

2004 restaurant awards

The best of this year's dining
BY ROBERT NADEAU



My main surprise in 2004 was that a restaurant recession mostly held off, and new openings continued at a rapid pace. The most expensive concepts, however, were held back in favor of restaurants that featured lower-ticket items or the potential for small plates. In a kind of rush to the middle, a number of fancier ethnic places also opened in 2004. That said, what's covered here ought to be quite different from where readers have been eating. As always, this column is about the places I *reviewed* this year, and not necessarily about those that *opened* since last January. Everyone in the know but me gets to use better strategies for eating: stick with the good places and learn their best plates; make friends with the staff and be treated like friends; avoid new restaurants until they settle out.

Although some of the following awards are for all-around excellence, there are very, very few great restaurants, but lots of great dishes. So most of the awards are for dishes. In a year without a major trend, there were some interesting minor ones. Restaurants don't usually improve, because the concept is the concept. But [Lucy's](#) improved by broadening its initial concept; [33](#) improved by focusing its original concept and reducing distractions; and [Koreana](#) improved despite a long hiatus after a fire. Restaurants often lose momentum in a move, but [Perdix](#) hit the South End running. I checked out a lot of Irish pubs in 2004, and found the food generally good to very good at the [Asgard](#), [Devlin's Bistro](#), the Kells, and [Orleans](#). The year also saw a brief run of successful-restaurant clones: [Vinalia](#) (like [Meritage](#)), [Buzkashi](#) (like the Helmand), and Family Restaurant (like the [Istanbul Café](#)). I hit two places with upscale Greek food last year. There was some resurgence in new Asian and fusion restaurants after a very thin 2003 reviewing year in those categories. And some dishes are getting ready for retirement: too many crême brûlées, too many beet-and-goat-cheese salads, way too many caesar salads, and enough grilled salmon to fill the Chicago stockyards.

And now, the envelopes.

Restaurant of the Year: [Tamarind Bay](#). At last, Indian food as good as the idea of Indian food, with some fusion worthy of the ideal of fusion, every dish distinct, and almost all wildly successful. It could have better desserts, however.

Non-Asian Restaurant of the Year: [Umbria](#).

Italian Restaurant Most Like Italy: [Il Bico](#).

Cheap Ethnic Restaurant of the Year: [Apollonia Café](#); At last, Albanian-Americans have a menu of their own. (Runner-up: [Café Polonia](#), where Polish-Americans have a menu of *their* own.)

Best Restaurant Meal I Didn't Review: I had a national-magazine assignment to choose four Boston restaurants, so I had to check last year's *Phoenix* pick for best restaurant — [Meritage](#) — to see if it was still good, of course. I had all three red-wine fish dishes, and all were outstanding, even with red wine! The national magazine killed the story, so *Phoenix* readers get the benefit.

Eighth Annual Howard Mitchum Memorial Medal for Innovation in Seafood Cookery: David Kinkead of [Sibling Rivalry](#), because it all starts in the market. It probably helps to have worked at KingFish Hall, but his opening menu at [Sibling Rivalry](#) had the checklist of important local seasonal seafood. Got the Nantucket Bay scallops? Check. Got the Halibut? Check. Got a piece of light, fluffy, meaty swordfish? Check.

Décor Prize: the Soirée room at [UpStairs on the Square](#), like Gauguin trying to work with Klimt.

Most Comfortable Restaurant of the Year: [the Enormous Room](#). Couch seating.

Appetizers of the Year: [Mezé Estiatorio](#). Well, they named the restaurant after the mezé platter, right? Anchored by superb taramasalata.

Best Fusion Appetizer: asparagus spring rolls at the [Ruby Room](#).

Best Trick Caesar: fallen (that is, wilted) caesar salad at [Lucy's](#).

Best Soup: tie: sancocho at [Lucy's](#); tomato shorba at [Tamarind Bay](#).

Best Unidentified Fried Object: fried slice of lemon in the fritto misto at the [Ruby Room](#).

Best Last of the Vertical Appetizers: fried squid at [Sibling Rivalry](#). Dishes get taller as the trend nears the end.

Best Trick Beet-and-Goat-Cheese Salad: tie: the version at [Grotto](#) with the beets and cheese made into mini sandwiches; the version at [Rustic Kitchen](#) with fennel pollen.

Best Raw Food: "Out of the Blue" at Blu, a quartet of brilliant morsels.

Funniest Name for an Appetizer: "Emerald Isle Nachos" at the Asgard.

Pasta of the Year: three-way tie: strongozzi umbri at Umbria; spaghetti alla chitarra at Amelia's Trattoria; agnolotti del plin at [Rustic Kitchen](#). (The readers protest: *Agnolotti del plin was last year's best meat entrée!* Nadeau replies: *This year I got to review another [Rustic Kitchen](#), and it felt more like a pasta. It's still meaty, all right.*)

Lobster of the Year: lobster with ginger and scallions at the Kells. I know it's just as good in Chinatown, but the accompanying Guinness in Chinatown isn't even close.

Fried Food of the Year: squid at [Quality Café](#).

Best Vegan Entrée: lala mussa dal at [Tamarind Bay](#). If you're there with carnivores, order two, because they'll want to share.

Best Carnivorous Entrée: three-way tie: braised veal breast at [West on Centre](#); moussaka at [Apollonia Café](#); chutney gosht at Rani.

Best Comfort Food: tie: pastitsio at [Mezé Estiatorio](#); Mighty Meatloaf at [Anthem](#).

Sandwich of the Year: "George's Meatloaf Sandwich" at [Noir](#).

Potatoes of the Year: lobster mashed potatoes at [Scollay Square](#).

Rice of the Year: [Aneka Rasa](#), both for the red rice and the coconut rice.

Best Weird Food: tie: ostrich stroganoff at [Lucy's](#); ganjajang noodles in black sauce at [Buk Kyung II](#).

Trick Salmon of the Year: [Equator](#)'s plate with grilled salmon, salmon sausage, and three sauces.

Best Topical Sushi: Red Sox maki at [Umi](#).

Hottest Food I Actually Liked: tie: mirchi ka salan at [Rani](#), which is a Hyderabadi curry of green chilies; wild curry at [Thai Thai Kitchen](#).

Garnish of the Year: squid rings like noodles on the halibut in the Soirée Room at [UpStairs on the Square](#).

Best Wines by the Glass: tie: [Scollay Square](#); [Amelia's Trattoria](#).

Chocolate Dessert of the Year: tie, but both at [Finale](#): the Manjari mousse versus

the two-person "Chocolate Bliss Combination." Runner-up: hot chocolate and cookies at [Perdix](#).

Best Ice Cream or Gelato: the trio at [Umbria](#), where pastry chef Lee Napoli makes a bowl of hazelnut brittle as handsome as art glass.

Trick Rice Pudding of the Year: Earl Grey rice pudding at [Cha Fahn Teahouse](#).

Funniest Dessert of the Year: fried Twinkies at [Anthem](#).

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