

The Patriot Ledger

THE YEAR'S BEST RESTAURANTS: Our Patriot Ledger food critic looks back at the best restaurants and meals of the year

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It's been a busy year. We've visited somewhere in the vicinity of 40 restaurants, most of them more than once, and with so much more to choose from, the selection has been that much more difficult. So much so that, in addition to my Top 10 choices for 2005, I'm going to add a few honorable mentions. For the most part, these will be restaurants that have been reviewed before and are fairly well established, thereby giving the newer restaurants on the scene the first shot at top honors.

In rereading my reviews and making my preliminary notes, two things repeatedly struck me. The first is how often the words "unique" and "innovative" came to mind. In each case, it's the chef's individuality, vision and passion that sets them apart - the desire to be better and more interesting than the next chef. And oddly enough, the most telling clues lay in the appetizers and the desserts. No buffalo wings, mozzarella sticks or frozen candy bar ice cream pies, but beautiful beginnings and endings, worthy of the same attention normally paid to the entrees.

The second thing that struck me is the wildly popular marriage of Mediterranean and Pan-Asian influences that wound their way through most of the menus. Two of the top dining choices in their own rights, they peacefully coexist in many of the delicious dishes our favorite chefs have concocted, elevating old classics to new heights. And looking back at Top 10 lists of the past few years, it becomes obvious that although this is not a new trend, it is one that has firmly taken hold.

And so, without further ado, and in no particular order, our top choices of 2005:

Feng Shui

More than filling the vacancy left by KoKo Island, Feng Shui is providing local diners with not only top quality Chinese food, but also beautifully prepared and presented Japanese food and sushi as well. Thoughtfully laid out and elegantly appointed, it's several steps above your average Chinese restaurant, with a smiling staff that is eager to accommodate. The extensive lunch buffet is a bargain at \$8.95.