

Chronicle Herald Arts & Life

The best of 2009

Fid top restaurant in Stick a Fork In It Awards

By BILL SPURR Bourgeois Gourmet

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ITS BEEN a while since I've looked forward to a year of visiting restaurants as much as Im anticipating 2010, in large part because two barbecue places are under construction in Halifax.

It's foolhardy to predict success for any restaurant concept, but Im optimistic about barbecue.

First, though, a look back at 2009 and kudos to the restaurants we reviewed over the past 52 weeks, with the annual Stick a Fork In It Awards.

RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR (open division)

Fid Resto, Halifax

It couldnt have been easy for Fid proprietor Dennis Johnston and his wife Monica to make the decision to turn their fine-dining destination into something more relaxed, more approachable. After all, Fid had for years been a favourite of the discerning palate/price is no object crowd. Now? The flavours are no less impressive, but a new d飯r and a new menu have broadened Fids appeal considerably, while maintaining Johnstons commitment to local ingredients. Our meal included incredibly tender hanger steak, caramelized scallops with pork belly, house-made sausages with lentils and the best crem brulee we had all year.

Honourable mention: Da Maurizio, Halifax Chef Andrew King is brilliant in the kitchen while wife Tanya is grace itself at the front of the house, keeping this landmark restaurant in the position its held for years: on top.

Also great: Estia, Halifax; Trendz, Dartmouth

RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR

(budget division)

Tommy Guns Speakeasy Lounge, Windsor

The appearance of this Windsor restaurant/pool hall belies what's going on in the kitchen, where chef Brian Dugas is turning out manicotti and fettuccini the equal of any in Halifax, caesar salad done right and artistically presented seafood chowder.

Honourable mention: the Good Food Emporium, Halifax Another place not getting any marks for appearance, this Gottingen Street eatery has a Korean menu featuring dishes that are hard to pronounce, like bulgogi and jajangmyun, but easy to eat.

SERVER OF THE YEAR

Lorinda (Lola) Thomas, Da Maurizio

This award goes almost every year to someone at a fine-dining restaurant, not surprising since that's where the servers making it a career generally end up something to do with income, I expect. Diners at Da Maurizio expect flawless service and Lola delivers. During our meal, she knew the answers to all my questions, recommended a perfect wine and made everything look effortless.

Honourable mention: Carmen Murphy at the Fireside, Halifax

BEST SEAFOOD

Chester Golf Club

Great fish cakes, pan-fried haddock that flaked apart at the touch of a fork, and large bowls of chowder so full of shrimp and lobster that the chowder is mounded above the rim of the bowl. Combine that food with charming service and an incredible view, and it's hard to beat.

Honourable mention: the Ship to Shore Restaurant & Lounge, Darnley, P.E.I.

The Ship to Shore restaurant is in a sparsely populated part of P.E.I., but the parking lot was full all summer as tourists came from far and wide for the fresh oysters, mussels, scallops and haddock. We also enjoyed great fish and chips at Vickis in Coldbrook, the Mud Creek Grill and Lounge in Wolfville and Murphys Fish & Chips in Truro.

BEST FRENCH FRIES (tie)

Little Europe Bistro & Gourmet to Go, Hydrostone Market, Halifax, and Marcus and Willys Restaurant & Sports Bar, Head of Jeddore

Fresh, hand-cut potatoes and clean, frequently changed oil. It's not that complicated.

BEST ONION RINGS (tie)

Marcus and Willys Restaurant & Sports Bar, Head of Jeddore, and Durty Nellys, Halifax

You know youre doing something right when you can charge almost \$1 per onion ring and get away with it.

BEST BURGER

Tin Pan Bakery & Bistro, Port Williams

What makes a great burger? The patty? The bun? The toppings? All of the above. The burgers at Tin Pan in Port Williams are gigantic, made to order and served on equally huge buns made right there. Sensational.

Honourable mention: Victors Bar and Grill, Halifax

BEST APPETIZER

One of the reasons this job is so good for putting on weight is that we order appetizers and dessert with almost every meal. It can be a real pleasure though, especially when dining on pa jeon at the Good Food Emporium, the tyrokafteri at Estia or the won tons at New Asia, also in Halifax.

BEST WEBSITE

Durty Nellys, Halifax

Be careful clicking on this site at work as theres audio commentary, but its informative and interesting.

BEST CLUB SANDWICH

Farmers Family Diner, Aylesford

Ive long held that the farther out of Halifax you get, the better the club sandwiches are. Farmers Family Diner, outside Aylesford, is definitely in the country, and wouldnt dream of serving a club sandwich on focaccia. With a choice of white or brown homemade bread and fresh roasted turkey, this club is worth the drive.

MOST PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE

Chez Tess, Halifax

The dining room at the Fox Harbr resort in Wallace is probably the most elaborate and Durty Nellys is very comfortable, but Chez Tess has a beautifully put together room, with large works of art, four kinds of light fixtures and dark-stained wooden chairs. Soothing.

BEST WINE LIST

Fox Harbr resort, Wallace

Mind-blowing.

BEST BREAKFAST

Saege, Halifax

Here are some of the notes I wrote after our Sunday breakfast at Saege. "Best orange juice ever. Best hot chocolate ever. Eggs perfect. Smoked bacon incredible." You get the picture.

Honourable mention: the Greek Village Restaurant, Halifax, and Dave Doolittles Sports Bar & Grill, Dartmouth.

BEST DESSERT

Leos Café Annapolis Royal

Always the toughest category in which to make a choice, with at least a dozen contenders worthy of mention, but the best dessert I tasted this year was the raspberry cheesecake at Leos Cafe

Honourable mention: butterscotch pie at Murphys, apple crisp at Porters Steakhouse in Dartmouth, pumpkin cheesecake at Da Maurizio

Happy New Year and happy eating.

Bill Spurr freelanced this column.