

As a restaurant critic, I zip around town sampling new establishments, savoring wine pairings, frequenting food fairs and noshing at snack vendors. But then I pay my dues.

I crank out reviews, tend to my blog, update my listings, schlep to the Y — and share a year's worth of my favorite discoveries via *Orlando Life's* annual Silver Spoon Awards.

As always, we also conducted an online Readers' Choice survey, whose results are shown separately.

Central Florida's culinary scene, like its population, is increasingly sophisticated and diverse. The proof, as always, is in the pudding. Or the parfait. Or the mousse.

Bon appétit!

BEST NEW INDEPENDENT RESTAURANT

Txokos

After evaluating the whole package — food, service, décor and originality — it's clear to me that **Txokos** deserves the nod as top new independent. Located in the Audubon Park Garden District's East End Market, Txokos (pronounced CHO-kose) serves specialties from Spain's Basque region. The chefs are dedicated to putting out destination-worthy food, and the prices aren't off-putting. txokoskitchen.com

BEST NEW HOTEL RESTAURANT

Highball & Harvest

The Vineyard Grill was a lovely restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes. But not lovely enough that you'd bypass the resort's other posh eatery — Norman's — for dinner. So it was a savvy and welcome upgrade on the part of the resort to tear down the old and start from scratch with the new: **Highball & Harvest**, a farm-to-table concept best described as rustic chic. Nibble on a bar snack of housemade jerky and sip a Whistle-Stop, which is essentially the world's best whiskey sour. Begin your meal with sweet parkerhouse rolls made with "ancient" grains and served with herb and apple butters. Other highlights: cask wines, deviled eggs, shrimp and grits, smoked lamb belly with boiled peanut "baked beans," and my all-time favorite, Pig 'N' Potatoes, an all-day classic farmhouse breakfast. grandelakes.com

BEST RESTAURANT EXPANSION

Le Café de Paris

My friends sometimes resisted me when I took them to lunch at **Le Café de Paris**, a tiny restaurant in the Dr. Phillips area. They'd take a gander at the innocuous nook, which had just enough space for three small tables, and assume that it couldn't possibly be as good as I claimed. Now the once-diminutive dining establishment has doubled in size, and looks five times bigger. The Wolff family — Claude, Chantal and their son, Pierre — have a grand café, serving up quiches, paninis, crêpes and omelets I'd come to love before they went big-time (well, bigger-than-before time, anyway). Plus, they've added wine and beer. cafedeparisorlando.com

BEST CELEBRITY CHEF BOOK

No Experience Necessary

Our local hotshot chefs have been busy writing lately, turning out so many pretty cookbooks that I may have to get a bigger coffee table. My favorite food-related literary tome isn't a cookbook but a memoir, **No Experience Necessary**. Turns out that **Norman Van Aken**, the proprietor of Norman's in The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes, isn't some super-fancy kind of guy. He's essentially a hard-working erstwhile hippie who traveled a long and winding road from short-order cook to culinary superstar. Chef Norman, generally regarded as the originator of New World Cuisine, wasn't formally trained as a writer. But he wasn't formally trained as a chef, either, and that turned out pretty well. normanvanaken.com

BEST RESTAURANT ROW SURPRISE

Bistro Cloclo

Other than the patriarchs, Christini's and Chatham's Place, Restaurant Row's few independents tend toward downscale. So what a delight it was to find **Bistro Cloclo**, a classic French dining spot that combines formality with warmth. Surrounded by rich red walls heavily bedecked by framed oil paintings of Parisian street scenes, you can *almost* forget that you're in an Orlando strip mall. The service is welcoming, and the menu offers pâté, steak au poivre, coq au vin and tarte tatin — the kind of

BEST APPETIZER

Le Coq au Vin's Vegetable Tarts





SILVER SPOON AWARDS

OUR ANNUAL CULINARY
COMPENDIUM SHOWCASES
A SMORGASBORD
OF DINING OPTIONS.

by Rona Gindin • photography by Rafael Tongol

2014 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Your vote counts, too! *Orlando Life's* Readers Choice survey, sent via email and posted online, gave you a chance to dish out your opinions. Here are your picks for favorite dining places in the following categories:

NEW ESTABLISHMENT

1. South + York
2. Eddie V's Prime Seafood
3. The Coop

BREAKFAST PLACE

1. Villa de Flora
2. Keke's Breakfast Café (multiple locations)
3. Oscar's Brasserie

LATE NIGHT PLACE

1. Raglan Road
2. Santiago's Bodega
3. Pom Pom's Teahouse & Sandwicheria

WINE LIST

1. The Venetian Room
2. Old Hickory Steakhouse
3. Bull & Bear

DESSERT

1. Cocina 214
2. The Dessert Lady
3. Raglan Road

SERVICE

1. The Venetian Room
2. Chef's Table
3. Café de France

SERVER

1. Matthew Schwemmer, Café de France
2. Jack Cremlin, Chef's Table
3. Wendy Voss, Wreckers Sports Bar

CHEF

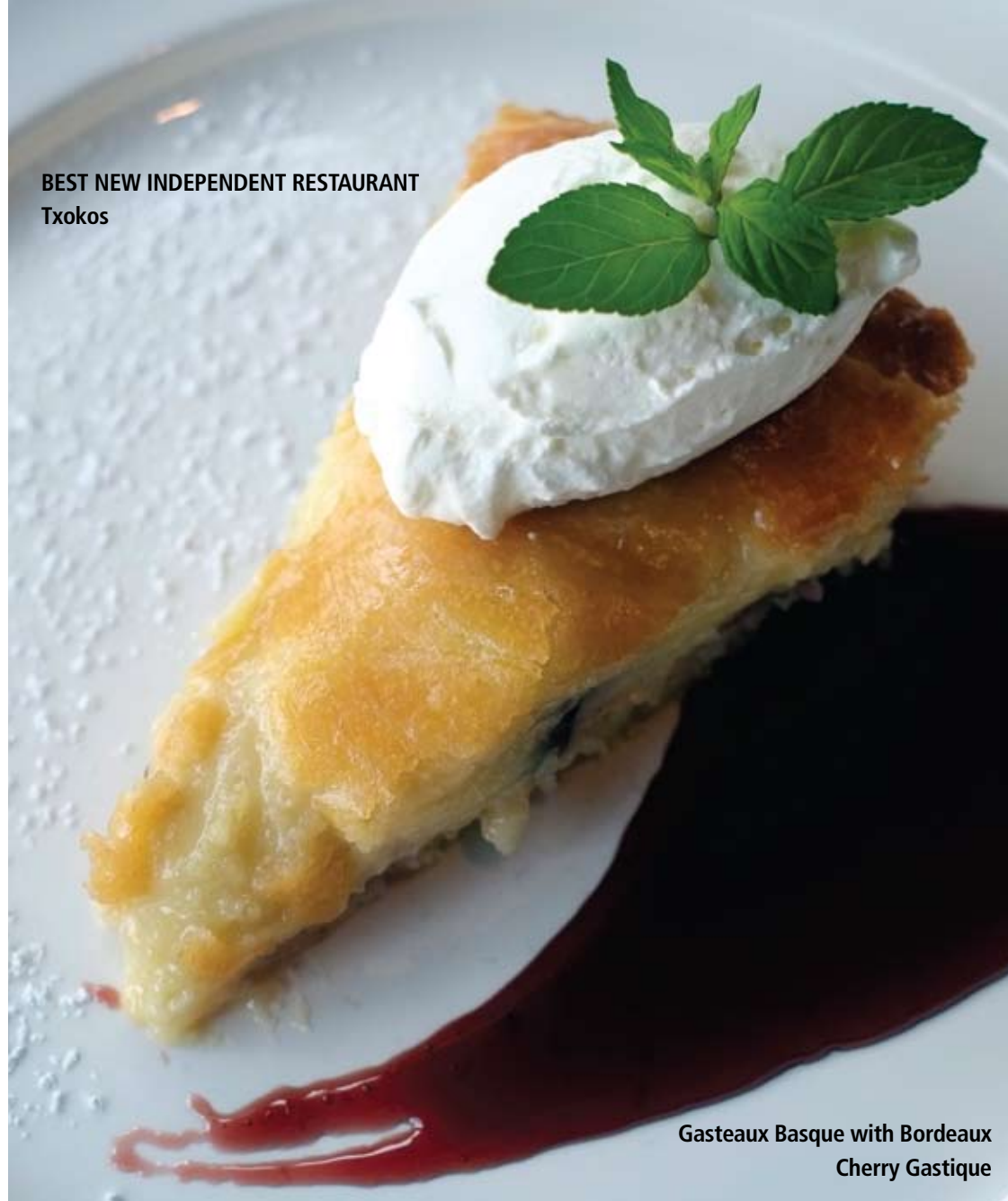
1. Barbara Alfano, Peperoncino
2. Kevin Tarter, Chef's Table
3. Nathaniel Russell, Café de France

APPETIZER

1. Mushroom Torte, Chef's Table
2. Guacamole, Cocina 214
3. Tempura Goat Cheese, South + York

BEST NEW INDEPENDENT RESTAURANT

Txokos



Gasteaux Basque with Bordeaux
Cherry Gastique

dishes you'd expect in a space this decked out. *bistrocloclo.com*

BEST OUTDOOR FOODIE IDEA

Fresh from the Field

Nonprofit organizations have for years raised funds through food-focused events. At first, they were nearly all indoor affairs, held primarily in hotel ballrooms. Now, some have moved outdoors, allowing patrons to chow down for charity beneath the stars. I'm particularly looking forward to **Fresh from the Field**, slated for Nov. 8 at Lake Meadow Naturals, a farm in Ocoee. The event will showcase chefs from K Restaurant, The Rusty Spoon, The Ravenous Pig and Cuisiniers, each of whom will prepare a course. The local Cystic Fibrosis Foundation will benefit. orlando.cff.org/freshfromthefield

BEST CHAIN RESTAURANT DISHES

Jason's Deli, Bonefish Grill, Anthony's Coal-Fired Pizza, Italio's

OK, I'm enough of a food snob to eschew chain eateries whenever possible. But I have to admit that some chains offer an impressive option or two. I like to lunch on the Zucchini Grillini at **Jason's Deli**. It's a monster of a vegetable sandwich with Muenster cheese, spinach, olives, tomatoes and roasted red-pepper hummus on a hearty bread. At **Bonefish Grill**, those spicy Bang Bang Shrimp are quite a tasty treat. **Anthony's Coal-Fired Pizza** offers an Italian tuna sandwich that raises the bar for this lunchbox staple. The lemony fish is placed on focaccia and topped with peppery arugula salad and sliced tomato. At **Italio's**, a counter-service Italian eatery, I'm mighty fond of the spaghetti with



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COCKTAIL

1. Orange Blossom Margarita, Cocina 214
2. Barrel Aged Seelbach, Chef's Table
3. Skinny Margarita, Señor Tequila

BEER

1. Cask & Larder
2. Wreckers Sports Bar
3. Raglan Road

DELI

1. TooJays (multiple locations)
2. Publix (multiple locations)
3. Jason's (multiple locations)

PIZZA

1. Prato
2. La Luce
3. Mellow Mushroom (multiple locations)

BURGER

1. Tasting Room at Chef's Table
2. Wreckers Sports Bar
3. BurgerFi (multiple locations)

BUFFET

1. Villa de Flora
2. Oscar's Brasserie
3. Boma

COFFEE

1. Starbucks (multiple locations)
2. Axum
3. Palmano's

SUSHI

1. Sora
2. Zeta Bar & Sushi Lounge
3. Seito

HAPPY HOUR

1. Cocina 214
2. Tasting Room at Chef's Table
3. Peperoncino

DATE PLACE

1. Chef's Table
2. The Venetian Room
3. Old Hickory Steakhouse

FAMILY PLACE

1. Cocina 214
2. Salamanders Sports Grill
3. Raglan Road

BEST RESTAURANT ROW SURPRISE

Bistro Cloclo



Italian sausage and spicy tomato-based Prima Rossa sauce. jasonseli.com, bonefishgrill.com, acfp.com, italiokitchen.com

BEST CREATIVE STEAKHOUSE CHEF

Kevin Spencer

It's just a happy coincidence that a guy named **Kevin Spencer** wound up as executive chef at **Spencer's for Steaks and Chops**. The restaurant is named for a cut of beef, not for him. What really matters, though, is that Spencer is making a name for both himself and the establishment he's been piloting. His appetizers and desserts are inventive and, while I prefer the beef, the meat list on any given week might include kangaroo. At private dinners and food-centered fundraising galas, he might bring pork belly enhanced by whiskey and Coca-Cola with foie gras gravy and gooseberries (it's amazing). The food at Spencer's is so good that it merits braving I-Drive traffic. thebiltonorlando.com

BEST SERVICE

Bonsai Sushi

Three sisters tend to guests at **Bonsai Sushi**, a tiny Japanese hideaway in the Dr. Phillips area. Giselle, Nicole and Michele know the regulars

and pamper them without fuss. (Giselle's husband, Chun Kim, makes the rolls and such.) They rush over with extra lemon for the guy who likes several slices. They remember which oh-my-heavens-that's-good version of their raw tuna and raw salmon dishes I last ordered. The Bonsai bowl? The one with avocados? Or was it the *other* one with avocados? Which one has the crunchies? They know, they care and they remember to bring extra spicy mayo for the Japanese take on jalapeño poppers. *No website*

BEST TRAVELING TAMALES

Tamale Co.

I discovered the portable **Tamale Co.** stand at a PechaKucha Orlando gathering, and rediscovered it at the Winter Garden Farmers Market. Now I can't get enough of these gentle flavor giants, which are also sold at the Orlando Farmer's Market at Lake Eola. They're soft masa pancakes (steamed, not fried!) wrapped around robustly flavored meats or beans and topped with crazy-flavorful sauces. Owners Fernando and Jennifer Tamayo toss in bonuses, such as Mexican cheeses, minced cilantro leaves and chipotle cream. I like — make that *love* — the chicken tamale with Fernando's tomatillo-based

AFRICAN

1. Boma
2. Jiko
3. Nile Ethiopian

AMERICAN

1. The Ravenous Pig
2. Tony Roma's
3. Season's 52

BBQ

1. 4 Rivers
2. Harry & Larry's
3. Bubbalou's

BRAZILIAN

1. Texas de Brazil
2. Fogo de Chão
3. Vittorio's

CARIBBEAN

1. Bahama Breeze
2. Guavate
3. Lelo's BBQ

CHINESE

1. Jum-Bo
2. Kim Wu
3. P.F. Chang's

CREOLE

1. Tibby's New Orleans Kitchen (multiple locations)
2. Hot N Juicy Crawfish
3. King Cajun Crawfish

CUBAN

1. Black Bean Deli
2. Padrino's
3. Columbia

FRENCH

1. Café de France
2. Le Coq au Vin
3. Chez Vincent

GERMAN

1. Hollerbach's Willow Tree
2. Biergarten at Epcot
3. Jaeger Haus

GREEK

1. Taverna Opa
2. Greek Corner
3. Athena's

INDIAN

1. Saffron
2. Memories of India
3. Woodlands



Taproom. With its macabre graphics and crimson walls, the place looks like a biker bar. Ignore all that. Choose a burger. Any burger. They're a blend of chuck, brisket and short rib — oh-so-moist and cooked over a gas grill to give them that backyard-barbecue caramelization. The buns are supplied by Olde Hearth Bread Company, a local artisan bakery that makes them not too thick or thin, not too soft or chewy, and just stout enough that they bear up to burger juice without falling apart. Toppings, even the ketchup, are made from scratch. obliviontaproom.com

BEST UNDERSTATED BURGER

That One Spot

This humble little counter-serve restaurant in Ocoee quietly plates up quality beef and creative patties on nice, thick rolls. **That One Spot's** surprisingly creative menu includes a salmon/goat cheese/garlic aioli combo and a black-bean patty. Specials range from an Asian-flavored shiitake mushroom burger to the "banana boat," a traditional burger topped with banana cream sauce, walnuts, fried egg, bacon and cheddar cheese. facebook.com/thatonespot

BEST BURGER WE MAY NEVER TRY

Shake Shack

When we couldn't get anyone to join us for burgers at **Shake Shack** on a recent trip to

New York, we shrugged it off, knowing Central Florida was getting its own soon. After all, über-chef Danny Meyer's creation, which was dear to me thanks to my NYC roots, is now an international sensation. The burgers are from humanely raised, vegetarian-fed Angus. The hot dogs, fries, frozen custard and shakes are all but artisanal. Confession time: I'm recommending this in spite of the fact that I still have *not* visited the local Shake Shack. It shares an overburdened parking lot with Trader Joe's in Winter Park, and I haven't had the heart to brave it. When I do, I'll order a double patty topped with Shack Sauce and Applewood-smoked bacon. Or maybe a meat-free, cheese-filled, crisp-fried Portobello mushroom burger. shakeshack.com

BEST FAMILY DINNER CHOICE

Pio-Pio

My family would eat at **Pio-Pio** weekly, if time permitted. I'm not crazy about the muted, formal décor, but I love the selection of Colombian and Peruvian staples, and so do the kids. The Campestre Combo, denoted on the menu as being meant to serve two, is actually ample enough for four. The meals start with a garlicky salad, followed by the platters: tender rotisserie chicken, fried sweet and green plantains, and rice. Garlic and spicy dipping sauces go fast;

we usually blend them together, then ask for refills. The Matador Combo includes all that, plus French fries with slivers of frankfurter and a plate of beans. It would feed six. *mypiopio.com*

BEST BEAT-THE-LINE STRATEGY

The Bar at Yellow Dog Eats

The more it evolves — and it keeps renovating, adding and changing — the more popular Gotha's **Yellow Dog Eats** becomes. The down side is, you have to wait in line to order your sandwich, salad or barbecue platter. Now there's another option: Sit at the newly expanded bar and tell the bartender what you want. He'll let the kitchen know while you unwind over a glass of wine or, better yet, a mango mojito. *yellowdogeats.com*

BEST APPETIZER

Le Coq au Vin's Vegetable Tarts

Year after year after year, casually elegant **Le Coq au Vin** ranks among the region's most beloved French restaurants. And year after year after year, I begin my meals there with a vegetable tart. The stalwart is an onion tart: flaky crust filled with a creamy blend of Boursin, goat and cottage cheeses and tender caramelized onions. A bit of hidden bacon adds a boost. During Magical Dining Month, the restaurant offered a zucchini version that was almost as good. Add a glass of wine and the tart makes a nice, light dinner on its own. *lecoqauvinrestaurant.com*

BEST ASIAN VALUE

RanGetsu

With its stylish dining room and patio, **RanGetsu** offers an ambiance worthy of its fine Japanese cuisine. But I'm a fan of this Maitland restaurant's mix-and-match: a reasonably priced bento box. For \$20, you can choose any four items from a list of about 15. I usually pick the teriyaki salmon, gyoza dumplings, bulgogi and sashimi. Your selections might include vegetable tempura, a spring roll and robata chicken. The portions are generous, and the bento box comes with a choice of miso soup or a green salad with ginger dressing. I often follow up my bento box with a take-home box. *rangetsu.com*



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IRISH

1. Raglan Road
2. Fiddler's Green
3. Claddagh Cottage

ITALIAN

1. Peperoncino
2. La Luce
3. Maggiano's
3. Rocco's Italian Grille & Bar

JAPANESE

1. Sora
2. Amura (multiple locations)
3. Kobé (multiple locations)

KOREAN

1. Korea House
2. Shin Jung
3. Bee Won

MEXICAN/TEX-MEX

1. Cocina 214
2. Taquitos Jalisco
3. Garibaldi

MIDDLE EASTERN

1. Bosphorus
2. Cedar's
3. Flame Kabob

SEAFOOD

1. Winter Park Fish Company
2. Eddie V's Prime Seafood
3. Mitchell's Fish Market

STEAKHOUSE

1. Bull & Bear
2. Capital Grill (multiple locations)
3. Ruth's Chris (multiple locations)

THAI

1. Thai Thani
2. Spice Thai
3. Soong Thai

VEGETARIAN

1. Ethos Vegan Kitchen
2. Sweet Tomatoes (multiple locations)
3. Dandelion

VIETNAMESE

1. Little Saigon
2. Pho 88
3. Saigon Flavors



BEST COFFEE ART
Al Bacio

BEST NEW YORK-STYLE PIZZA

Pisa Italian Pizza

A friend and former New Yorker has pushed me for years to try **Pisa Italian Pizza**, insisting that the unfussy eatery's pies are "just like home." It's on West Colonial, though, near Hia-wassee Drive. That trafficky part of town is off-putting, so I hesitated. Now I tell you this: Go, go, go, go, go! This is, indeed, the kind of pizza I grew up loving — proof that if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. The crust is thin, the dough flavored nicely. The sauce is not too sweet, not too dull. The cheese goes just the right amount. And the pies emerge from the oven with oversized brownish bubbles, just as they should. I haven't tried the toppings yet, or anything else on the menu. I was so relieved to find a real pizza — the type New Yorkers call "regular," here it's known as "cheese" — that I may never venture into sausage, pepperoni or spinach territory. *No website*

BEST RETRO ICE-CREAM PARLOR

The Soda Fountain

What's black and white and red all over? The most darling little storefront in College Park. It's called **The Soda Fountain**, and it's right on Edgewater Drive. The corner shop has a black-and-white tile floor, a chalkboard — with chalk! — on the wall, and a warm, nostalgic feel throughout. A local company, Muse Gelato, makes the premium ice cream using hormone-free milk. Eighteen flavors are available. Have one or more of the flavors in a cone, in a sundae or atop a brownie. Or, skip the ice cream

altogether and have a Brooklyn-style egg cream, which consists of seltzer (in this case Perrier, although I'd prefer plain seltzer, which produces bigger bubbles), milk and chocolate syrup. *the-soda-fountain.com*

BEST PASTA

Ravalia's

When **Ravalia's** opened in Casselberry, it looked like every other déclassé pizza parlor. Except its pizza was really, *really* good. And the staff made the pastas from scratch, right behind the counter. This "find" isn't such a secret anymore, thanks to its recent move to more upscale digs in Lake Mary. I'll bet its customers will follow. *ravaliaslakemary.com*

BEST COFFEE ART

Al Bacio

When an **Al Bacio** server brought my cappuccino order, I had to smile when I saw the foamy floral design it featured. The trio of flowers had white petals, dark brown outlines and red centers. It was just so cheerful. At Al Bacio — located in the Park Avenue space once occupied by Brandywine's Delicatessen — each artful cup of joe is also served with a chocolate-dipped Italian cookie. *albacio-florida.com*

BEST GUACAMOLE

Los Portales Supermarket & Mexican Restaurant

Next time you're out on West Colonial near Winter Garden, stop by **Los Portales**, a Mexican grocery store with a counter-service eatery

within. Ask for guacamole to go and choose a container size. Then comes the show: An employee will cut an avocado in half, scoop out the flesh and mash it with white onion, tomato, cilantro and jalapeño. The result is a fresh and hearty guacamole as good as any you could make at home. *No Website*

BEST FOOD AND WINE BONUS

Global Venture Dinners

With tens of thousands descending on Orlando during Epcot's annual Food & Wine Festival, neighboring hotels have come up with clever promotions to attract visiting foodies. At the Waldorf Astoria Orlando and adjacent Hilton Orlando Bonnet Creek, Food & Wine Weekends involve multiple eating and drinking events. Friday and Saturday night **Global Venture Dinners** are group affairs. Sixteen guests, maximum, share a three-course, wine-pairing dinner. Chefs and wine gurus discuss each dish served and each wine poured. The menu changes weekly, but one thing is guaranteed: As you break bread together, the total strangers you sat down with will feel like dear friends by evening's end. This year's festival wraps up Nov. 10. waldorfastoriaorlando.com

BEST NEW EPCOT TREATS

L'Artisan des Glace

Epcot is renowned for its sweet treats, from Japan's fruity shaved ice to America's sugary funnel cakes. Now, in the France Pavilion, you can indulge yourself at **L'Artisan des Glace**, a dessert shop where the chef-created ice cream is made in an upstairs kitchen. I sampled Caramel Fleur de Sel, which is similar in composition to America's frozen custard. It's ultra creamy yet also frothy, with a deep, rich flavor. This, and all L'Artisan des Glace ice creams, can be savored solo. They also can be enjoyed between warm halves of brioche topped with syrup in a "croque glaze" sandwich, in a sweetened iced cappuccino topped with whipped cream, or in a "martini" drizzled with Grand Marnier or another spirit. Chocolate and seasonal ice cream-filled macaron sandwiches are also sweetly sinful. disneyworld.com ■



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Chocolate Killer Cake



Carrot Cake

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