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## A year of delicious dining

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**Memo:** The Best of 2009

Just about this time last year, in my year-end column, I chided restaurants for not stepping up to the plate and dishing out some real bargains, considering the tanked economy and all. I would like to think they got the message, because 2009 will go down as the year when you could actually see dollar signs dropping all over the culinary landscape. I am suggesting that all these better deals allowed customers to dine out a little more (even if they were spending a little less), and the result probably kept a lot of restaurants from biting the dust. I think this synergy will continue right on into 2010. Another trend that bodes well for delicious dining experiences is that celebrity chefs are opening casual eateries. White tablecloths gave way to wood tops; top-chef know-how coupled with reasonable prices became a win-win situation. Rick Bayless opened XOCO next to his impossible-to-get-into other two restaurants (Frontera Grill and Topolobampo). Michael Kornick (MK, the Restaurant) opened MK Burger Bar on North Sheffield (instant hit); Paul Kahan (Blackbird, AVEC) opened Big Star on North Damen, a honky-tonk taco and tequila joint that hit a nerve and then some. Chef Bill Kim opened up two industrial chic joints called Belly Shack and Urban Belly. Culinary school graduate Doug Sohn, who opened Hot Doug's -- a get-in-line-and-wait (and wait) hot dog stand -- a short six years ago, was way ahead of this curve.

So, here is my annual "Best of" list, made up solely from restaurants reviewed here over the last 12 months. And here's to 2010, because it's very obvious the dining scene around here will continue to sizzle. In fact, I have no fewer than 15 new restaurants to try to get to in the winter months alone. Come on, guys -- I can only eat so fast.

#### TOP 10 DISHES OF 2009

I had a lot of great dishes in 2009, so picking only 10 wasn't easy, but for some reason these shine brightly:

- The Mac and Cheese with Chicken and Prosciutto at Kuma's Corner on West Belmont
- The Madagascar Shrimp at Cafe des Architectes on East Chestnut
- The Buddha's Crispy Rice at Sunda on West Illinois
- The Sampling of Calamari at Fred's at Barneys on East Oak
- The Sandwich Cubano at Siboney Cuban Cuisine on North Western Avenue
- The Malted Custard French Toast at Jam on North Damen
- The Monkfish Ossobuco at Pelago Ristorante on East Delaware
- The Chile en Nogada at Amelia's Bar & Grill on South Halsted
- The Lamb Casablanca at Shokran Moroccan on West Irving Park Road

#### RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR: LES NOMADES

The one-of-a-kind small zinc bar just inside the entryway at **Les Nomades** is a metaphor of the class act that goes along with a typical dinner in the impressive greystone building that houses one of Chicago's finest fine-dining restaurants. Seating is either downstairs or upstairs, and both rooms put you in a lap of luxury (but it's not a stuffy lap). Crisp tablecloths, spotless tableware and silver, and elegant, efficient service are just a few of the posh amenities.

The menu choices, which speak a bit of American but with a heavy French accent, are as creative as one could ask for: seared diver scallops, served with shred of braised oxtail and a puree of cauliflower; duck consomme with a brunoise of colorful and crisp root vegetables; herb-roasted Scottish salmon; slow-roasted veal tenderloin with pomme puree and a sauce Perigueux. For as long as I have been dining at this restaurant, I have never had a souffle that missed the mark.

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All the food at **Les Nomades** is, as the restaurant points out, "a fresh expression of French cuisine." Each dish on the menu has a foundation that is solidly French but does not leave it at that. Nuances and touches of that "fresh expression" flow through every dish, a gentle nod toward tempering the French just enough to bring it into the mainstream. **Les Nomades** is all about clarity and careful cooking without a crumb of contrivance.

"Cuisiner" Chris Nugent and proprietress Mary Beth Liccioni run a restaurant that is as European as you will find in the Midwest, and I applaud them for that and for not selling out to the latest trend to come down the road. "Real" never goes out of style, and that is another reason why I picked **Les Nomades** as my 2009 Restaurant of the Year.

Expect to spend \$90-\$110 a person.

- **Les Nomades**, 222 E. Ontario; (312) 649-9010

#### TOP 10 RESTAURANTS OF 2009

Here are the restaurants I thought had something extra special to offer in 2009. Food that was creative, yet not contrived; a lively atmosphere; first-rate service. In short: the Top Ten restaurants of 2009:

Sunda (110 W. Illinois,

312-644-0500)

Trendy sushi and sashimi aplenty, but some dim sum, "Asian grill" (pork, beef, kobe, chicken) and creative salads added to the raging popularity of this restaurant since its 2008 opening. Credit chef Rodelio Aglibot for the outstanding food and designer Tony Chi for the stylish fun-filled atmosphere (the glamorous sushi bar is worth a look-see on its own). Don't miss the lemongrass beef "lollipops" and "The Food Buddha's Classic Crispy Rice." Very impressive sake list and knowledgeable sake service.

Cafe des Architectes (20 E. Chestnut, Sofitel Chicago, 312-324-4000)

Top toque Martial Noguier moved his culinary skills from one sixtyblue to this restaurant in the fall of 2008 and didn't miss a beat. The chef is French, the hotel is French, but the menu manages to straddle, quite nicely, the contemporary American idiom (more Midwest than Marseilles). Not to say, however that there isn't a French accent that comes forth rather clear into more than a few dishes.

one sixtyblue (1400 W. Randolph, 312-850-0303)

Chef Michael McDonald has taken a firm hold on the kitchen, so the restaurant continues its tradition of excellence. The cuisine style is quite contemporary American, and over the year featured dishes that included leek gnocchi, braised sea scallops, rack of lamb, duck, breast, and cheesecake custard. The atmosphere is romantic and plush.

Spring (2039 W. North,

773-395-7100)

Spring continues to lure people who are looking for something special. While the core of the menu is contemporary American, many of the dishes incorporate Asian influences in a way that is solid and makes good sense, thanks to chef/partner Shawn McClain. Exemplary dishes include braised short rib dumpling, squash and brown butter won tons, black cod and coffee semifreddo.

MK, The Restaurant (868 N. Franklin, 312-482-9179)

Contemporary American food served in an urban-chic setting. While MK stands for owner/chef emeritus Michael Kornick, the kitchen shines in the capable hands of executive chef Erick Williams. Service is outstanding. The wine list is 29 pages long (and pricey).

Terzo Piano (Art Institute Modern Wing, Third Floor,

159 E. Monroe,

312-443-8650)

Chef Tony Mantuano and his team have put together a menu that is a masterful blend of contemporary American and modern Italian. The dining room is a wall of windows and offers great views of the city to the east and the west. The atmosphere is modern minimalist and white from table to chairs to walls. Exemplary dishes include smoked whitefish, antipasto, spaghetti with mushrooms, raviolotto and almond financier.

Sepia (123 N. Jefferson,

312-441-1920)

Andrew Zimmerman took over as chef in the summer of 2008. The food is contemporary American with an emphasis on upper-level flavor profiles. I note as an example the fillet of monkfish wrapped in Serrano ham with Manila clams, judion beans and a piperade of tomato and bell pepper -- truly an outstanding piece of work. The atmosphere is a melange of rustic and Art Nouveau. Service is some of the best in the city.

Coco Pazzo (300 W. Hubbard; 312-836-0900)

Holding its own and then some after 17 years, this smart, yet casual, ristorante is a paradigm for la vera cucina Italiana -- the true cooking of Italy - under the watchful eye of executive chef Chris Macchia. The loftlike atmosphere belies the depth of pure comfort and excellent service that flows throughout. Exemplary dishes include polpo all griglia, garganelli con vitello risotto and semifreddo.

Cibo Matto (Wit hotel, 201 N. State; 312-239-9500)

This restaurant took off like a rocket. The translation of the name is "crazy food," and it seems that everyone (including this writer) went crazy over the food. The chef is Todd Stein, and he fashioned a menu of Italian dishes that are approachable, carefully done and simply delicious. The atmosphere is casual chic, from the open kitchen to the chef's table. Exemplary dishes include burrata, ravioli, braised short ribs of beef, seared trout and mascarpone semifreddo. Nice wine list.

Pelago Ristorante (201 E. Delaware, 312-280-0700)

First-class Italian food served in a pleasantly plush and intimate atmosphere (only 60 seats). Chef Mauro Mafri is a culinary maestro; his creations are deliciously conceived and elegantly presented. Exemplary dishes include trio of pastas (house made), monkfish ossobuco, roasted rolled pork and duck, and gianduiotto chocolate cake. The wine list features a small but nicely priced selection by the glass.

Read Pat Bruno's reviews of all these restaurants online at [www.suntimes.com/entertainment/dining](http://www.suntimes.com/entertainment/dining). E-mail him at [brunoeats@aol.com](mailto:brunoeats@aol.com). Color Photo: Keith Hale and John J. Kim, Sun-Times / The year's best dishes include (clockwise from top) the Madagascar Shrimp at Cafe des Architectes,... Color Photo: Keith Hale and John J. Kim, Sun-Times / ... the Malted Custard French Toast at Jam... Color Photo: Keith Hale and John J. Kim, Sun-Times / ... and Amelia's Chile en Nogada. Color Photo: Sun-Times / "Cuisiner" Chris Nugent propelled **Les Nomades** to the top of Pat Bruno's dining experiences... Color Photo: Sun-Times / ... in 2009 with dishes like duck consomme Color Photo: Keith Hale, Sun-Times / The seared trout is part of the food that's "crazy" good at Cibo Matto. Color Photo: Keith Hale, Sun-Times / Sunda chef Rodelio Aglibot shows off his scattered sashimi over Japanese gazpacho. Color Photo: Tom Cruze, Sun-Times / The Italian delights at Pelago include the monkfish ossobuco.

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