

Restaurants: The year in review

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Coming soon

The coming 12 months are full of dining-out promise.

The ambitious **Burch Steak** -- and its lower-level sibling, **Burch Pizza Bar** --the latest project from spouses Isaac Becker and Nancy St. Pierre (**112 Eatery**, **Bar La Grassa**) and business partner Ryan Burnet, is scheduled to debut in mid-February in what had been the longtime Lowry Hill home of Burch Pharmacy.

Smack Shack, chef Josh Thoma's long-awaited North Loop iteration of his popular lobster roll-focused food truck of the same name, is set to open Jan. 22.

The success of **Sea Salt Eatery** at Minnehaha Park, **Tin Fish** at Lake Calhoun and **Bread & Pickle** at Lake Harriet is paving the way for additional good-food opportunities in the Minneapolis parks. Next up? The shores of Lake Nokomis, where **Piccolo** top chef Doug Flicker will put his inimitable spin on picnic fare at **Sandcastle**.

The big news out of Robbinsdale is that the **Travail Kitchen and Amusements** team -- led by co-chefs Mike Brown, James Winberg and Bob Gerken -- is moving a few doors down. The roomier real estate means the addition of a bar/lounge for cocktails (another first) and casual drop-in fare. The six-month construction project is planned to begin in the spring.

Two Travail alums, Nick O'Leary and Tyler Shipton, are the creative team behind **Borough**, set to open in the North Loop on Jan. 2. Expect seasonally minded small plates upstairs and cocktails (by Jesse Held, formerly of **Eat Street Social**), snacks and desserts downstairs. Ownership also includes Brent Frederick and Jacob Toledo, partners in the **Maple Tavern** and the **Pourhouse**.

FireLake Grill House & Cocktail Bar is branching out to the Mall of America, inside the Radisson Blu hotel that's poised to open in March. Chef Paul Lynch has moved to Bloomington, and Jim Kyndberg (**Crave**, the former Bayport Cookery) is now running the show at the original downtown location.

Spill the Wine is busting a move from downtown to Uptown, at Lake St. and Bryant Av. S.; look for an April opening. Ann Kim of **Pizzeria Lola** will be entering slice-shop territory with **Hello Pizza**, aiming for a March opening.

The Broder family, which does business on two corners at 50th St. and Penn Av. S. in Minneapolis with its **Broders' Pasta Bar** (southwest corner) and **Broders' Cucina Italiana** (northwest corner), will be taking on a third -- the southeast corner -- with the advent of an evening-only wine bar/cafe in the former Pierre's Bistro space, debuting in the spring.

Coming in late spring to St. Paul's Grand Avenue: a branch of the **French Meadow Bakery & Cafe**, which is taking over the former Coffee News Cafe and an adjacent storefront.

Neighborhood revitalization project

South Minneapolis became a magnet for an unprecedented number of exciting and original new food-and-drink destinations, including the **Lynn on Bryant**, **Nightingale**, the **Gray House**, **Harriet Brasserie**, the **Kenwood**, **George & the Dragon** and **Pig & Fiddle**.



General manager Jake Uttich at the raw bar at the Oceanaire Seafood Room, which moved to well-situated quarters at 6th Street and Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis.

Tom Wallace, Star Tribune

Times two

A number of restaurateurs kept busy by opening second enterprises. Don Saunders of **In Season** took the Kenwood neighborhood by storm with, appropriately enough, the **Kenwood**. Stewart and Heidi Woodman of top-rated **Heidi's** crafted the eco-friendly **Birdhouse**. The **Be'wiched Deli** duo of Matthew Bickford and Mike Ryan launched music-focused (and pie-friendly) **Icehouse**. The gregarious **Northeast Social** went south to 26th and Nicollet with **Eat Street Social**, downtown's **Eli's** crossed the river with **Eli's East**, **Cafe Maude** owner Kevin Sheehy grabbed the former Nick and Eddie space and launched **Cafe Maude at Loring**, **Rusty Taco** expanded to northeast Minneapolis, No. 1-with-a-bullet gastropub **Republic** expanded into Calhoun Square, **Raku** doubled up in the Shops at West End, **Masu Sushi & Robata** planted a flag at the Mall of America, **El Burrito Mercado** debuted a branch at the Midtown Global Market and **Colossal Cafe** expanded into St. Anthony Park. **Al Vento** and **Rinata** chef/owner Jonathan Hunt outdid them all by forging his third concept, **Sparks**.

Thinking big

After an incredibly busy 2011, it would have been perfectly acceptable for **Crave** head honcho Kam Talebi to take a breather. But no. Instead, he revived the fabled **Figlio** name, transplanting it inside his short-lived Sopranos Italian Kitchen. Would the former Uptowner play well in the 'burbs? Judging by the crowds, the answer would be a resounding yes. In November, Talebi converted a blighted downtown building into **Union**, complete with a basement nightclub, a first-floor restaurant and bar (by chef-to-watch Jim Christiansen and libations monarch Johnny Michaels) and the rooftop to end all rooftops, its enormous square footage capped by an all-weather retractable glass roof that is surely inducing envy in Vikings owner Zygi Wilf.

On the move

The **Oceanaire Seafood Room** departed its longtime home deep inside the Hyatt Regency Hotel for street-level digs at 6th St. and Nicollet Mall, adding lunch service. **Bon Vie** moved back home to its parents' house -- otherwise known as **A Piece of Cake Bakery** -- and the restaurant's Selby Avenue square footage was reborn as the **French Hen Cafe**. The cramped Grand Av. S. quarters of **Butter Bakery Cafe** were left behind and relocated six blocks southeast to a sunnier -- and roomier -- Nicollet Avenue storefront. On the Minneapolis skyway, the **Burger Place** switched locales, and crowds followed.

On the street

One of the year's more exciting phenomena was the ever-burgeoning food truck scene. A constant influx of newcomers kept sidewalk superintendents happy (five favorites: **Ngon Bistro** and its retro-chic VW bus, **Bacon Trolley**, **Sayo**, **MidNord Empanada Truck** and Andrew Zimmern's **AZ Canteen**), and several outfits traded on their street experience and matriculated into bricks-and-mortar maturity, including **Foxy Falafel** and **El Primo** but most notably **Chef Shack**-ers Lisa Carlson and Carrie Summer, who popped open a weekend-only daytripping destination in Bay City, Wis. Then there was the lines-out-the-door debut of the Wadi brothers' **World Street Kitchen** (do not, under any circumstances, miss the Korean-style short ribs-kimchee rice bowl). Look for more curbside-to-dining room transitions in 2013, starting with **Smack Shack** and **Sushi Fix**.

Hennepin and Lake

Two corporate outsiders made a big splash in Uptown. Chicago-based **Primebar** -- and its 50-plus beer taps -- landed in the former Figlio spot in Calhoun Square, and **Bar Louie**, a franchise operation out of Dallas, brought its modern gastropub sensibility to the neighborhood's Mozaic project. The next arrival -- which should materialize by February -- is a local player: **Origami**, which will deliver its brand of sushi and other Japanese favorites to the Mozaic complex. Look for its eight-year-old Ridgedale outlet to close its doors.

Utmärkt

That's Swedish for *excellent*. One of the year's most dynamic newcomers is **Fika**, the sleek counter-service operation inside the American Swedish Institute, where chef Michael Fitzgerald and his crew are deftly interpreting contemporary Scandinavian fare at retiree prices.

In the 'burbs

Several suburban newcomers made a splash, including **Eat Shop Kitchen & Bar** in Plymouth, **Rodizio Grill** in Maple Grove and **Copper River Fish & Chop House** in Lakeville.

Women's work

One encouraging trend is the growing number of women-run (and often women-owned) kitchens, including Lisa Hanson of **Mona Restaurant & Bar**, Erica Strait of **Foxy Falafel**, Carrie McCabe-Johnston of **Nightingale**, Jes Werkmeister of **Birdhouse**, Stephanie Kochlin of **Pig & Fiddle** and Elizabeth Olson of **Ward 6**.

Good baked goods

Bakery lovers had good reason to celebrate. After losing its St. Paul home to a runaway boulder in 2011-- seriously -- **Bread, Coffee and Cake** happily relocated to great-looking digs in Mendota Heights. Farmers market darling **Solomon's Bakery** opened an Uptown branch. After pleasing the good citizens of Maple Grove and White Bear Lake, Arnaud de Rambures brought his third **Chez Arnaud** (and his first-rate eclairs, tarts and brioche) to St. Paul's Grand Avenue. **Hell's Kitchen** got into the breads-and-sweets business with **Angel Food Bakery + Coffee Bar**, and **Nadia Cakes** brought the cupcake craze to the northwest suburbs. And Kevin VanDeraa of **Cupcake** had a banner year, taking top prize in the Food Network's "Cupcake Champions" bakeoff (and walking away with a \$50,000 prize) and opening a Mall of America outlet.

Hit for MGM

The six-year-old Midtown Global Market started to generate some genuine culinary critical mass with several new arrivals, including **Fresco's Italian Market and Pasta Bar**, **Sabbai Cuisine** and the exceptional **Left Handed Cook**.

Global goodness

The world's flavors blossomed in the Twin Cities with **Aida Mediterranean Cuisine** (Egyptian/Greek), **Daalo Grill** (East African), **Maya Cuisine** (Mexican), **Copper Pot Indian Grill** (Indian), **Somos Peru** and **Uchu Peruvian Cuisine** (Peruvian) and **Eat Street Eatery** (banh mi and crêpes from **Rainbow Chinese Restaurant & Bar**, now celebrating its 25th anniversary).

So long, farewell

The past 12 months saw their share of closings, including Amici Pizza and Bistro, Aura, Cowboy Slim's, the Donut Cooperative, El Meson, Jack's, Kikugawa, the King and I, Marcello's Pizza and Pasta, Nick and Eddie, Pierre's Bistro, the Public House, Sopranos Italian Kitchen and Wondrous Azian Kitchen.

Frozen explosion

Cow Bella offered a welcome but increasingly rare made-by-hand frozen dairy experience: small-batch, locally sourced and beautifully prepared gelato. Phosphates, egg creams, house-made sodas and other yesteryear favorites headline the menu at **Lynden's Soda Fountain**. Those who lived through the TCBY-filled 1980s may be experiencing a slight case of pop-culture déjà vu with the current frozen yogurt resurgence. In 2012, the Twin Cities' already established fro-yo beachhead was supplemented by seemingly countless self-serve shops -- **Yogurt Lab**, **FreeStyle Yogurt**, **CherryBerry**, **Cool Cups** and the chain that started it all, **Pinkberry**, among others -- that proliferated across the landscape. Most offer as many flavors as gastropubs have taps, and boast topping selections larger than the average salad bar. There's more: **Orange Leaf**, an Oklahoma City-based chain, is promising a Woodbury franchise in the coming year.

Super centennial

St. Paul landmark **Cossetta** celebrated its 101st anniversary by tripling its size in a \$10 million expansion, adding an upscale restaurant -- **Louis Ristorante & Bar** -- and pumping up its popular pizzeria and Italian market (there's the now-obligatory rooftop venue, too). The final stage of the project, a pastry shop, is set to open in January.

Best hire

Partnering with chef Tim McKee (he of **La Belle Vie** and James Beard award fame) was a wise move on the part of Parasole Restaurant Holdings, because his efforts really paid off in 2012. Whether it's a contemporary version of oysters Rockefeller for **Salut Bar Americain**, a deep-dish pizza formula for **Moza Mia**, an olive oil-poached tuna melt at **Uptown Cafeteria**, bone marrow at **Manny's Steakhouse**, a Korean-style roast pork-fest at **Chino Latino** or a wild rice-edamame salad at the **Good Earth**, McKee's culinary prowess is making profound menu improvements all across an enterprise that routinely feeds thousands of Twin Citians daily.

Hotel happenings

Two major hotel properties smartly rebooted their restaurant operations. Three cheers to the Hyatt Regency Minneapolis for warming its previously vast and chilly lobby with **Prairie Kitchen and Bar**. And kudos to Noble House Hotels & Resorts, which scraped the 1980s off a former Radisson near the University of Minnesota and converted it into the Commons Hotel and its appealing **Beacon Public House** restaurant and bar (no comment on the **Applebee's** that continues to lodge on the property). Here's hoping that when it reopens in April, the renovated Minneapolis Millennium Hotel will have similarly improved its food-and-drink operations.

Media darling

The Twin Cities food scene was showered with an unprecedented number of love letters from the national press, including praise-heaping by Food & Wine, Saveur, Bon Appetit and Details magazines, along with the New York Times, Washington Post and television's "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" and "Bizarre Foods America."

Looking good

Twin Cities restaurants really upped their design game in 2012, with portfolio-worthy work by local architects and designers, including Shea Inc. (**Butcher & the Boar**, **Union**, **World Street Kitchen**), Smart Associates (**Mona Restaurant & Bar**, the **Kenwood**), Peterssen/Keller (the **Lynn on Bryant**), Rachel Kate Design (**Nightingale**) and HGA (**Fika**). Oh, and HGA led a restoration of St. Paul's Union Depot, where **Christo's** has returned, enveloped in the building's Beaux Arts glory. Four lookers to watch for in 2013 are coming from Julie Snow Architects (**Burch Steak**), Otogawa-Anschel (**Travail Kitchen and Amusements**), ESG Architects (**Smack Shack**) and Duluth's David Salmela (a Minneapolis riverfront plant/shop for **Izzy's Ice Cream**).

Its own destination

Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport totally amped up its food-and-beverage selections, thanks to a major creativity (and cash) infusion by OTG Management. The company sprinkled Terminal 1's G Concourse with inventive, traveler-friendly new eateries inspired by Twin Cities chefs, including **Volante** (seasonal Italian by Doug Flicker of **Piccolo**), **Mimosa** (a brasserie and raw bar by Russell Klein of **Meritage**), **Vero** (pizza by Ann Kim of **Pizzeria Lola**), **Custom Burger** (locally sourced burgers and made-to-order milk shakes by Erick Harcey of **Victory 44**) and **Taste of Mill City Tavern** (locavore breakfasts, lunches and dinners, by Lenny Russo of **Heartland Restaurant & Farm Direct Market**). There was much grousing after **McDonald's** lost its lease to the newcomers, but MSP officials are hoping to lure the populist fast food-er back in 2013. Next up: Look for branches of **Surdyk's Flights** and **Cocina del Barrio** to land this spring at the airport's Terminal 2.

Less than superior

Taking a trip to the North Shore is going to be a little less exciting, now that two dining favorites -- Nokomis Restaurant & Bar in Duluth and Chez Jude in Grand Marais -- have closed their doors.

Drinking at the source

In response to a brilliant 2011 change in state law, craft beer taprooms popped up faster than CVS Pharmacy outlets, with beer lovers finding havens at **Excelsior Brewing**, **Fulton Beer**, **Harriet Brewing**, **Indeed Brewing** and **Summit Brewing**. There are more to come, with taprooms scheduled for 612Brew in northeast Minneapolis, Steel Toe Brewing in St. Louis Park and Big Wood Brewery in White Bear Lake. And Minneapolis landed its first brewpub in more than a decade with the opening of **Northbound Smokehouse**.

Cosmetic surgery

Two very different Minneapolis grande dames were beneficiaries of much-needed makeovers. **Murray's**, a 6th Street fixture since 1946, got an updated dining room and a pleasant new bar out of its late-summer redo, and a springtime remake nudged 41-year-old **Tao Natural Foods** from the 1970s into the 21st century.

Congratulations

In its second incarnation, the Charlie Awards celebrated the Twin Cities dining scene by honoring restaurants -- including **Tilia** for Outstanding Restaurant and **Meritage** for Outstanding Service -- and individuals, including Doug Flicker of **Piccolo** for Outstanding Chef, Michelle Gayer of the **Salty Tart** for Outstanding Pastry Chef, Birk Gruden and Christina Nguyen of **Hola Arepa** for Emerging Food Professionals, Johnny Michaels of **La Belle Vie** for Outstanding Bartender, Brenda Langton of **Spoonriver** for Community Hero and Lenny Russo of **Heartland Restaurant & Farm Direct Market** for Lifetime Achievement.

Critical changes

Several years ago, **Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl** left her post at City Pages and moved to Minnesota Monthly, and Minnesota Monthly's **Rachel Hutton** switched her byline to City Pages. In 2012, Moskowitz Grumdahl jumped to Mpls.St.Paul magazine, and Hutton returned to MNMo.

In the stars

Our top-reviewed restaurants of 2012 included:

★★★★: Butcher & the Boar and La Belle Vie

★★★: The Gray House, Harriet Brasserie, the Kenwood, Mona Restaurant & Bar and Nightingale

Ins and outs

Hot: Goat, pretzels, offal, sardines, kale, burrata, cookie plates, punch and smoked everything.

Not: No-reservation policies, deafening dining rooms and the perennially exasperating "Are you still working on that?"

Enough already: Molten chocolate cake, sliders, vintage filament-style light bulbs, \$15-plus wines by the glass.

'Thanks'

The Star Tribune funds my work-related dining-out expenses. Still, I managed to squeeze in many -- probably too many -- meals paid with my own plastic, including memorable ones at **Al's Breakfast**, **Brasa**, **Gorkha Palace**, **Lucia's Restaurant**, **On's Kitchen**, **Sun Street Breads**, **Vincent**, **Wise Acre Eatery** and **Yum! Kitchen and Bakery**.

Best of the best

Butcher & the Boar is in fine company. Previous Star Tribune Restaurant(s) of the Year include:

2011: **The Bachelor Farmer**

2010: **Piccolo**

2009: **Bar La Grassa**

2008: **Manny's Steakhouse**

2007: **Brasa, Saffron Restaurant & Lounge** and **Heidi's**

2006: **Masa, Midtown Global Market** and the **Mill City Farmers Market**

2005: **112 Eatery**

2004: **Al Vento** and **Corner Table**

2003: **Solera**

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