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These are the 5 best new Cincinnati restaurants of 2022



[Keith Pandolfi](#)
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Is it over? Are things finally back to normal? It's a question I ask myself whenever I sit down at a restaurant, bar or bistro these days. Other questions include, "What is the energy level like?" "How is morale?" "Are people excited to be here?" and "How much of the staff is out sick?"

You might be surprised to hear that restaurants are still facing such issues. Especially if you've spent a night waiting for a table at a packed Pepp & Dolores, watching as cheerful waiters dance their way through the dining room with hot plates of pasta and shrimp scampi, or if you've sat in wonder as a pianist tickled the ivories of the mother-of-pearl piano at Jeff Ruby's decadent new steakhouse location across from Fountain Square.

It's a great thing to see. But it doesn't mean restaurants aren't smiling through at least a little bit of residual pandemic-related pain. Many of them are carrying the same baggage (pandemic-related or otherwise) they have during the past three years.

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Among the five restaurants I chose for this year's best new restaurants list, almost all the owners have overcome challenges before opening their doors. One chef was hospitalized for depression, one owner lost his father, one lived through the ravages of Katrina before going up against the ravages that COVID took on his livelihood.

To ensure any measure of success, each of these owners needed to treat their workers like family (maybe that's why all the restaurants on my list are, at least in part, family affairs, with husbands and wives working side-by-side, with siblings, nephews, niece and kids). They needed to convince their employees that their restaurants are worth the commitment. And

that, if they made that commitment, they would receive the kind of mentoring skills that will give them the tools to possibly run their own restaurants in the future.

That said, here are five new spots that came out strong in 2022. Each one added something new to the local conversation around the cuisines they're serving as well as the direction our post-pandemic restaurant scene might be heading. Cheers to all of them.

“Frankie’s Sips & Savories”, Downtown

Walk inside Frankie's and the first thing you might notice is the stenciled quotes on the wall with such sentiments as “Every family has a story. Welcome to ours” and “Where’s your drink?” “Turn up the music” and “Life's too short.” Look up above the bar and you'll see a sign, in Broadway lights, that simply states, “What a life.”

These aren't just random thoughts inspired by a shopping adventure to a home decor shop. They're the favorite sayings of the late Fahid “Frank” Shakir Daoud, the patriarch of the Daoud family, and one of the founders of the Gold Star chain of chili parlors. They are, in short, the words he lived by.

After Frank died in 2020 at the age of 83, his son, Sami, purchased a handsome building on Garfield Place, among Cincinnati's most beautiful, if not overlooked, blocks. The goal was to open a restaurant and bar that honored his father, and, as far as I'm concerned, Frank should be mighty proud. The staff here is largely made up of Daoud family members, something that's palpable given the warm feeling I get every time I visit. Though you won't find any three-ways or coneys on the menu.

Under the direction of chef Pedro Rangel, a former chef de cuisine at Boca, Frankie's savories might be outdoing its sips (though both are very good). The golden breading of Rangel's arancini hides succulent braised lamb and crispy risotto. A shrimp cassoulet combines flavors both rustic and citrusy with perfectly cooked white beans topped with a pressed shrimp cake and topped with preserved lemon celery greens and bread crumbs. And a briny brandade (salt cod mixed with mashed potatoes, garlic and olive oil) is topped with the retro sundried tomato and shatta, a mild Middle Eastern hot sauce. The dish is served with warm, pillowy house-made pita straight from the oven.

While I prefer working through the small plates at Frankie's, more substantial portions are available. Mezze boards come with a variety of dips and salads, and there's also charcuterie or cheese boards as well as stuffed pita sandwiches.

Taking that aforementioned "Where's your drink?" sign into account, be sure to try one of Frankie's signature cocktails (or something from their well-curated wine and beer list). I like the Kentucky Bash with bourbon, blackberries and ginger beer, though, given Frankie's apparent sense of humor, I think he might get more of a kick out of a vodka, blueberry puree and club soda concoction called How's Your Love Life?

14 Garfield Place, Downtown, 513-996-0021, frankiessips.com.

Nolia Kitchen, Over-the-Rhine

There have been plenty of Southern-style restaurants in Greater Cincinnati over the years. But nothing like what New Orleans native Jeffery Harris has brought to the table with Nolia Kitchen.

Harris' first restaurant – the now-closed food stall at Oakley Kitchen Food Hall called Jimmy Lou's – was proof that the souls of authentic New Orleans po'boys, beignets and red beans and rice could survive without their Gulf Coast mortal coils.

But with Nolia, Harris, along with Nathan Penny, sous chef Stephanie Gonzales, and Harris' wife (and Nolia co-owner) Heather Harris, is taking things to the next level.

The Over-the-Rhine restaurant walks the fine line between downhome and fussy: Gulf oysters get a smack of jerk seasoning, a normally decadent maque choux chock full of bacon and cream gets the vegan treatment without sacrificing an ounce of flavor. A hush puppy is turned into a minor masterpiece when it's stuffed with country ham. No, this is not a New Orleans restaurant, it's a Southern-style spot that embraces the ethos of taking simple ingredients and turning them into something extraordinary. *1405 Clay St., Over-the-Rhine, 513-384-3597, noliakitchen.com.*

Tuba Baking Co., Dayton, Ky.

With German food on autopilot in Cincinnati for the past few decades, Drew Rath's efforts to change the conversation about what it is and where it comes from is long overdue. At Tuba Baking, Rath explores the Swabian influence on his ancestral Deutschland, with an emphasis on spelt, Swabia's most ubiquitous crop, which Rath works into everything he can.

Along with German-style beers made by local breweries, Rath keeps at least two dozen imported lagers, hefeweizen and schwarzbier on tap. In doing so, he's created a European-style tavern, where those beers can be savored with Tuba's famous pot-bellied

pretzels, or traditional flammkuchen, an oblong German-style flatbread made with rye and spelt sourdough and topped with gruyere, sweet onions and speck. But the menu doesn't stop there.

Rath, who's flirted with veganism in the past, is also trying to break free of German cuisine's heavy meat-centric bubble by offering vegan and vegetarian dishes. Yes, there's plenty of meat here, too, but his currywurst entree, wherein sausage is replaced with a sizable carrot slow-cooked over apple and cherry wood, is among the best things I've tasted all year.

The restaurant is a rebirth for Rath in more ways than one. He is upfront about the depression he suffered after shuttering the original Tuba Baking in Covington. Now he and his wife, Valerie, along with several other family members, are back on track, placing their bets on Dayton's steadily growing commercial district by purchasing, not renting, the building where Tuba is located.

If the old adage of getting by with a little help from your friends (and family) applies, Rath is doing just that. He and his team have put something special together here: a restaurant that elevates German cuisine by simplifying it and giving it the respect it deserves. *517 Sixth Ave., Dayton, Ky., 859-835-2171, facebook.com/tubabakingco.*

Cafe Alma, Pleasant Ridge

It starts with a big hot cup of coffee that comes with a glass bottle of cream and a homemade cookie you didn't ask for on the side. That's the moment I start to exhale at Cafe Alma. There is something about this new Pleasant Ridge restaurant that relaxes me, and it's not just the healthy and delicious Mediterranean fare they offer.

Husband and wife team Lainey and Yair Richler opened Cafe Alma as an antidote to the heavy meat-centric restaurants that dominate this town. And while this isn't the first Mediterranean restaurant to open in Greater Cincinnati, it is definitely one of the best.

A house salad with cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and shredded carrots gets added depth and texture from creamy feta and sweet, crunchy pecans complemented by a raspberry poppy dressing. Shakshuka, a traditional Middle Eastern dish where eggs are poached in spicy tomato sauce, comes in four varieties while eggs cooked any style arrive with flavorful accompaniments such as toasty zaatar and colorful beetroot tahini.

On the more decadent side, Alma offers sweet halva and banana pancakes with chocolate chips, and challah French toast gussied up with pomegranate whipped cream. But my

favorite thing to order at Cafe Alma is the Shmagel's bagel platter, which allows you to construct your own bites of house-made Montreal bagels with lox, capers, pickled red onions and cream cheese and hard-boiled eggs.

For dessert, I order the golden milk latte, a soothing blend of turmeric, vanilla, ginger and ashwagandha (a medicinal herb that is said to lower blood pressure) with frothed milk. I haven't checked my readings after drinking one, but I swear that it works.

Like most of Alma's offerings, that latte always leaves me feeling satiated and restored. In fact, the only problem with this cafe is that I never want to leave.

6111 Montgomery Road, Pleasant Ridge, 513-620-8526, cafealmacincy.com.

Crown Cantina, Downtown

I was worried that husband and wife team Anthony and Haley Sitek were getting in over their heads when they opened Crown Cantina this year. By the time I moved back to Cincinnati three and a half years ago, they already owned two restaurants and were about to open a third. This is usually the point where you get to see if a restaurant owner will be able to survive as a restaurateur.

The Siteks now oversee the Crown Restaurant Group, which includes Crown Republic, Losanti, Rosie's Italian and Crown Cantina. And no, I needn't have worried. Crown Cantina, which offers modern Mexican fare from the eight regions of Mexico, is better than I could have imagined.

Their corn tortillas, made with Ohio-grown corn, are tied with the versions at Tortilleria Garcia for the best in town. The lamb barbacoa tacos ... where do I begin? The mesquite coldsmoked tuna in a wild mushroom broth ... Are you kidding me? And the enchiladas verdes with juicy braised chicken, queso fresco and smoked black bean puree is a dish I could eat every night of the week.

So, no, the Siteks are not at all in over their heads. In fact, they're just getting started.

326 E. Eighth St., Downtown, 513-345-6783, crowncantina.com.