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The Year's Best Bites

By [Naomi Wise](#) | Published Thursday, Dec. 30, 2004

I eat in at least 50 restaurants a year -- more often, 65 and up. Some you read about; others prove too short-lived or too awful to merit ink.

The "Bests" list here reflects only meals that I've eaten during the last 12 months. Most of these restaurants opened within the last 16 months, but unlike (say) movies, which are preserved on DVD in their original versions, restaurants change over time, so I periodically recheck old favorites to see whether they still deserve the laurels earned long ago. Some classic restaurants that have maintained their standards are included below. But don't look here for a single "Best Restaurant" or "Best Chef." Great cooking comes in such a multitude of forms and genres, I can't squeeze it into absolutes.

Best New Restaurant: China Max (4698 Convoy Street at Engineer Road, Kearny Mesa, 858-650-3333). The "Best New Restaurant" is also the best Chinese restaurant I've found in San Diego. Close your eyes and open your mouth -- you could be eating in Hong Kong, arguably the culinary capital of the East. Addictive Peking duck, lacquered "crispy fried" squab, and live-tank seafood are among the attractions -- equally impressive is the wide array of homey south Chinese "peasant" dishes rarely found on local bills of fare. In an area where most Chinese restaurants offer cookie-cutter menus of goopy, *guai lo*-adapted favorites, China Max stands out for its clear regional identity, lucid cooking, and a menu all its own.

Most Creative New Restaurant: Asia-Vous (417 W. Grand Avenue, Escondido, 760-747-5000). This is fusion master Riko Bartolome's triumphant North County homecoming, in (at last!) a restaurant of his own. Freed from corporate bondage, Riko has unleashed his creativity, resulting in a number of extraordinary dishes, such as sweetbread morsels matched with sweet Chinese sausage, and airy potato gnocchi sauced with lobster and vanilla. His larder of rare ingredients includes pampered Kurobata pork, and *moi*, a Hawaiian fish formerly reserved for royalty. To eat royally here, you won't need ermine robes -- the atmosphere and prices are more bistro than big-bucks bash. A terrific and affordable wine list complements the high-adventure cooking.

Best Berkeley Restaurant in San Diego: Region (3671 Fifth Avenue at Pennsylvania, Hillcrest, 619-299-6499). Chef Michael Stebner and co-chef/owners Allyson Cowell and Jack Fisher at Region have created San Diego's closest culinary approximation to Berkeley's famed Chez Panisse. This is a deceptively simple style of cooking that showcases the flavors of natural ingredients. The wine choices -- eccentric, adventurous, and not necessarily expensive -- are a fine match for the cuisine. Packed houses almost every night prove that San Diego is more than ready for this culinary rigor. (Now that Region is so successful, my

New Year's wish for it is carpeting, drapes, and a soundproof ceiling, so that patrons can concentrate on the exquisite food, not the next table's business.)

Best New Ethnic Restaurant: Pomegranate (2302 El Cajon Boulevard, northeast corner at Louisiana, University Heights, 619-297-4007). Our one and only Georgian restaurant is a more-than-welcome addition, serving the zesty, spicy cooking of the Slavic deep south. Co-owner/chef Jon Skorepa is a food scholar, with a distinctive culinary heritage that counts among its joys a spectacular, meaty borscht (no resemblance to the bottled stuff), rich stews, and juicy house-smoked trout. The menu gives merely a hint of the final dish, cooked daily according to his mood. What's more, the decor is a comedy show, with odd objects dangling from the ceiling and multilingual graffiti on the walls and beams.

Best Remake: Chive (558 Fourth Avenue near Island, Gaslamp district, 619-232-4483). The old Chive was wonderful, but now, with chef Fabrice Poigin (most recently of Bertrand at Mr. A's) taking charge of the kitchen, it features a new cuisine for the upscale residential neighborhood rising around it. Diners can choose an adventure meal or enjoy an evening of sophisticated comfort food. Urbane multicultural fusions dance cheek to cheek with remade American classics and the occasional sleek French luxury dish. A new "grazing menu" offers small bites for folks on a diet or on the run.

Best Restaurant to Take Visitors from Dubuque: Coronado Boathouse 1887 (1701 Strand Way, Coronado, 619-435-0155). If you're entertaining food-fearing in-laws and want a good meal without spending a fortune, put on your aloha shirt and head over the Coronado Bridge (itself an eyeful for visitors). The old Coronado Boathouse boasts a handsome Victorian structure that mirrors the nearby Hotel Del, plus enthusiastic servers, water views, and satisfying mainstream American cooking. The herbed artichoke appetizer was among my favorite appetizers this year, and I loved the macadamia-crust ed halibut, the Prime-grade roast beef, and a molten chocolate cake made with dark Belgian chocolate.

Best Service: Grant Grill (U.S. Grant Hotel, 326 Broadway from Third to Fourth, downtown, 619-232-3121). Like well-aged Bordeaux wines, the waiters are mature, mellow, food-friendly, and serve with finesse. They don't want to be actors when they grow up, and they don't want to be surfing instead of serving. They're skilled professionals and do everything within reason to increase your comfort and pleasure.

Best Dim Sum: Jasmine Bistro (Parkway Plaza, 315 Parkway Plaza, at Fletcher Parkway and the 67 Freeway, El Cajon, 619-588-8228). Dim sum is always fun -- but Jasmine Bistro pushes this art form one step beyond. Unlike the mass-feedings at huge and crowded dim-sum pagodas, the kitchen here makes small, fresh batches, which you can order using point-and-shoot from a laminated picture menu, as well as from rolling steel carts that change their assortments at every round. Delicious either way.

Best Beef Entrée: Wine-Braised Short Rib with Smoked Mashed Potatoes at George's at the Cove Fine Dining Room (1250 Prospect Street, La Jolla, 858-454-4244). My dinner at George's proved among this year's most pleasurable experiences, and a highlight of chef Trey Foshee's menu is the short rib of USDA Prime beef -- rarely used in braised dishes because of its cost; the difference in grade is palpable in the richness of this often-tough cut. It's a finer meaty treat than the whole year's worth of Gaslamp steaks combined. And the smoked mashed potatoes under the rib are startling, reminding your palate to pay attention.

Best New Burger: Frozen Kobe-style beefburgers (Trader Joe's and elsewhere, about \$8 per one-pound package of two patties). These burgers, made from ultra-tender beef raised on Idaho's Snake River Farm, are

showing up at restaurants all over town. If you're willing to cook your own, their retail price is less than half what restaurants charge. Sauté or grill them fast -- the meat should be as rare as you can handle -- or consider using them raw (freshly defrosted) for steak tartare. And remember: Pampered cows don't get mad.

Best New Peruvian Restaurant: El Dorado (311 Palomar at Third Avenue, Chula Vista, 619-426-4545). Several authentic Peruvian dishes cooked with skill justify the trip. *Papa rellena* is potato bliss, a football-shaped patty of creamy mashed potatoes wrapped around a filling of lean ground beef and condiments, then deep fried to create a millimeter-thick layer of crunchiness. *Seco de cabrito*, baby goat stew, offers a complex explosion of flavors, including cilantro. The kitchen also makes a mean ceviche and yummy fried bananas.

Best New Thai Restaurant: Rama (327 Fourth Avenue, near K Street, Gaslamp District, 619-501-8424). The more spacious sibling of the marvelous Celadon Thai outshines its big sis, with the same exhilarating dishes, plus a few new ones. The *Tom Kha*, hot-sour coconut milk soup, is beyond rich -- made from fresh coconuts. This is the secret of many of the curries, too. The menu bravely offers less popular (but equally delicious) authentic dishes such as *Gai Qua*, chicken with broad, flat noodles and a slightly sweet sauce based on palm sugar, and the wicked *Kanna Moo Krob*, a tasty fat-fest made with unsmoked bacon.

Most Delicious Sculpture in the Medium of Fish: Pearl (11666 Avena Place at Webb Park, Rancho Bernardo, 858-487-3388). This extraordinary dish looks like a dish mop with sponge rubber "fingers." It's an edible sculpture made from Chilean sea bass, with fish-flesh rising from the skin like an onion flower. Lightly baked to form a crust over the tender meat, it's served sprinkled with pine nuts and dots of melon -- and tastes even more fabulous than it looks. Pearl, a spin-off of Emerald on Convoy Street, also deserves kudos for excellent dim sum, including a superb shark-fin soup dumpling: A concentrated broth (poultry-based but with hints of seafood) surrounds a translucent purse of the thinnest possible won ton noodle dough. Break it open and out pours minced and shredded mystery ingredients, with multiple textures and fascinating flavors.

Best Dungeness Crab: "Special Sauce" Dungeness Crab at Phuong Trang Vietnamese Seafood Restaurant (5296 University Avenue at 53rd Street, central San Diego, 619-582-0603; 4170 Convoy Street, Kearny Mesa, 858-565-6750). The crab is live when you order it -- you can even shake hands -- and sauced with tamarind, a sweet-tangy fruit paste that glazes the stir-fried shells and meat. The top shell, perched over the chopped limbs, is stuffed with the coral (roe), tomalley (liver), and stray crabmeat bits, bound into a substantial omelet that's hard-glazed with the same exuberant sauce.

Best Sushi: Taka (555 Fifth Avenue, Gaslamp, 619-338-0555). As sushi bars multiply in the Gaslamp (along with everywhere else), Taka remains the local standard, with impeccably fresh seafood, perfect rice, and exquisite technique.

Best Dessert: Sweets are not my strong suit, so this is a hard category for me. Most people crave a sweet ending to a meal, especially chocolate -- which I find boring unless it's exceptional. My choice is the trembling, airy *panna cotta* made by Jack Fisher of Region (3671 Fifth Avenue at Pennsylvania, Hillcrest, 619-299-6499) -- who also makes his own cheese.

Cheesecake on Parade: Speaking of cheese, cheesecakes are rising to prominence, perhaps finally replacing the last decade's exhausted parades of *crème brûlée* and *tiramisu*. The year's most exciting renditions were Laurel Huffnagel's daring Brie cheesecake at California Cuisine (1027 University, Hillcrest, 619-543-0790), Damaso Lee's bewitching pistachio-crust ed honey-orange ricotta cheesecake at Trattoria Acqua (1298

Prospect Street, La Jolla, 858-454-0709), and Hannes Cavin's airy New York cheesecake at New Leaf (Hilton Gaslamp Hotel, 401 K Street, Gaslamp District, 619-702-8280).

Best Spot for Espresso and Dessert: Assaggio (835 Fourth Avenue, between the two Bandars, Gaslamp, 619-234-6538). Open nightly until 11:00 p.m., Assaggio is a great place to stop for dessert and coffee after a movie or play. It offers house-made desserts, fresh from the day's baking, including a poufy spongecake concoction called *dolce di crema* (resembling Latin *tres leches*) and an authentic tiramisu restrained enough to remind you of why this sweet got popular. The espresso is outstanding, both in its Italian beans and the "barista" technique. Even the decaf version tastes the way coffee smells.

Best Local Sweet: Chuao Chocolates (the Lumberyard, 937 South Coast Highway, Encinitas, 760-635-1444; Westfield Shoppingtown UTC, 4465 La Jolla Village Drive, 858-546-1463; www.chuaochocolatier.com). Sublimely complex Venezuelan chocolate meets creative fillings, such as passionfruit-caramel and ginger-green tea. And then there's the irresistible passionfruit gel candy. Wow.

Best French Toast: Brockton Villa (1235 Coast Boulevard, La Jolla, 858-454-7393). Confession: Only rarely do I enjoy breakfast in restaurants, unless that meal is their forte, so I can't honestly name any overall "Best Breakfast." But I do know French toast and regard Brockton Villa's "Coast Toast" as the Platonic ideal of the genre -- slabs of fluffy Italian bread soaked overnight and baked to a chewy crust, with the interior texture of a soufflé and the alluring flavor of orange liqueur.

"A Sucker Born Every Minute" Booby Prize: Osetra (904 Fifth Avenue at E, Gaslamp District, 619-239-1800). The most expensive restaurant in metropolitan San Diego (and maybe the whole county) has become the hottest ticket, with reservations taken six weeks ahead of time. What do you get for your money? Well, there's a Las Vegas atmosphere, with glitzy decor and a "wine angel" in black tights hoisting herself up and down a glass tower to fetch your precious bottle. If you are a celebrity, an identified restaurant reviewer, or if you start your meal with the caviar plate (indicating your intention to spend grandly), you may get decent service. If none of the above, then probably not. The cooking? After seven-person meals on two evenings, we were more impressed by the angel than the food.

THE YEAR IN FOOD

The big item in food news this year happened in a single neighborhood: The Gaslamp has been transformed. The opening of Petco Park, along with the upgrading of hotels near the Convention Center, has brought lasting changes. The parking problems on game nights have eased with the completion of several new lots, but once Gaslamp parking prices were jacked up to \$10--\$15, few ever came back down again. Unless you go to a hotel restaurant with validated parking, the price of a night out has risen. There's also a difference in the style of restaurants that dominate the area. Plenty of the old Italian restaurants still survive, but they no longer own the streets. The simple steak-and-seafood formula favored by conventioners now pervades Fifth Avenue from the Convention Center all the way to Broadway, and it's making inroads on Fourth (Fleming's, Oceanaire) and Sixth (McCormick & Schmick's).

Other new Gaslamp restaurants -- Ra Sushi, Mister Tiki's, Osetra, Yard House, and the Latin Room among them -- are more "sceneries" than eateries, with distinctive decor, pounding music, and at least as much creativity lavished on their cocktails as their cookery. Last year's opening of the "W" proved that the Cafe Japengo singles crowd will gladly come downtown on weekends; this new crop aims to entice them to the hub.

A few blocks eastward, more drastic changes are in store. As luxury condos overrun the old East Village, we can expect to see an explosion of ground-floor restaurants, cafés, and coffeehouses to feed their hungry, overworked residents. I doubt that these will be magnet restaurants. Market Street, I predict, will become a longitudinal, inside-out food court (with eateries facing the street, rather than the mall's center) from 6th to 16th, with a plethora of "casual" and ethnic fast food, takeout, and delivered food of the pizza-gyros-fish tacos ilk. The one piece of good news: Albertsons is building a square-block-sized supermarket (including parking) in the heart of E-Ville, a neighborhood where, currently, if you like to cook, you could starve.

The other local trend is the increasing pace of the game of "musical toques," a swirl of ownership changes and chefs moving from one restaurant to another to...I'm not going to detail it here. I've covered it all year, and it's too exhausting to revisit.

Restaurant Obits: Very sad RIPs to 808, the Third Corner, Cafe 828, and the venerable DB Hacker's fish'n'chips joint in Encinitas. Laurel (its entrance and nearby parking blocked by construction for several months) is reportedly up for sale, if the owners can find a taker with money to burn. *Sic transit gloria mundi* -- it'll be painful if we lose our Laurel to yet another (yawn) steakhouse.