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MARCH 2008 mspmag.com



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Peter Lilienthal: Where Everybody Knows His Name

I've been a restaurant critic in these pages for thirty-one years now. Although it's been an enjoyable run, this avocation isn't as glamorous as it appears. While it's been difficult over a three-decade period to retain complete anonymity, I take some pride that the vast majority of greeters, servers, and chefs in town have no idea who I am when I walk in the door. As a result, I'm often the hapless victim of long waits, undesirable tables, bad food, surly service, and bouts of indigestion. So when my wife, Sallie, and I dine out on our own nickel, the thing we crave most is recognition and interaction.

At our favorite spots, we've not only gotten to know the chefs, but many of the servers, hosts, and sommeliers. It's wonderful to be greeted by name and know that my questions about what's special, fresh, or going on in the local kitchens are treated as more than idle conversation.

Our preferred way to dine these days is to call ahead and see if the chef will prepare a tasting meal. We do this not just at high-end restaurants, but for small ethnic spots as well. When the day is done, it's the people both in the front and back of the house that keep us coming back. You'll never find me spending my hard-earned cash where they hand out pagers to let me know I have the honor of reaching the front of the queue.

When **Alma** first opened, I was lukewarm about it. I had no real sense of the talent and commitment of owner-chef Alex Roberts. Since then, this gem of a restaurant has become one of my favorites. Roberts is a devotee of locally sourced ingredients, and there aren't many others around who are as skilled in their use. I'm equally impressed by his willingness to test boundaries. I challenged Roberts to see if he could amaze Sallie on her birthday with some takes on her favorite items, one of which was fresh abalone. Although he had never cooked the shellfish before, he ordered some from a farm on the West Coast and nailed the preparation. It's no wonder that he's received national acclaim, which includes being nominated for a James Beard award.

There aren't many cities that can boast of a restaurant like **Chambers Kitchen**—operating under the banner of renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten—but thanks to Ralph Burnet, Minneapolis is one of them. Although the chef only comes to town for occasional checkups, he has clearly written the book on assuring that his kitchens reliably represent his name and standards. Whether it's the incredible chicken samosas with cilantro-yogurt dipping sauce, the perfectly prepared satays, the ethereal steamed lobster with butter-fried garlic, or the Minnesota-inspired tempura salt-and-pepper walleye—each and every dish arrives looking and tasting exactly as

the master specifies.

For years, the original **Christos** on Eat Street has been a favorite. Owners Carol and Gus Pappas always greet us with a warm hug, and we inevitably receive a tableside visit by their impish chef Mohamed Armeli. We particularly love having a spontaneous lunch: We start with the wonderful Middle Eastern dip sampler of hummus, *tzatziki*, *melintzanosalata*, and *skordalia* served with a basket of warm pita, then order the fabulous mussels with aioli, a Greek salad, and a glass or two of wine (and for me at least one pour of retsina).

If it's been some time since you've made your way to the chic fourth-floor aerie that is the home of **Cosmos** at the Graves 601 Hotel—you should return. If you enjoy inspired dining, it's worth every penny. A truly talented team runs things: executive chef Stephen Trojahn, Swedish-born chef de cuisine Hakan Lundberg, and pastry expert Khanh

Tran. A recent tasting menu blew me away. Among the over-the-top dishes were a knock-your-socks-off ahi tartare, a black Sambuca foie gras torchon, rare-seared Wagyu beef, and confit of halibut. Sophisticated. Delectable.

I never cease to be amazed that so many people have never heard of **Heartland**. Owner-chef Lenny Russo and his charming spouse, Mega Hoehn, (who runs the front of the house), are a dynamic, energetic duo, and the place has an irresistible romantic intimacy. Sayeth the menu: "[Heartland] features regional cuisine that employs indigenous and cultivated ingredients from the American and Canadian Midwest to create a nightly changing menu featuring two degustations along with a la carte selections . . . (we) have shunned mainline purveyors in favor of small family farmers and artisanal producers." Translation: The kinds of dishes featured here include whitefish, trout, venison, wild boar, foie gras, free-range chicken, and a whole host of interesting ingredients imaginatively prepared, impeccably plated, and sustainably raised. Russo's soups and sauces are particularly sublime.

Although open only a couple of months at this writing, **Heidi's** is already easily deserving of being on this list. Owner-chef Stewart Woodman—an alum of Le Bernardin and Lespinasse who was named a *Food & Wine* best new chef in 2006—eschews the complex and expensive dishes that were his stock-in-trade at Levain and Five and has developed an affordable, creative



menu. The buzz spread quickly about Woodman's Buffalo shrimp, his vegetarian pasta "Bolognese" with porcini mushrooms substituted for meat, and the tender, boneless, short-rib "filet." The former Pane Vino Dolce spot remains cramped, but there's an abundance of warmth and charm here.

Despite the presence of several incredible restaurants, for many diners University Avenue remains a mysterious and ominous destination. **Krua**

For years, Chinese-food lovers pined for a place that featured a credible Sichuan bill of fare. Last year we got it with **Little Szechuan**—a real-deal University Avenue storefront. Bamboo shoots with spicy oil, fish fillet with tofu in spicy broth, Chung King chili shrimp, and beef stew with spicy hot sauce are guaranteed to set your taste buds tingling. Little Szechuan is clean, comfortable, and definitely a cut above the University standard.

Meritage just opened in downtown

roti bread, golden crabmeat balls, and superlative char-grilled beef or main-course portions of wonderful *char kaw teow* noodles (ask for the thin version), or the stir-fried tofu that even leaves those who don't love tofu swooning—it's all but impossible to go away unsated and unsmiling.

Saffron is unquestionably one of the best new restaurants of 2007. The first time I visited this Warehouse District charmer, I wouldn't have guessed the amazing dishes—foie gras with rose petal jam, cauliflower flan—were conceived by a twenty-three-year-old chef. Sameh Wadi, a Tim McKee protégé, is going to make some big waves. Nothing compares to Wadi's modern Middle Eastern fare. And given my propensity to graze, I particularly appreciate the sharing-sized choices, including delicious kofta meatballs and a tangy blue crab salad with avocado, curry, and citrus. Monday's half-priced wine list is a veritable bargain of the decade.

I tend to contemplate Japanese restaurants in broader terms than the success of their ubiquitous and similar menus. An important component of a Japanese meal is hospitality. No place delivers on both fronts as consistently as **Sakura**, home to excellent and traditional *sukiyaki*, *tempura*, *shabu shabu*, and *yosenabe*. My friendship with owner Miyoko Omori dates back to the days when she ran Kikugawa in the Pillsbury Center. I always feel welcome here.

We have Northwest Airlines to thank for the presence of talented and charming Vincent Francoual, a former sous chef for Eric Ripert at Le Bernardin and chef de partie at Lespinasse. In 1997, Francoual's wife, Joanne, was transferred here by NWA. After a stint at *café un deux trios*, he left to open **Vincent—A Restaurant**, the Twin Cities' iconic French restaurant. What many don't know is that there's a great bar menu that can be ordered in the main dining room and includes bistro classics such as escargots, steak tartare, duck *pâté*, and *croque-monsieur*. Equally compelling is the signature Vincent burger—an awesome amalgam of ground beef, beef short ribs, and Gouda cheese. If Vincent isn't off competing in a triathlon or watching a rugby match in some far corner of the world, you'll find him circulating with a smile on his face and a joke to share.



// **Heartland**

Grilled Moneycreek Ranch wild boar chop with Dragmsmith Farm winter pearl onions and tomato coulis

Thailand is an outstanding example of what people are missing: The tiny, welcoming, family spot serves what I consider the best Thai food around. Whether it's the superlative green curry, outstanding noodle dishes, or savory soups, the food is uniformly aromatic and flavorful. The décor is nothing to write home about, but with food this good, who cares? **Krua** is unlicensed, so pick up a bottle of wine next door.

La Belle Vie is on any serious foodie's short list. It's only a matter of time before chef Tim McKee receives a long-overdue James Beard award. Whether it's something as simple as roasted beet salad or as elegant as seared squab, McKee's culinary magic will leave you in awe. Anyone who kvetches about the prices doesn't know what the equivalent buys in Chicago or on the coasts. And with welcoming maitre d' and sommelier Bill Summerville at the door, it's no snob house. This is a place we don't visit nearly as often as we should.

St. Paul, but is already the essential, romantic venue for pre-Ordway dining. New York transplant and chef-owner Russell Klein and his wife, Desta, have turned the former A Rebours into a welcoming and compelling spot. The monthly menu is slightly longer than its predecessor's, offering such brasserie fare as French onion soup, mussels, steak frites with béarnaise, and *plats du jour* that include sole meunière, bouillabaisse, and braised rabbit with mustard sauce. The chicken under a brick and fresh fish are standouts, and I love the wine list.

If anyone needs proof that a lot of Minnesotans will embrace something out of the ordinary, all they need to do is stop by **Peninsula Malaysian Cuisine** on Eat Street. The place is often packed. Indeed, after a few bites of the authentic, flavorful fare prepared in the open-to-view, glittering stainless steel kitchen, everyone we have taken here has been hooked. Whether it's a grazing meal built around crisp, hand-tossed