

DINING | THE YEAR IN REVIEW

From Lamb to Soufflé, Let Us Count the Ways

Thomas McDonald for The New York Times, bottom; Janet Durrans for The New York Times, top
The Basso Cafe in Norwalk, above, and Market in Stamford were also standouts.

By PATRICIA BROOKS
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OF the several fine restaurants I reviewed in 2008, one stands at the top of the list: The Roger Sherman Inn, a New Canaan landmark for many decades, seems to be sparkling under its new ownership. Starters like lobster ravioli and wild mushroom fricassee are delicious introductions to entrees that include pan-seared Arctic char, roasted Colorado rack of lamb and wild striped bass. Add desserts like Grand Marnier soufflé with crème anglaise and you have a grand dining experience — not cheap, but worth every penny.

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Though no other restaurants visited this year equaled the Roger Sherman in creativity, presentation and all-around professionalism, many had merits of their own. The appeal of Basso Cafe, in Norwalk, is its gustatory duality: mostly Mediterranean, reflecting the family background of Renato Donzelli, with a touch of Latin America (Chef Donzelli grew up in Venezuela). The menu, which changes weekly, includes dishes like tuna and mango sashimi surprise, sparked with fresh cilantro, soy dressing and sesame seeds, and luscious desserts like tres leches and coconut flan.

Market, in Stamford, features ultra-fresh ingredients in well-executed New American specialties like fried baby artichokes with shaved Parmesan, garlic aioli and tangy Meyer lemon chips or Chatham cod with a leek-potato fondue, steamed cockles, smoky bacon and a lemon-sparked chimichurri sauce. Desserts like doughnuts filled with ricotta and amaretti are no slouches either.

At the Japanese restaurant Matsuri, in Darien, what stands out is the high quality of the sushi and sashimi. The raw seafood sparkles, jewel-like, and the cooked dishes, like seared tuna steak and pan-seared Chilean sea bass, taste fresh and lively. Even the tempura batter is gossamer-thin and crisp, a test so many Japanese restaurants fail. Best bargains are at lunch, where all entrees include soup, tossed green salad, rice, shumai dumplings and California roll.

Another lingering memory is of Finalmente Trattoria, in Westport, a cozy romantic place where appetizers like carpaccio di tonno or grilled shrimp and calamari have a simple excellence, and entrees include a number of well-prepared pasta dishes as well as appealing classics like osso buco alla Milanese and pan-seared filet of wild king salmon.

Among other rewarding restaurants of 2008 were Crew Restaurant, in Greenwich, memorable for its creative small plates and fresh natural ingredients; Osetra, in South Norwalk, with a menu of small and large plates, in many ingenious combinations; and Cucina Modo Mio in Westport — facing the water, with many well-prepared seafood specialties.

Finally, there is Harvest Supper, in New Canaan; it had no liquor license and no hot coffee or tea when it was reviewed, but the memory of its kitchen skills lingers. Now that it has a wine-and-beer license, and serves hot beverages, I'd return in a nanosecond for its braised short ribs, black trumpet mushroom risotto, pan-seared cod cakes and crispy pork belly.