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Best in DFW: New restaurants of 2010

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After a shaky start, with the economy still in stubborn slow-mo, 2010 shaped up to be quite the interesting year for new Dallas restaurants. One chef cemented his fledgling empire, landing two spots among the city's best new dining rooms. Another chef closed his five-star restaurant, making way for something fresher and more fun. Yet another took farm-to-table cooking to the next level. And geeky-chic found an unlikely home on trendy North Henderson's restaurant row.

Then, as the year drew to a close, what was probably the most highly anticipated restaurant of the year opened – and it opened with a bang.

THE BEST

Lucia

From the mid-December moment when chef David Uygur announced that his new Oak Cliff restaurant was finally open for business, Lucia was, hands-down, the hardest reservation to snag in town. Partly it was because the restaurant is small – only 36 seats (four of them at the bar) – and it's open only for dinner.

But more than that, it was because the former chef of Lola is known to Dallas' dining cognoscenti as one of the city's most talented. We had all waited, hungrily, as we read accounts of Uygur tinkering with the cures for his salumi (all made in-house); he was otherwise maddeningly tight-lipped about his menu.

With expectations running high, one could easily be disappointed.

But with the first bite of the crusty house-baked bread, the first taste of the olives bathed in warm oil and herbs, I was thoroughly charmed. A sip of lively red Moric Blaufrankisch from Austria, a bite of earthy chicken liver crostini set off with pickled cipollini – and the evening unfolds deliciously.

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Don't look for fettuccine Alfredo on the menu; you won't find it. What the chef is doing is very personal. Oyster risotto, bright with parsley; house-made whole-wheat spaghetti topped with rich, saucy braised duck. All the details feel right, down to the garlicky fried bread crumbs with a smidge of anchovy and lemon zest that recently topped cauliflower roasted to exactly the right point of melty caramelization. Uygur's wife and co-owner, Jennifer, runs the front of the house with warmth and aplomb, excitedly recommending this or that from her adventurous, mostly Italian, reasonably priced wine list.

Does the dining room, with its white tiles and open kitchen and rustic benches, feel like Brooklyn? Or San Francisco? No, there in the heart of Bishop Arts, it feels like we're all right at home.

408 W. Eighth St., Dallas. 214-948-4998. www.luciadallas.com.

Here, in alphabetical order, are the rest of the best new restaurants of the year:

THE OTHER SEVEN

Brownstone

After spending several years in California, Top Chef favorite and ex-Shinsei toque Casey Thompson returned to the local spotlight when Brownstone opened in Fort Worth in June.

The dining room has a stylish kind of grace, and Thompson is a leader in developing a farm-to-table approach to Texas cooking. Her menu, which changes with the seasons, features spectacular vegetables; last summer that meant feather-light puffed okra with Indian-accented green pepper sauce, a beguiling succotash and more. But her slow-cooked meat dishes, such as confit pork in a jar called "potted pig" or wine-braised wagyu beef cheeks, are wonderful, too. As the menu has evolved, it looks even more intriguing. The owners have plans to open a Brownstone in Dallas (with Thompson running both kitchens) at some point; till then, Thompson's cooking is reason enough to high-tail it to Cowtown.

840 Currie St. (just south of West Seventh Street), Fort Worth. 817-332-1555. www.brownstonerestaurants.com.

Horne and Dekker

North Henderson Avenue may be the epicenter of hipper-than-thou dining, but owners Shawn Horne and Flynn Dekker resist serving up attitude at Horne and Dekker. Unpretentious and fun, with a geeky-chic Midwestern vibe, it's a great place to stop by for simple dishes executed with an easy touch – tender roast duck breast; crackly crusted fried chicken; juicy, thick-cut barbecue pork steak. I love the bargain Sunday supper, where 15 bucks buys you a big (all-you-can-eat) plate with a green salad and a choice of main course, such as nicely homey meatloaf blanketed in a good mushroom sauce, plus fluffy biscuits and sides. Love the sea-salt brownies, love the little eyeball-shaped, peanut-butter-and-chocolate buckeyes.

2323 N. Henderson Ave., Dallas. 214-821-9333. www.horneanddekker.com.

Neighborhood Services Bar and Grill

There's a reason why there's always a wait at Nick Badovinus' newest restaurant: The place is rollicking good.

Excellent service, upbeat vibe, decent acoustics, comfy booths. What more do you want? The cocktails are great. The patio's relaxed. The menu has something for everyone: polished salads, deviled eggs topped with hot-smoked salmon and cucumber, luscious brisket meatballs. Nicely cooked halibut, good house-made pasta with a three-meat ragu, "big steak dinner." And the best butterscotch pot de crème I've ever tasted.

I hate that you can't make a reservation, but you can call ahead to put your name on a priority list.

10720 Preston Road at Royal Lane (southeast corner), Dallas. 214-368-1101. www.neighborhoodservicesdallas.com.

Neighborhood Services Tavern

Can we help it if Nick Badovinus opened two of the best restaurants of the year? Certainly not.

The menu has much in common with the Bar and Grill, but the Henderson Avenue location is less like a

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restaurant, more like a tavern – or, shall we say, a gastropub. I love the fried little asparagus topped with a tangle of lemon-dill-dressed frisée, and the crisp, hot, pounded veal saddle whose name seems to change with the seasons (now it's "the internationally renowned schnitz"), served with black pepper spaetzel and beer-braised chard. The "cleaver and block" burger? It may be my favorite in town. Same annoying reservation policy as above.

2405 N. Henderson Ave., Dallas. 214-827-2405. www.neighborhoodservicesdallas.com.

Nosh

Many a Dallasite mourns the loss of Aurora, but I'm a much bigger fan of the casual, stylish French-accented bistro Avner Samuel opened in its place. The cooking (thanks to Samuel and executive chef Jon Stevens) has flair and a sense of adventure, from the hot, light escargot fritters or the deconstructed clam chowder to a sumptuous pan-roasted chicken. For a noontime craving, go for a super-deluxe croque monsieur. Pastry chef Steve Noe's desserts, such as his very correct tarte Tatin or a fashionably hazel-nutty financier, sweeten the pot.

4216 Oak Lawn Ave., Dallas. 214-528-9400. www.nosheurobistro.com.

Perry's Steakhouse and Grille

I can't say I was particularly excited when Perry's, an outpost of a Houston-based chain, opened last spring, but it turned out to be one of our better steakhouses – with a snazzy feel, terrific service and a fabulous pork surprise. Eschew the usual starters in favor of a plate of snappy Polish sausage, if you dare to face your physician in the morning. Or begin with puffy morsels of tempuraed rock lobster fashioned into a fanciful Matterhorn shape. Bone-in dry-aged steaks don't disappoint, but the "Perry's famous" pork chop – a mammoth hunk of meat that gets carved tableside after it's been rubbed, aged, cured, smoked and roasted for a few days – is a real event.

2000 McKinney Ave., Dallas. 214-855-5151. www.perryssteakhouse.com.

Ristorante Nicola

Back in March, the owners of Nicola's Ristorante Italiano in Plano added a touch of Italian glamour to the North Dallas landscape with their second Nicola. Not that the food is glamorous – it's nicely done yet basic trattoria fare. But the dining room, the crowd and the charming staff are decidedly swank.

While the pastas didn't quite impress when I reviewed it in May, the antipasti and secondi definitely had their charms. To wit: good aged carpaccio topped with well-dressed arugula salad and sautéed mushrooms, a tomatoey zuppetta di cozze e calamari (squid and mussel soup), a splendid veal chop Milanese. The wine list is small and well-chosen; the stemware's as nice as can be without being Riedel.

8111 Preston Road (between Lovers Lane and West Northwest Highway), Dallas. 214-379-1111. www.nicoladallas.com.

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Go Fish Ocean Club

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