

THE GOLDEN WHISK AWARDS

Dining critic **RONA GINDIN** whips up an irreverent list of winners and losers for the year.

I've been the dining critic of Orlando magazine for nearly nine years. During that time I sat silently while readers decided in an annual survey what were the best restaurants in various categories. You know, Best Seafood, Best New Restaurant? Now it's my turn to give out awards, but in categories of my choosing. Some are complimentary, others not so much. The following are the recipients of the 2008 Golden Whisk Awards. Why a whisk? It stirs things up.

BIGGEST ATTENTION HOG

THE RAVENOUS PIG. You're tired of reading about The Pig? I'm sick of writing about it, including the controversial name and the "gastropub" tag. But the name and counterintuitive label got people talking about the restaurant, helping propel it to instant stardom in the local dining scene. Point out another restaurant in town that's soared to prominence like this one has and I'll eat my hidden notebook, which The Pig's chefs James and Julie Petrakis could surely make delicious. Since this Winter Park dining spot opened in late 2007 with foodie-pleasing offerings like grilled hamachi (fish) with ramp risotto and carrot foam, the town's cognoscenti rarely dine elsewhere.

BEST LOW-PROFILE RESTAURANT

NONNA TRATTORIA ED ENOTECA. You've never seen an ad for Nonna and its name

doesn't come up at the office water cooler. Step into this happening College Park restaurant, though, and you'll see in-the-know area residents indulging in an Italian menu that's actually *Italian*—not Americanized with the likes of veal parmigiana. Chef-owner Kevin Fonzo serves simple, well-crafted foods the way they do in Italy—combining a few amazing-quality ingredients drizzled with a bit of luscious olive oil.

BEST UNDISCOVERED CHEF

DAMIEN BRESSON. One of our best chefs works *inside* Epcot. At Bistro de Paris, located on the France pavilion's second floor, Bresson turns out a sea scallop and artichoke Napoleon, and pork piccata in a mushroom sauce, as delectable as any entrees I've had this year. And to start? An ethereal appetizer of crab rillettes and tuna carpaccio with parmesan shavings and a Provencal marinade. Who knew?

MOST TALKED-ABOUT CHEF

JEPHANIE FOSTER. She may have presided over two restaurants that failed this year (though, to be fair, she'd severed ties with Midnight Blue before that one went belly up), but the former Blue Bistro chef-owner remains popular among foodies in this town. The self-taught culinarian's flavors at the Blue restaurants were so bold that they shocked, an experience most fearless foodies loved but some folks just didn't take to. Since the restaurants' closings, Foster has taken over the kitchen at Thornton Park's Graze, where her new menu has created some buzz. Is Foster still as bold as ever or has she toned down her style? I'll let you know in the January issue, when I review Graze.



MOST DISINGENUOUS OWNER

CHRIS CHRISTINI. In an interview for OMag's 2008 Dining Hall of Fame awards, the owner of Christini's Ristorante Italiano complained about not getting local press coverage. "It hurts my feelings," he said, although I was obviously giving him ink at that time. I jumped on his eagerness for exposure and made several attempts to get him to appear on *On the Town*, my Bright House TV show celebrating local restaurants. When I finally tracked him down, which took some doing, he brushed me off, sniping, "I'm too busy."

FRESHEST RESTAURANTS

DUX at the Peabody Hotel, **ETHOS VEGAN KITCHEN**, **HARMONI MARKET**, **DANDELION COMMUNITEA CAFÉ**, **GAYLORD PALMS RESORT HOTEL & CONVENTION CENTER**, and the **WALT DISNEY WORLD SWAN AND DOLPHIN HOTEL**. Pick and choose: Slow Food, locally sourced food, organic food. Whatever the angle, these six businesses take the trend more seriously than most. For example, the Dandelion folks champion the OurLandoLocallyMade movement; the Gaylord Palms has become the unofficial home for multi-course gourmet repasts by the local chapter of the Slow Food organization. Kudos to all for going after farm-fresh ingredients from nearby producers.

BEST HOLE IN THE WALL

TASTY WOK. Glossy barbecued ducks and chickens hang from their feet near the cash register at Tasty Wok. A vase full of polyester roses on top of the beverage cooler is as fancy as the décor gets. But delve into a sizzling scallion pancake, an aromatic pork and dumpling soup, or a heap of garlicky sautéed Chinese broccoli at this Hong Kong-style restaurant in Little Vietnam and you won't give the unsettling surroundings another thought.

BEST VIRTUAL FOOD FIGHT

FUNKY MONKEY VS. POSTERS. Feeling offended after reading a mediocre customer

BEST BLAND CONCEPT

TAVERNS. If I taste another creamy-but-bland artichoke dip, another expensive but unimpressive steak, or another oversized but underwhelming brownie-and-ice cream dessert, I may give up trying the town's new chain taverns altogether. A slew opened over the last year, and they were all alike: an inviting bar with serious cocktails, an upscale-cozy dining room with plenty of booths, and identical menus. Each one sounded like the perfect bridge between Chili's-type midscale chains and frou frou restaurants. Not so. The recipes were developed in corporate test kitchens: No zip. No zing. Just inoffensive food at hefty prices.

review of his downtown restaurant on yelp.com, Funky Monkey co-owner Eddie Nickell responded to the woman who posted the comments. Long story short, the earnest but impulsive Nickell got into a vicious online war with that poster and other former patrons. While Nickell's responses were mostly defensive, such as saying that a guest who was hot while waiting outside to enter for a drag show dinner "could have waited in her [air-conditioned] car," the posters were vile. "Yelpers" called the restaurant "Spunky Monkey," dubbed it "----ing lame" and actually labeled Nickell a "douche." The upside: The restaurant's Web site got 600 hits the month of the ruckus, up from 50 the month before.

BEST CHEF TO HIT THE ROAD

CLAYTON MILLER. Mere months after being inducted into our Dining Hall of Fame along with his boss, celebrity chef Norman Van Aken, Miller bolted from the kitchen of The Ritz-Carlton Grande Lakes Norman's. The up-and-comer took his prestigious award and headed to the D.C. suburbs as the chef at Trummers on Main. Miller isn't the first Hall of Famer to skip town with a shiny OMag plaque for his new office wall. California Grill chef John State left us high and dry for a gig in Michigan soon after receiving his recognition a year earlier.


BIGGEST NEW MENU FLOP

FIFI'S. I am no longer giddy when I go to Fifi's. I am now annoyed. I so loved this upscale Thornton Park French-ish coffee shop when it first opened as Fifi's Patisserie in early 2007 that I was teased for being a "Fifi's Girl." Gone is the osso bucco. Absent is bread pudding. Adios went the always-amazing ingredients. Now called just Fifi's, and billed (more accurately, actually) as a bistro and wine bar, the thoroughly pink place serves BLTs no better than you can make at home and an all-cupcake dessert menu. I do, though, enjoy the *croque madame* sandwich of black forest ham and gruyere indulgently topped with a fried egg.

BEST RESTAURANT TO DODGE TAXES

JOHNSON'S DINER. Call it the Hall of Fame Curse. A 2008 Hall of Fame inductee, Johnson's Diner recently ran afoul of the Florida Department of Revenue over tax payments. Or lack thereof. The owners of the soul food establishment ponied up \$39,000 in back taxes after the Revenue Department shut down the restaurant for three weeks. Johnson's temporary closure only proved Benjamin Franklin's adage: Nothing is certain but death and taxes. Johnson's faced the former when it didn't pay the latter.

BIGGEST SNOOZER OF A NAME

STEAK AND SALAD. No kidding. That's the name of a new restaurant on Mills near Virginia. It doesn't have a menu online, but I guess there's no need for one. Dull names are no stranger to the building housing this placid-sounding place. The previous restaurant in the same location went by the moniker Friends. 

MOST OVERRATED DESSERT
CRÈME BRÛLÉE. Original.
Chocolate. White chocolate. Mocha.
Mango. Hazelnut. Enough already!
Come up with your own dang
dessert idea.

[REVIEW]

In College Park, a Little Italy

The year-old Adriatico Trattoria Italiana has an Old World feeling and authentic flavors. **By Rona Gindin**

WITH TRADITIONAL DESIGN ELEMENTS LIKE arched mirrors and white tablecloths, and several menu items so familiar that you'll feel you're back in the Italian restaurant your parents took you to as a kid, Adriatico feels like a College Park stalwart, not a newcomer.

A small, narrow restaurant warmed by walls of both brick and stone, the year-old Adriatico is the classic mom-and-pop Italian restaurant. When I arrived one Saturday evening, co-owner Rosetta Cudazzo, a native Sicilian, was bustling around the dining room, smiling genuinely at guests as she rearranged tables following a large group's departure. In looks, in dress, even in the way her hair was pulled back, you can see that she has an Old World heritage—and warmth.

Behind the scenes, her husband, Chef Marco Cudazzo, was cooking the foods of his homeland. He is a native of Ortona, Italy, in the central, Abruzzi region. While he maintains Abruzzi's signature emphasis on, as Rosetta puts it, "fresh, simple ingredients done well," some of the menu comes from other regions of Italy. The bill of fare offers classic favorites like a Bolognese ragu, which is a tomato sauce flavored with ground meat, and veal in a marsala wine sauce, as well as more unusual items.

Adriatico emphasizes classic Italian fare such as (clockwise from top right) cannoli, veal scaloppine, pork pizzaiola and Roman-style sautéed baby artichokes

Some of the food is truly terrific; some could be better. If you enjoy vegetables, begin your meal with *carciofini Mamma Mia*. It's a plate loaded with baby artichokes, most chunks temptingly tender, that have been



sautéed Roman-style with extra virgin olive oil, garlic and a subtle dash of mint. Slivers of garlic and small bits of sun-dried tomato added zip. Don't rush to order the mozzarella *caprese*, however. This well-known dish is as simple as it gets and it's often a reliable indication of a kitchen's finesse: tomato, mozzarella cheese and basil are layered like a Napoleon and drizzled with olive oil. Here the olive oil was masterful: although unadorned except for salt and pepper, it had a lively zing. But the tomato wasn't vine-ripened to perfection; it was just tomato. The mozzarella, although an imported buffalo variety, was decent but not distinguished.

Adriatico has an interesting assortment of pastas. The gnocchi is made in house from Marco's mother's recipe, but the kitchen had run out of the potato dumplings during my visit. The restaurant is one of the few in town to offer rigatoni mixed with *braciola*, which is a ribeye steak rolled with parsley, garlic, pine nuts, mortadella and parmesan cheese.


I strongly recommend the scaloppine *alla Sienese* as an entrée. Two large, tender veal cutlets are topped with a gentle layer of the Italian ham called *prosciutto di Parma* and then a creamy layer of melted fontina cheese. A mound of absolutely perfect, freshly garlic-sautéed spinach sits beneath the meat, and a white wine sauce finishes the dish. It's served with a mound of mashed potatoes and a helping of sautéed vegetables that were no better than most cooks could make at home.

I was encouraged to see pork *pizzaiola* on the menu. Few restaurants in town offer pizzaiola, an exceptionally bold red sauce distinguished by the welcome addition of

oregano as well as, at Adriatico, shallots, green onions and capers. The sauce's flavor was right on target for every pizzaiola memory I have, although it was a bit thin. But the pork tenderloin, though flavorful, was tough. This dish, too, was served with mashed potatoes and sautéed vegetables.

For dessert, I tried the cannoli, which our waiter told us was homemade. Turns out he got that wrong. The only dessert made in-house is tiramisu. Nonetheless, the cannoli was a winner. The outside tube-shaped cookie was firm and flavorful, the inside ricotta-based creamy filling luscious. In addition, Adriatico imports four desserts from Italy. I tried the chocolate caramel pyramid and found it grainy, but my dining companion enjoyed the cocoa-dusted chocolate mousse-like sweet.

I won't let one server's lack of knowledge about the menu define the restaurant's service, but the Cudazzos need to screen or train their staff better. Our waiter was of no help with our questions.

What our waiter lacked in experience, the owners more than made up with their positive attitudes and that delicious veal and spinach dish. The menu is solid and the prices are attractive. If the restaurant nudges its dishes up a notch and trains its help properly, it should become the old-timer it already resembles. 

ADRIATICO TRATTORIA ITALIANA

ADDRESS 2417 Edgewater Drive, Orlando

PHONE 407-428-0044

WEB adriatico-trattoria.com

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American fare at J. Alexander's:
(clockwise from top left) salad,
steak Maui and pork tenderloin

[REVIEW]

An Initial Letdown

Overly flavored food and overeager staff take away from the positives at the new J. Alexander's.

I SUSPECT THAT A LOT OF READERS WOULD ADORE THE new J. Alexander's, a polished chain that bills itself as featuring "straightforward American food." The Restaurant Row spot has a Frank Lloyd Wright-ish decor with clean lines; the space is dramatically dark with nifty spotlights illuminating the center of each table. Food choices are a familiar line-up of steaks and crab cakes and such, with nearly everything made in house from corporate recipes. The prices are low—from the low teens to low 20s for most dinner entrees. And the service is eager.

You're sold already, right?

Not me. Only the décor and prices work. The food is overly flavored (more on that later) and the service is too eager. Not possible? Here's a sample from the first five minutes of my visit. As I'm handed the menu, I'm asked, "Do you want a glass of white wine? Do you want to start with our smoked salmon appetizer?" I hadn't even looked at the bill of fare yet, so how should I know? And when I asked for a glass of water to complement my Manhattan, I received an enthusiastic "Excellent!" It

didn't help that five different people waited on us.

The food ranged from OK to uh-oh. Both the grilled pork tenderloin and steak Maui were tender, but both had sauces that were too powerful. The pork's Thai "bang bang" topping tasted like barbecue sauce that could use some diluting, and the steak's marinade gave it a way-too-sweet teriyaki taste. The rest of our choices were inoffensive: a mild spinach and cheese dip with bland tortilla chips; a too-salty southwestern egg roll; and a large slice of chocolate bundt cake with ice cream and hot fudge that was huge but not especially rich.

The Manhattan, however, was superb. Plus, it's served with a second helping in a carafe; when you're ready to drink it, your server brings you a new chilled glass.

—R.G.

J. ALEXANDER'S

ADDRESS 7335 West Sand Lake Road, Orlando

PHONE 407-345-1039

WEB jalexanders.com

ENTREES: \$9 to \$27

[A CONVERSATION WITH ...]

Michael Bombard

Beverage director, E-Brands Restaurants

Cocktails are one part art, one part business for Michael Bombard. The 40-year-old beverage maven masterminds the liquid refreshments for six restaurant concepts under Orlando's E-Brands Restaurants umbrella, including three that have units in town: Timpano Chophouse & Martini Bar, Samba Room, and Salsa Taqueria & Tequila Bar. The Casselberry resident spends his workdays tailoring wine lists for E-Brands' chains, concocting fashion-forward martinis, and calculating how much to charge for the spirited selections. He leads *Orlando* magazine dining critic RONA GINDIN through a beverage director's milieu.



Michael Bombard

RONA GINDIN: Each E-Brands concept has cocktails natural to its concept, like mojitos and caipirinhas for Samba Room. Why create new ones?

MICHAEL BOMBARD: If you don't keep creating new ones, you won't stay on top of your game. New products like flavored vodkas and rums and tequilas are constantly coming onto the market, along with new ways to present drinks made with those products. I have to put some on my menu in a way that will set my place apart from my neighbor's. An example is wine martinis, a trend that started in New York. I have one made with a wine that has ruby-red grapefruit notes in it and ruby red-flavored Finlandia vodka.

RG: Does it bug you that most drinks called martinis aren't really martinis, just concoctions served in martini glasses?

MB: I think everybody's over that. Before all the new-style martinis came out, bars were taking shooters, like lemon drops, and putting them in martini glasses—then calling them lemon drop martinis. That has definitely changed.

RG: Do you prefer the authentic versions or the playful versions?

MB: I'm all about the playful versions. I like

to be different. One of my favorite things is creating names for the cocktails.


RG: What's a popular trend in mixology now?

MB: I love infusions. You can do an unlimited amount of things with them. You take a liquor like vodka, rum or tequila, and put it in a jar with anything you want—rosemary, peppers and onions, fruits and spices. Let it sit for seven days and you've got an infusion. At Salsa we do an infusion with tequila, two cored and cut whole pine-apples, split vanilla beans and brown sugar. After six days it's terrific.

RG: What's the best non-spirited drink that you serve?

MB: We do a watermelon "fresca" at Salsa. The bartenders mix freshly squeezed watermelon juice with soda water. It's unbelievable.

RG: Christmas is coming up. What's one amazing nearly forgotten holiday drink?

MB: For a drink without alcohol, I recommend filling a coffee pot with cranberry juice and a cinnamon stick. Turn the warmer on, and in 30 minutes an amazing aroma will waft through your house. With alcohol, we offer a Peppermint Pattie, which is a martini made with peppermint schnapps and hot chocolate. 



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