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# Minnesota

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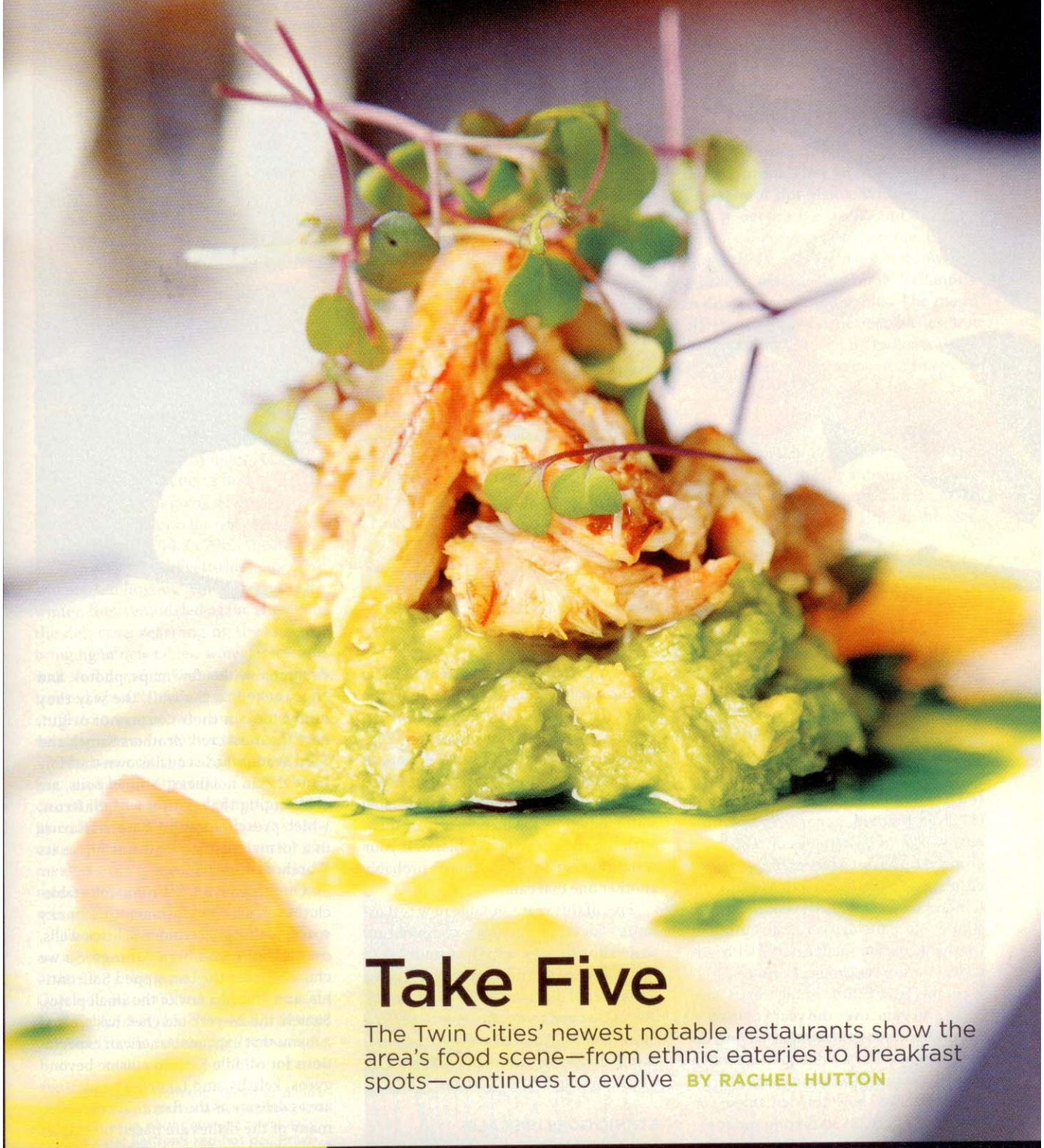
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**PARTY OF FIVE**  
DISHING ON A  
QUINTET OF NEW  
TWIN CITIES  
RESTAURANTS



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## Take Five

The Twin Cities' newest notable restaurants show the area's food scene—from ethnic eateries to breakfast spots—continues to evolve **BY RACHEL HUTTON**

ON THE WEB [TwinCitiesTaste.com](http://TwinCitiesTaste.com)

Searchable restaurant listings, plus videos of new restaurants every month.

Photographs by **DAVID J. TURNER**

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### REVIEW

**YOU DON'T HAVE TO** like the idea that you may have descended from a chest-thumping Neanderthal, but you have to agree—everything evolves. Restaurants included. Since the first restaurant by today's standards arrived on the scene (1725 in Madrid, according to *Guinness World Records*), new concepts have cropped up as fast as fry cooks can griddle plates of hash: the Colonial tavern, the London coffeehouse, the cafeteria, the supper club, the drive-in, the automat, the theme restaurant decorated with vintage guitars or mechanical animals.

In the Twin Cities, dining trends have come and gone over the years as restaurateurs continue to innovate. Not only do the Cities now boast a dining scene with a breadth of cuisines across a range of price points—from \$5 bowls of Vietnamese *pho* to eight-course, \$150 tasting menus—we're also cultivating a culture of original thinking, the kind of award-winning cook-

ing that garners national attention. The public has become sophisticated to the point that novelty—serving Californian or Tibetan cuisine in meat-and-potatoes land—isn't enough. We want oysters as fresh as those we ate on Cape Cod, served in an attractive space by a knowledgeable staff member who will help us pair them with the right Sauvignon Blanc. If your restaurant can't do that, there's probably another one that can.

Five of this year's notable new restaurants—an ethnic eatery, a combination wine shop/bistro, a mall restaurant, a breakfast spot, and a wine bar—are a harbinger of things to come: eateries that are classier and more convenient, serving more inspiring food than their ancestors. So put down that caveman's club, pick up a fork, and dig into 2007's latest.

### ETHNIC GOES UPSCALE

When seeking out great ethnic food, foodies seem to think strip-mall joints

decorated with a few maps, photos, and rugs tacked to the wall, the way they might look in their country of origin, have the most cred. Brothers Sameh and Saed Wadi, whose cousins own the Holy Land deli in northeast Minneapolis, are challenging that notion with **Saffron**, which presents Middle Eastern flavors in a formal, fusion cuisine as hip as its Warehouse District digs.

On a recent visit, Saffron's white tablecloths felt a bit too formal for the funky space, with its big windows, brick walls, orange hues, and high ceilings. So we chose seats at the bar, sipped Saffrontinis, and grazed a few of the small plates. Sameh, the 23-year-old chef, has created a menu that expands American expectations for Middle Eastern cuisine beyond gyros, kebabs, and falafel. The platings are as delicate as the flavors are complex; many of the dishes are based on staples from Western Europe—duck breast, quail, ravioli—with tabbouleh, tahini, an



Algerian/Moroccan/Tunisian marinade called *chermoula*, sultana grapes from Turkey, and *dukkah*, an Egyptian mixture of crushed nuts and spices. The East-West fusion sparks inventive dishes such as curried blue-crab salad and foie gras with pistachios and rose-petal jam. My favorites were the braised-beef ravioli with eggplant and harissa and the tangy, house-made yogurt cheese that served as a base for a “flight” of spices: sumac, *za’atar*, and dried mint. Europe may still corner the market on culinary clout, but other cultures are catching up with their own brand of haute cuisine.

#### ONE-STOP WINE SHOP

With Costco selling everything from crab cakes to caskets, it was only a matter of time before restaurateurs got into the convenience game, fusing related needs into restaurant-takeout-grocery shops. The I Nonni/Buon Giorno complex in Lilydale and the expanded Lucia’s bakery/deli in Uptown got things going a few years ago. The latest innovator is the wine shop/market/bistro France 44. In 2001, the owners added a deli and market to the liquor store and started hosting wine dinners. This winter, they remodeled again: shrinking the deli case, rearranging the shelves, bringing in new tables, wineglasses, and wait staff to create **Cafe 44**. Once you’ve trucked a bunch of great wines and food-stuffs to one spot, why not open a new revenue stream by serving them on-site?

The new café space has soaring ceilings and bright murals of abstracted diners. It’s a bit loud and chaotic, not the place for a romantic dinner, but its classy, casual vibe is perfect for a weeknight meal. It’s the rare wine bar with a kids’ menu—Johnny can have his chicken fingers while Mommy sips a Chardonnay.

The café’s cheese and antipasto plates are as well-considered as its wine list. We ordered by the glass—a brassy French Cotes-du-Rhone Blanc and a more laid-back California Pinot Noir—but wines are also available in tasting portions or, for a

\$10 corkage fee, from bottles purchased next door. We found the kitchen’s cooking to be as impressive as the wine shop’s 4,000-bottle selection. Short ribs braised in red wine were tender and rich, served with fluffy potatoes and crisp green beans. A whole trout was paired with caramelized fennel—there’s never enough caramelized fennel—and a risotto that was neither soupy nor clumpy, cooked perfectly, as if an Italian grandmother had stirred it. On the way out, we picked up a bottle of wine to take to a party that evening and deli items for the next day’s lunch.

#### MALL MEAL MAKEOVER

Just a decade ago, mall dining meant food courts, the realm of teenagers with 10-inch bangs scarfing Taco Bell burritos and Cinnabon rolls. Mall restaurants have evolved into destinations—with shopping an added convenience. When Southdale remodeled a few years ago, adding an Epcot-esque façade of big-name chain eateries (the Cheesecake Factory, P. F. Chang’s, Maggiano’s), it drew thousands

of diners on a typical weekend night, who waited for hours and drove in from as far as Wisconsin.

**Crave**, the newest restaurant at the Galleria in Edina, is geared toward those who want more adventurous eating than the Good Earth’s chicken salads, and cinnamon teas—women who identify more with *Desperate Housewives* than *Ladies’ Home Journal*. They might be moms, but they shop at Hot Mama. With its earthen colors, decorative stone, and floor-to-ceiling glass-encased wine room, Crave’s dining room is reminiscent of its owners’ other restaurant, the trendy Bellanotte in downtown Minneapolis. The menu offers an array of American basics, but with carefully chosen ingredients those simple dishes shine. Penne with rotisserie chicken is spiked with kalamata olives, roasted red peppers, local goat cheese, and organic basil. Pizza is topped with portobello mushrooms, fennel, Brie, and ricotta. Crave may be a mall restaurant, but it’s one that stays open until 2 a.m. on weekends, staffs a full-time sushi chef,



» Clockwise from top: Spill the Wine’s garlic-shrimp parcel with raspberry-chili sauce; wine *pour deux* at France 44’s new café; Saffron’s red-hot bar. Previous pages: Saffron’s blue crab salad (91); sashimi to crave at Galleria (92).