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2009: THE YEAR IN DINING

Restaurants embrace a blend of cutting edge and tradition

By HEIDI KNAPP RINELLA



It has been both a sad and exciting year for Las Vegas restaurants.

My annual Top 10 list encompasses only the restaurants I've reviewed during the past year, and as I was perusing this year's list, I noticed that several potential Top 10 candidates had closed their doors, in most cases because of the dismal economy. A few other promising places shut down before I could even get there.

At the same time, there have been several openings by brave souls willing -- or more willing than usual -- to cast their economic fates to the desert winds, and I salute them. Then there's CityCenter, which has brought a couple of dozen -- give or take, and depending on how you count them -- new, and in most cases exciting, restaurants to the city, further reinforcing Las Vegas' place as a leading dining destination.

And so, as we lament the former, celebrate the latter and hope for a better 2010, here is my list of the best local restaurants this year:

RESTAURANTS

1. Switch
2. Burger Bar
3. Off the Strip
4. Raku
5. Pips
6. Origin India
7. Bouchon
8. Hugo's Cellar
9. Marche Bacchus
10. The Peppermill

1. SWITCH, Wynn Las Vegas, 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. South -- The walls change -- I mean completely change -- and the ceiling sort of folds in on itself to morph its appearance, but the spectacular visuals never overshadow the creative, perfectly prepared food and flawless (yet welcoming) service.

2. BURGER BAR, Mandalay Place, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South -- Ask a skilled French chef -- that would be Hubert Keller -- to turn his attention to a great American tradition and you get burgers that glorify the very concept.

3. OFF THE STRIP, 10670 Southern Highlands Parkway -- This is a neighborhood restaurant that sure doesn't feel -- or taste -- like one, but its ambitions don't preclude the preparation of a darn good meatloaf.

4. RAKU, 5030 Spring Mountain Road -- The perennially vilified soybean curd has never tasted as good as it does in the form of the agedashi tofu at Raku, a jewel box tucked into a strip shopping center, which continues its perfectionist touch with the rest of the menu.

5. PIPS CUCINA & WINE BAR, Aliante Station, 7300 Aliante Parkway, North Las Vegas -- Longtime local food-and-wine guru Rino Armeni finally opened his own place at Aliante Station, where he successfully combines old-time family favorites and modern tastes.

6. ORIGIN INDIA, 4480 Paradise Road -- This year's visit was for the what-a-deal happy hour, but whenever we've dined there, Origin India's British-colonial fusion has been a pleasing, flavorful journey.

7. BOUCHON, The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South -- Every detail gets an inordinate -- but in a good way -- amount of attention in this Thomas Keller boite that tries to look authentic without going overboard, and honors the classics while providing more than a few nods to modern sensibilities. And the breads and pastries are spectacular.

8. HUGO'S CELLAR, Four Queens, 202 Fremont St. -- The king of downtown Las Vegas, Hugo's Cellar is straight from the old school, without even a whiff of the new Las Vegas. That's just fine, though, because when it comes to the best of old Vegas, Hugo's wears it well.

9. MARCHE BACCHUS, 2620 Regatta Drive -- It was down for a while, but Marche Bacchus came roaring back under the toque of chef Jean Paul Labadie, whose updated-French menus make a happy marriage indeed with the retail shop's wines (and at a reasonable \$10 corkage).

10. PEPPERMILL, 2985 Las Vegas Blvd. South -- The look is Jetsons-land-on-a-Southern-plantation, the food is consistently good, the portions generous, the prices reasonable -- especially for the Strip! -- and the feel is so only-in-Vegas, what's not to love?

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