

Pluckemin Inn tops list of Best Restaurants for 2007

by Cody Kendall for The Star-Ledger

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The Pluckemin Inn in Bedminster hits all the right notes for food, service, atmosphere and value.

Fine dining in New Jersey continued to improve and evolve during 2007, when some longtime favorites more than held their own among exciting additions to the state's thriving restaurant scene.

While picking my top 10 from the 51 restaurants reviewed this year, I had difficulty narrowing the list. That's a good thing, because it means there are more choices for those seeking memorable meals.

Before presenting my selections, I'll share my criteria for rating a restaurant. It is, of course, a subjective process, but I try to quantify it as much as possible.

First, and most important, I have to emphasize that every visit to a restaurant is done anonymously to replicate as closely as possible the experience you will have there. I never attend grand openings or accept any invitations for free meals.

While my primary consideration is the quality of the food, with an emphasis on imaginative and effective preparation, it is far from the sole factor involved in giving out stars. Service is key, and often the trickiest aspect for a restaurant to manage. Staffers who are knowledgeable, attentive and dress neatly may be hard to find, so a restaurant's success depends on how well employees are trained before they are permitted to operate on their own. The training should extend to everyone on the staff, including the host or hostess and whoever answers the phone. I'm always amazed when a restaurant permits someone who can't communicate properly to perform this task. And why, I wonder, doesn't every restaurant tape up printed travel directions next to the phone. That avoids the annoyance of hearing someone yell to a co-worker, "Hey Joe, how do they get here from the Parkway?"

Atmosphere is another vital aspect. Is everything (including the kitchen and bathrooms) pristine and freshly painted? Are the menus clean or dog-eared? How about the lighting -- is it conducive to reading the menu, or so dim that a flashlight is required?

The noise level also is a prime consideration. There's a difference between buzz and din; unfortunately, too many places haven't figured it out. If tables are close together and there's no soundproofing to offset tile floors or glass windows bouncing the decibels around, it's uncomfortable. Thoughtlessly adding loud music to the mix only makes things worse and demonstrates a lack of understanding about customer comfort. When I have to shout, or strain my ears to hear my dining companions, it's points off for the restaurant.

Value is an important element in the rating. High prices are one thing; highway robbery is another. If the quality and quantity of the food are on a level with superb service and atmosphere, then it's

worth the expense. Overcharging, however, shows a disrespect for the customers, and it backfires, since they're unlikely to return so they can be taken advantage of again.

After 20 years of reviewing, I hoped my campaign to have all specials printed out could have ended successfully. Things are getting better in that regard, but there are still too many places where specials are only recited by the wait staff and worse, no prices are given. Who can remember what's available if more than one or two items are reeled off verbally? With a computer, it's a quick job to print up an addition to the regular menu.

The restaurant business is volatile, but the mark of a truly fine establishment is consistency. The places on this year's top-10 list are so professional that when you have dinner there, you should enjoy the same fine food and service that I experienced.

In 2007, the trend of informal elegance continued. Fine dining today usually means an atmosphere geared toward comfort with a relaxed dress code, but high-style food and service. In that regard, the Pluckemin Inn (359 Route 202-206 South, Bedminster; (908) 658-9292, www.pluckemininn.com), has hit new heights after an auspicious beginning several years ago.

With the addition of environmentally conscious chef David Felton, the food took a turn toward fresh ingredients from the area, such as roasted local chicken with trumpet royal mushrooms and salsify. Further afield, expect the likes of wild Alaskan salmon with the contrasting vegetable tastes of fennel, raw tomato sauce and Japanese eggplant. Many of the entrees come in two sizes, which means that, in effect, you can design your own tasting menu.

The wine options are impressive at the Federalist-style inn with cheery fireplaces, but the service is even more so. Records are kept on repeat customers' preferences. Even if you can't remember which cocktail you had last time, your server will know all about it. "Gracious" is the key word here; you will feel valued from the minute you enter until you drive away, which is why **this is the top restaurant reviewed in 2007.**

Our No. 2 restaurant of the year, one of four to which we gave a 4-star rating, is that lovely fixture on the New Jersey dining scene, the Highlawn Pavilion (Eagle Rock Reservation, West Orange; (973) 731-3463, www.highlawn.com.) The addition of chef Mitchell Altholz gives the place even more of a glow than the fabulous view of Manhattan's sparkling lights. Altholz recently also was made executive chef at Highlawn's sister restaurant, the Manor, in West Orange, but it is to be hoped that won't affect the food at Highlawn. The atmosphere is romantic and going against the trend, more formal. Jackets are required for men; don't even think about trying to get in while wearing sneakers and jeans.

Start with the jumbo lump crabmeat salad highlighted by herb and lemon dressing and avocado mousse, then move on to roasted pork tenderloin stuffed with apricot and illuminated by Armagnac sauce. Savor the glitter in both the food and the skyline.

Celebrity chef David Drake has been refining Restaurant David Drake (1449 Irving St., Rahway, (732) 388-6677; www.daviddrakes.com) to make it an even more splendid spot. If you want a quiet, cozy place to eat, this comfortable setting in a 19th-century house is your ticket to intimate. Drake and chef de cuisine Alex Stotler have collaborated on some amazing dishes for their prix fixe menus, including fall squash soup with Prince Edward Island mussels, complemented by toasted pumpkin seeds and spices. Another selection that will warm up winter is the beautifully balanced plate of braised short ribs with sweet potato puree, toasted pecans and pomegranate reduction.

The Frog and the Peach (29 Dennis St., New Brunswick; (732) 846-3216, www.frogandpeach.com) is a long-running 4-star, where the formula for success was figured out early in the game -- even before New Brunswick became a hot restaurant town. They have stuck to it and chef Bruce Lefebvre keeps coming up with new items to intrigue the palate. Whether it's a mushroom and chard strudel with goat cheese or seared duck breast and chestnut spaetzle, this is a culinary home run.

Our best newcomer this year was Due Terre Enoteca (107 Morristown Rd. (Route 202), Bernardsville; (908) 221-0040, www.dueterre.com.) which moved into the space vacated by Eccoqui. We appreciated the

noise control here, something that was lacking in this restaurant's predecessor, along with food in which the elements were artfully merged. A case in point was the sage, red wine and porcini mushrooms that melted into the veal agnolotti, as well as the rosemary oil, greens and tomato that made a Tuscan bean soup special. There is a lot more evidence attesting to the expertise of consulting chef and partner Michael White and chef de cuisine Bill Dorrler. The wine selection here is also something special.

Running a close second among the newcomers was 55 Main (55 Main St., Flemington; (908) 284-1551, www.55main.com.) The value is outstanding at chef/owner Jonas Gold's BYOW establishment, where you'll enjoy the extra touches on every dish, such as the bacon and blue cheese potato fritters with a black Angus steak.

RosaLuca's Italian Bistro (1114 Route 173, Asbury; (908) 238-0018, www.rosalucas.com) features fabulous pasta and such dazzling creations as grilled eggplant topped with a Parmesan souffle. This place is a labor of love for chef/owner Carmine Castaldo and his wife, Jill.

Arthur's Landing (Pershing Circle at Port Imperial, Weehawken; (201) 867-0777, www.arthurslanding.com) is, like Highlawn, a spot where the scenic panorama of Manhattan is part of the attraction, but chef Michael Haimowitz makes sure the food doesn't play second fiddle to the view. We were impressed by the roasted dayboat monkfish, served with cranberry beans, escarole, shemiji mushrooms and truffle relish that gave this seafood dish flair.

Table 8 (615 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair; (973) 746-2233; Table8nj.com.) offers style in both decor and food. Jonathan Da Rocha and David Viana, the co-executive chefs, produce such memorable delights as pan-seared skate wing with anchovy paste atop pappardelle, offering welcome variations in flavor and textures. Restaurant owner Demetri Malki never fails to make guests feel at home in this BYOW.

Krave Cafe & Caterers (15 E. Clinton St., Newton; (973) 383-2600, www.kravecaterers.com.) is proof that gems can be found in the most out-of-the-way places, even an unprepossessing strip mall.

Chef/owner Rich Hashway and his wife, Kate, make sure the attractive place is up to snuff, with snappy service and food from a variety of cultures in up-to-the-moment adaptations. My favorite item at this BYOW was among the desserts, a classy key-lime pie with a gingersnap crust, but everything we tried here was special.

The most promising newcomer that didn't make this year's top 10-list is Spuntino Three 60 (120 Albany St., New Brunswick; (732) 246-0360, www.spuntino360.com.) Their Umbrian chestnut soup is a dream dish I would be happy to enjoy at every meal.

Let's hope 2008 holds many more dining delights, as the Garden State restaurant scene continues its rise and prospers.

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