

HOUSTON'S DINING MAGAZINE
MY TABLE

February 2010

INSIDE MY TABLE #95 | RESTAURANT LISTINGS

2009's Best New Restaurants

Our selection of the year's best newcomers.

By Teresa Byrne-Dodge

There have been years when I really had to stretch to come up with the 10 Best New Restaurants. But 2009 was astonishing for its ambitious newcomers – and this in a city double-whammied with a late 2008 hurricane and The Great Recession. Maybe hardship brings out the best in us. So I was happy to expand the magazine's annual list to make it 15, because how do you choose between Valentino and Chez Roux or Branch Water Tavern and Haven? Here are 15 newcomers that you must try. (At the end of *2009's Best New Restaurants*, we have a list of the year's most significant closings.)

BISTRO ALEX, 800 W. Sam Houston Parkway in Hotel Sorella, 713-827-3545, bistroalex.com. Alex Brennan-Martin had this swanky Westside hotel restaurant already underway before a fire during Hurricane Ike destroyed Brennan's downtown. Many dishes on the Louisiana-accented menu here will seem familiar, including Brennan's legendary turtle soup. Downstairs, casual sibling Cafe Rosé serves lighter fare and breakfast. (By the way, Brennan's is expected to reopen very soon.)

BRANCH WATER TAVERN, 510 Shepherd south of Washington Ave., 713-863-7777, branchwatertavern.com. Gastropubs were one of the year's major trends, and chef David Grossman scores well by assembling a roster of American favorites (e.g. slow-roasted salmon, venison medallions) and giving each a little goose. Beverage director Evan Turner has fun with the bar side (we love his pretty vintage glassware) and is building a comprehensive list of American whiskies.

CANOPY, 3939 Montrose bet. Branard & Sul Ross, 713-528-6848, canopyhouston.com. Claire Smith and team, who have Shade in The Heights, opened this soaring space in December where Salud! Winery used to be. If you like Shade, you'll like this place, too, which features chef David Luna's grounded American menu. The soft greens and wood finishes in the dining room – it feels a bit like an upscale spa – might finally have tamed this awkward room. There's lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch, plus "grab-n-go" coffee and fresh-baked pastries for breakfast.

CHEZ ROUX, 600 La Torretta Blvd. in La Torretta Lake Resort & Spa, Montgomery, 936-448-4400, latorrettalakeresort.com. I worried about Chez Roux. Not the food, mind you, but whether the Lake Conroe area would/could support an expensive contemporary French restaurant. Yippee that chef Albert Roux's namesake (under the management of Matthew Gray, apparently the only Michelin Guide-rated chef in Texas) seems to be holding. Exquisite, finely detailed food and a lake view from the dining room.

EDDIE V'S, 12848 Queensbury Lane in CityCentre, 832-200-2380, eddiev.com. Yes, this is a chain, but you would be mistaken to hold that against them. Come here for dazzling seafood: parmesan-crusted lemon sole, steamed sea bass, a custom tower from the raw bar. The interior is sexy and rich, and there's an adjacent lounge with live jazz every evening. Bill Greenwood is the chef. Dinner only.

GIACOMO'S CIBO E VINO, 3215 Westheimer at Bammel Lane, 713-522-1934. Here are some of the things I like very much about Giacomo's: It's open all day. The little dishes (called cicchetti – think Italian-style tapas) are inexpensive (\$3 to \$9). I can assemble whatever crazy meal I'm in the mood for. Counter service means I can get in and out quickly. And the wine is very reasonably priced. There are dozens of temptations, such as grilled and marinated vegetables and meatballs, plus panini, pasta and soups. Stylish, quick and casual.

HAVEN, 2502 Algerian Way near Kirby & Hwy. 59, 713-581-6101, havenhouston.com. Chef Randy Evans (previously at Brennan's) has gone all locavore on us. In other words, the kitchen's foodstuffs are sourced locally (as much as possible), and the building is as green as it can be. There's even a prepared plot out back just waiting for tomato and pepper plants. The menu is sometimes a giggle (e.g. shrimp corn dogs with Meyer lemonade), always delicious (pork belly with cream peas, free-range chicken with bacon spaetzle).

HUYNH, 912 St. Emanuel at Walker, 713-224-8964. I like this plain-folks Vietnamese restaurant behind the George R. Brown for its gutsy home-style cooking. Annie Huynh is out front, suggesting dishes, explaining how mom (in the kitchen) invented them, even advising exactly how to eat to get the most enjoyment – e.g., stir up the mi quang thoroughly so that you have a little of the yellow noodles, pork, shrimp, fish cake and broth in each bite. It's also BYOB.

KATA ROBATA SUSHI & GRILL, 3600 Kirby at Richmond, 713-526-8858, katarobata.com. Houston-based Azuma Group – they have Soma and Azuma – struck out with their Hue concept in this location. They nimbly regrouped and launched a sushi spot instead, even scooping up chef Manabu “Hori” Horiuchi (formerly of Kubo's) to make it happen. Wow! The kitchen seems able to do almost anything, from traditional old-school sushi to breathtaking new variations of French-Japanese fusion cuisine.

POSCÓL VINOTECA E SALUMERIA, 1609 Westheimer just west of Mandell, 713-529-2797. Located in the old Cafe Montrose location, Gloria and Marco Wiles' Poscól takes up where their Dolce Vita leaves off, offering dozens of little dishes to sample and pass around the table. These are clustered on the menu under headings like cheese, vegetables, fried, seafood, risotto. It sounds casual, and it is, with Led Zep on the soundtrack. But the food will snap you to attention. The all-Italian wine list continues to grow.

RDG + BAR ANNIE, 1800 Post Oak Blvd. at Ambassador, 713-840-1111. The Schiller-Del Grande group closed Cafe Annie in June and two weeks later debuted this three-in-one concept town the street that includes the BLVD Lounge (cocktails and small bites), Bar Annie (onyx-sided bar, cozy banquettes and balcony patio) and the more traditional RDG Grill Room. The food preparation is a little less fussy now, and it seems like there's much more seafood on the menu. (I knew you'd wonder: Yes, you can still get Cafe Annie's tortilla soup.)

THE ROCKWOOD ROOM, 5709 Woodway bet. Chimney Rock & Bering, 832-251-9463, therockwoodroom.com. The Hollywood Rat Pack is the inspiration for this Tanglewood-area supper club from chef Michael Dei Maggi and business partner Robert Hall III. The vintage American cuisine includes steamers, shellfish chowder, prime rib, sausage and meatballs, and lobster tail. The brown and cream interior will make you feel like you're dining inside a Louis Vuitton handbag.

STELLA SOLA, 1001 Studewood at 10th St., 713-880-1001. This space – custom built for Robert Gadsby’s short-lived Bedford – got a quick overhaul last fall by chef Bryan Caswell and partner Bill Floyd (they own Reef) before bowing in as a Texas-Tuscan restaurant. (The name is Italian for “lone star.”) Justin Basye, previously with Voice, is the chef de cuisine, and he’s already become quite famous in the local food world for his charcuterie platter (a hot restaurant trend) and roasted marrow bones (ditto).

SUSHI RAKU, 3201 Louisiana at Elgin, 713-526-8885. With its sleek interior design (by Michael Hsu, who did Uchi in Austin) and a kitchen under the direction of Takayoshi Sekiguchi, this is 2009’s second outstanding Japanese newcomer. Chef Taka, as he is known, uses Western and Japanese techniques, melding them brilliantly, as with the single slice of fluke served with cubes of tomato water aspic, red pepper coulis, yuzu white soy and a tempura-fried shishito. Patrick Chiu, who also has Waza, is the owner.

VALENTINO HOUSTON & VIN BAR, 2525 West Loop South at Westheimer in the Hotel Derek, 713-850-9200, valentinorestaurant.com. California restaurateur Piero Selvaggio took over and revamped the old Bistro Moderne location this past summer, in effect re-setting the bar for Italian food in Houston. Chef Cunninghame West executes the modern Italian cuisine. Selvaggio is famous for the wine list at his Santa Monica restaurant, and he is building the Houston list as well.

FAREWELL

2009’s Most Significant Closings

Bedford, 1001 Studewood

Bistro 829, 829 S. Mason Road, Katy

Cafe Annie, 1728 Post Oak Blvd.

Cafe le Jadeite, 1952 West Gray

Isla Coqui, 1801 Durham

Jim Manning Catered Affairs, 3223 Houston Ave.

Jimmy Wilson’s Seafood, 5161 San Felipe

La Strada, 322 Westheimer

Las Alamedas, 8615 Katy Fwy.

Mak Chin, 1511 Shepherd

Mikado, 5709 Woodway

Out of Africa, 14019 Southwest Fwy., Sugar Land

Pan Y Agua, 3215 Westheimer

Pico’s Bakery & Taqueria, 5710 Bellaire Blvd.

RainDrop Chocolate, 810 Waugh

Rickshaw Far East Bistro, 2810 Westheimer

Sandy's Market, 12171 Katy Freeway

Sage, 2221 W. Alabama

Salud! Winery, 3939 Montrose

Tio Pepe, 5213 Cedar

Tookie's, 1202 Bayport Boulevard, Seabrook

Yatra Brasserie, 706 Main