)

**; Best Southeast Asian:** Le Bambou (Del Mar Village, 2634 Del Mar Heights Road at Mango, Del Mar Heights, 858-259-8138). The winner of so many reader polls now wins the critic's "best" list. The fare is the charming, sophisticated cuisine of the former Saigon -- elegant, rather than hearty. Appetizers are outstanding -- an inventive series of brilliant tidbits, each with distinctive flavors, to wrap in lettuce with fresh herbs and joyfully eat with your hands -- including sugar-cane shrimp, a royal delicacy that's rarely managed with such a light touch in these parts.

**; Best Budget Seafood:** Blue Waters (3667 India Street at Chalmers, Middletown, 619-497-0914). Plastic plates, low prices, order at the counter -- but fresh, fresh, fresh! Instead of formality, you get pristine fish prepared to maximize its natural flavors -- mainly grilled just right, with a choice of simple garnishes and (along with entrées) a huge salad with your choice of superb house-made dressings. The raw oysters are luscious, and the clean-flavored grilled swordfish taco with perfect garnishes converted me from its battered cousins. What's more, the retail fish counter sells the same superior stuff, raw and ready for your own inventions. My sainted mother (who always loved "a nice piece of fish") must be rolling in her grave, yelling, "Let me out and let me at it!"

**; Best Healthy Fast Food:** Chipotle (many locations). It's not a spin-off of McDonald's, it's an acquisition -- and it sticks to the original chef-entrepreneur's concept of a taqueria serving wholesome ingredients and tender, naturally raised meats (wherever possible), all prepped and cooked fresh on-premises. (Most local taquerias use cheap meat pre-marinated by the meat jobber.) The carne asada burrito is fabuloso. (But if you don't want rice in it, you've got to tell them at the very start of your order.) They do have a liquor license (to correct a review error), so the margaritas are full-strength tequila versions -- proceed *con cuidado*, *compañeros!*

**; Best Italian Pasta:** Spaghetti al Cartoccio at Osteria Del Pescatore (1201 Camino Del Mar at 12th Street, Del Mar, 858-509-9293). This frequent special sings a song of the south of Italy, mingling spaghetti, clams, rock shrimp, and artichoke hearts baked in a tomato sauce with garlic and a rich undertone of anchovies. (Only anchovy lovers will perceive their presence.) As they bake together in a sealed packet of parchment paper, the clams open and spill their juices into the sauce, and the maritime flavors permeate the pasta. Peeled open before serving, the parchment package resembles a big white flower with a red center that exudes a perfume that can drive you mad with seafood lust.

**; Best Trend:** The Rise of the Neighborhood Bistro. We have more and more wonderful wine bars serving tasty snacks, but a true bistro goes a few steps further, turning out full meals of delicious and affordable

food from Europe's "wine countries" to complement the sips or gulps. Among their numbers are the Italian-slanted Apertivo (North Park), Parisian-chic Chloe (East Village), and francophile the Third Corner (Ocean Beach). They're all delightful places to hang out, sip, and nosh. Special plaudits go to Apertivo, for proving that even with a bare-bones budget, a restaurant can serve tasty, creative produce rather than the dreaded "Sysco medley" -- if the chef does his own shopping and thinking. Come to think of it, I ran into the Sysco combo (you know, the inevitable carrots-broc-zuke) about half as often in 2005 as in previous years. If that's a trend, too, can it mean that San Diego is really becoming a food city?

**; Mama, Look, a Boo-Boo:** I got food poisoning from the salsa bar at a highly touted new taqueria, from a neighborhood pizzeria-cum-cheesesteak joint, and from a cheap buffet lunch near the town of "Pizza" (Phitsanuloke), Thailand -- but the culinary disaster of 2005 wasn't at some low-down dive. Quite the opposite: It was at a restaurant I hoped would merit my first five-star rating. But the kitchen was evidently having the mother of all off-nights, with the appetizers arriving 40 minutes after we ordered, the temp waitress playing John Wayne ("Never apologize, never explain, never refill the wine glasses"). Every dish was either badly undercooked (foie gras) or overcooked (steak). No, I won't name the perp. This chef is usually terrific, so I'm sure it was temporary insanity under holiday stress. My other gripe is perpetual: At so many new restaurants, the owners think that a painfully loud sound level equals a "lively atmosphere." That's fine for clubs, not restaurants.

**; Other Culinary Signs and Omens:** The U.S. government, busily removing native species from the endangered list, did recognize that a species actually can go extinct and embargoed beluga caviar from the Caspian anarchies formerly part of the USSR. Well-farmed sturgeon roes from Europe and the U.S. are filling in the gap, at the same old high prices. Just proves that Cheney, G.W., and their good ol' boys don't eat caviar, since its only oil is fish oil.

Then too, five years ago, the 30th Street corridor was "from hunger." This year alone, Apertivo, Lefty's Pizza, the Linkery, Spread, Tazablanca, the upcoming Vagabond, and Zensei all moved in, plus there's a gourmet deli/wine shop, Grant's Marketplace (2953 Beech, west of 30th Street, 619-231-0524) with Bread & Cie bread (if you get there early enough), Aidells sausages, Asento pastas, Thai Kitchen curry pastes, etc., albeit at "gentry" prices. On the other hand: The Albertsons originally announced to open in the East Village is this month still a hole in the ground, while the Gala supermarket on Fern is rumored to be doomed to be replaced by condos. Trader Joe's, Henry's -- Brother, where art thou?

Oh, and Happy New Year, all. The sun will rise again!