

Top tables

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10 new restaurants that most resonated in 2016



AROUND THE WORLD | The lamb loin at Flora Street Cafe, above, is just one of the dishes that made it the restaurant of the year. Other highlights: the katsudon cutlet at Top Knot, below; the handmade ricotta ravioli ragu at Sprezza, top opposite; and the trompo tacos and combination quesadillas at Trompo, bottom. (Photography by Arnold Wayne Jones and Kevin Marple)

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Restaurants are an oddly egalitarian pop culture phenomenon. TV shows can “find” their audiences in reruns, movies’ success can depend on good

marketing and distribution, but then be later discovered on cable or Netflix and gain a new life. But restaurants are chimeras. They are not static, like a film or a CD or a season of a TV show; they change depending upon many factors, from their staffs to the training to the attention of the chef to the menu to the neighborhood. Even the greatest of them eventually shutter. And even the best — as far as critics are concerned, at least — can fail to catch on with diners, depending on parking or price point or just the death of buzz.

A critic can only say what makes a great restaurant (or a bad one); what we cannot do is make you like it (if you have preferred deep-dish Chicago pizza since childhood, no amount of prose can convince you thin NYC style is superior, no matter how many adjectives we layer on like pepperonis). And a caravan of effusive encomiums can't predict the future — my waiter happened to make a great wine recommendation; your experience may vary.

It's why I call my year-end list Top Tables, because these are the new restaurants (usually since about Autumn 2015 and ending 12 months later, though there are some exceptions from late 2016; but look for many late-2016 openings — Kabuki, Sugarbacon Proper Kitchen Lakewood, HG Sply Co. Fort Worth, Flying Fish, TorTaco, V-Eats Modern Vegan, Beto & Son and a host of others — to be considered for my 2017 list) that captured dining in Dallas in the previous year. (Just missing this year's list: Julia Pearl, Whistle Britches, Street's Fine Chicken, 18th & Vine BBQ and Tacodeli.)

There might be better meals out there, or fancier décor, or slicker service, but not necessarily places that stuck with me more regarding my dining life. I stand by all of them.

Restaurant of the Year:

Flora Street Café by Stephan Pyles

The naming of Stephan Pyles' Flora Street Café as the best restaurant of the year is less a selection than an inevitable apotheosis, a kind of beatification or consecration of what really set North Texas' dining scene apart in 2016. It wasn't a question of being "good" or "better than someone else;" it was a

matter of absolute culinary perfection, the kind that gave Pyles his reputation in the first place. (He cribbed the name from his first success, Routh Street Café — a reminder that as far as he's come, he's not far from his roots.)

There's the décor — a wall of glass windows bring the tree-lined parts of Flora Street into the building itself; a whimsical light fixture pops from the ceiling like a perpetually blooming flower — which only enhances the sense of harmony between nature and man's mastery of it in the form of culinary wizardry. There's the warm, coddling elegance that makes you feel instantly ensconced in attentiveness. There are the subtle touches (small, discrete barrels upon which female diners may set their purses; the check, delivered rolled in a block of wood with a pen included, like some 18th-century scrivener's desk set; the canelles of sweet butter) that add classiness.

And then, of course, there is the food itself, more curated than prepared. Each category (starters, entrees, desserts) is accompanied by a literary quote or poem as refined as the execution. Pyles' renowned affinity for south-of-the-border delicacies (huitlacoche in the empanadas, cod prepared escabeche-style) elevated with his exacting standards transform even a prosaic fisherman's dish like ceviche into a winding rope of amberjack specked with mango-lilikoi reduction and Marcona almonds.

This isn't going to be your daily lunch hangout or a casual dinner date. It feels like an event. I guess because it is.

2330 Flora St. FloraStreet.com.

The Rest

2. Top Knot. Last year's No.1 restaurant, Uptown's fine-dining sushi success Uchi, figures again this year with Top Knot, its upstairs sister restaurant. You have to respect the culinary lineage of these two. At Top Knot, the most common items are elevated to gourmet status (French toast gets a Thai twist at brunch, for instance). The kitchen is adept at taking food down inventive rabbit holes. If you've never tried katsudon (rice topped with a breaded cutlet and gently fried egg), you're missing out on an essential Japanese dish rarely



The katsudon at Top Knot



The handmade ricotta ravioli ragu at Sprezza

found in North Texas. And you can wash all of it down with a well-priced cocktail menu with choices like pampalousse and whiskey punch. It's all top-knotch. *2817 Maple Ave. TopKnotDallas.com.*

3. **Filament.** Matt McCallister (a protégé of Stephan Pyles) is one of Dallas' bright lights in the cheffy constellation, someone who takes many risks — some of which don't always pay off, but which get you excited in their high-wire-act ballsiness. That's how it seems at Filament, his Deep Ellum diner — part warehouse, part shabby-chic Southern manse. From the New Orleans-inspired tile floor to the old-fashioned accessories, you feel at home with the menu that reinvents country classics. The barbecue chicken is glazed in DrPepper sauce; the shrimp and grits Mexicanized with chipotle. Then there are outside-the-box items like the bonito flake johnnycake, dancing evanescently on the plate. Perfect — the food here not only moves, it moves you. *2626 Main St. FilamentDallas.com.*

4. **Sprezza.** A blind spot in Dallas cuisine has always been excellent high-end Italian food. Pizza? Yes. A good paparadelle here and there? Certainly. But consistent hand-crafted Italian? You can count them on one hand. But now you need to

go to your thumb: Sprezza, which contributed to the resto renaissance in Oak Lawn (it has given buzz to Maple Avenue along with neighbor 18th & Vine BBQ, which just missed my finalists). The secret of great pasta is the rustic texture, which is designed specifically to grip various sauces, oils and vegetables to their highest flavor usage; these handmade ravioli, triangoli, bucatini and more accentuate the fresh flavors and the richness of the in-house bolognese, the shaved pecorino, the creamy burrata. You enjoy these treats (which evolve with a tweaked menu almost daily) in a bright, light-filled dining room with a large, inviting bar. Bravo! 4010 Maple Ave. *SprezzaDallas.com*.



Trompo tacos and combination quesadillas at Trompo



The new Kitchen LTO space, above, provides an even better neutral canvas for the art and food than its Trinity Groves incarnation. (Arnold Wayne Jones/Dallas Voice)

5. **Trompo.** So, great restaurants have a great location, superior service, warm atmosphere, an extensive menu and a laudable wine list, right? Well, not so much. Sometimes they are a total hole-in-the-wall that offers bottle of Topo Chico through a window and delivers your meal in a polyurethane clamshell. At least, that's how they do it at Trompo, a taqueria I adopted early (I was its first-ever customer, as well as first-ever reviewer) and have not lost my passion for. Owner Luis Olvera makes a small menu of three tacos and thee quesadillas, either with trompo (a vertical rotisserie of paprika-spiced pork, sliced onto a hot tortilla and grill-finished), bistek (sliced beef) or paneer-and-nopales (vegetarian), garnished lightly (cheese is added for the quesadillas) and with housemade salsas adding heat. It's simplicity turned into taste-bud porn: Sensual, satisfying, unique. Olvera will be opening a new version in Oak Cliff this year with slightly-expanded offerings and seating, but we'll always fondly recall our first love. *839 Singleton Blvd.*

6. **The Theodore.** Where Filament focusses specifically on Southern cuisine,

chef Tim Byers — himself a Southern-influenced cook — takes a broader American approach to the food at The Theodore. There's chicken and waffles (coconutty!) for the Dixie fans, but also a traditional New England lobster roll, fluffy fish and chips and perhaps the best meatball appetizer I've had this decade. It's an eclectic menu (including inventive cocktails) that surprises with each mouthful. *NorthPark Center, 8687 N. Central Expressway. TheTheodore.com.*

7. Grayson Social. My initial impression of Grayson Social was a slight puzzlement. The website has no thorough menu listed, and the cocktail list looked extensive but overly sweet and directionless. I went in, frankly, as a skeptic. I emerged a convert. The drinks do tend a bit to the floral side, but not unduly so, and they have a hand-crafted quality that makes the bar menu fun to explore. But chef Daniel Tarasevich has designed some big-idea dishes with a Southern flair. (With Filament, The Theodore, Kitchen LTO, Mudhen Meats & Greens, Julia Pearl, Whistle Britches, here and elsewhere, redux Southern cooking was probably the major theme of 2016... other than tacos. See elsewhere on this list.) Look for a full review soon. *1555 Main St. GraysonSocial.com.*

8. Montlake Cut. 2016's first major restaurant opening remained one of the year's best, and the principal reason is probably authenticity. Nick Badovinus was already known for his casual concepts with high-end execution of comfort foods at popular spots like Neighborhood Services and The Porch. But this seafood-centric resto — which overtook the same space as the similarly-themed Spoon — may be his most personal place yet, a Valentine to his Pacific Northwest upbringing. Take, for instance, the NW clam chowder, a piping and potent stew of al dente cubes of russet potatoes (the signature tuber of the Northwest), chewy clams, salty-peppery lardons of bacon and a great crunch from, I suspect, celery and onion — it's his mom's recipe, so I'd never ask outright. But that's the kind of hominess that gives a restaurant heart: Montlake Cut even serves coffee from a Seattle roaster ... and it's not Starbucks. Like I say: Authenticity. *8220 Westchester Drive.*

9. Kitchen LTO (v2.0). Technically, this restaurant opened “too late” to be on this list, but it worked its way on for several reasons: First, it’s the re-launch of a concept that closed in 2016 (in Trinity Groves) and emerged in November in Deep Ellum, so there’s a history here. Second, the very nature of the concept is to re-invent itself every six months, so wait too long and you’ll miss what it’s all about: New and exciting food and décor. It’s a risky proposition, but proprietress Casie Caldwell has upped her game with this new iteration. The space is more tailored to her vision — more warmth, more intimacy — and current chef Josh Harmon has gussied up some dishes (miso-praline bacon, as decadent as it sounds), done playful takes on others and generally created a kind of culinary playground. *2901 Elm St.*

KitchenLTO.com.

10. Resident Taqueria. I swooned over more than one taco joint this year. There’s a talent to tell a story on a pallete as small as a tortilla. But the three-dollar tacos at Resident Taqueria, on the secluded side of a corner strip mall in northeast Dallas, are as thoughtfully conceived and executed as you’d find at the nicest Parisian brasseries — they are artfully magnificent mini-meals.

They are sizeable, first off, and three can take you through a tasting tour of the diversity and complexity of a great taco. The glazed pork belly perches like a queen atop a bed of lightly-vinegared slaw and coins of cucumber, crowned by a tiara of microgreens. It’s a taco of surprising beauty, but the rich flavors justify your decision to stop lookin’ and start eatin’. A tremendous mound of slow-cooked pulled chicken with peanuts and mole almost overwhelms the tensile strength of the single tortilla, so wolf it down quickly. And vegans should appreciate the caramelized cauliflower with kale chips and lemon epazote aioli, with a choice of smoky guajillo, tangy verde or spicy arbol salsas. *9661 Audelia Road. ResidentTaqueria.com.*

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