

# A drum roll for 2005's restaurant of the year

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Each year at this time I fondly look back on another year of dining. And while this column will still focus only on the restaurants I have reviewed this year, it has also given me an opportunity to reflect on what has been a wonderful 10 years of reviews.

I always like to thank those who have dined with me for reviews. Some dinners are good, and some are not so good, but my friends who dine with me always approach each restaurant with enthusiasm, and helpful input. This year thanks go to Kevin, Diane, Michi, Bill, Vic, Kim, LaTrea, Tim, Nancy, Steve, Richard, Randy, Colleen, Ron, Vince, Arnie, Ann, Barry, Liz, Lance, Penney, Jay, Ginger and Leonora.

I also have special thanks to several people. I thank my mom Sylvia, whose wonderful cooking made me an enthusiastic eater, and even more enthusiastic cook. I also thank my dad Dallas, who fortunately dined with me on reviews frequently until we lost him far too early. He encouraged me to push the edge of the culinary envelope wherever we traveled. Ironically, it was also because of my dad that I knew what the vanilla ice cream (his favorite dessert) tasted like at every restaurant I visited.

Special thanks also go to my friends John and Debbi, who are two of my most frequent dining companions. I value their knowledge of food and wine, as well as their opinions. They have joined me at the best and worst restaurants I have reviewed, and make each dinner a pleasure.

And thank you to my wonderful husband Todd. He is there for all my reviews, and has particularly keen and helpful insight in the area of service. In the past two years he has gone from having very little interest in food to being a chow-hound in training, with an increasingly astute sense of taste. He makes every day a joy.

We began and ended the year with baked goods. First off was Panera Bread, where I go for their excellent semolina bread. And last week Not Just Bagels showed that you don't have to be fancy or formal, as long as you do what you set out to do well.

This was the year for long-established restaurants to change locations. Mary's Kitchen moved from Beal to Eglin Parkway. Summerhouse relocated from downtown Fort Walton Beach to Okaloosa Island.



Daily News file photo

**A beautiful location, improved service and innovative cuisine helped vault Chef Tim Creehan's Beach Walk Café to the top of the local restaurant scene for 2005.**

Rosemary Beach's Summer Kitchen and Blue by Night started out on the south side of 30A and is now found across the street on the north side of 30A. Noi's on Racetrack Road used to be located on Eglin Parkway; and Pandora's moved from one end of Santa Rosa Boulevard to the other, while deftly keeping the feel of the original location intact.

We had lots of food from around the world. Ali Baba gave us a buffet filled with classic Greek fare. Havana's gave us Cuban classics, and Georg's served excellent German food (go for the schnitzel, red cabbage and spaetzle). Mulhollow's in Destin started serving Indian cuisine (the lamb chops were spectacular), and is now adding Vietnamese food to the menu.

Excellent Asian food is easy to find in our area, and this year Noi's, Maikong Thai and Thai Elephant provided plenty of Thai food to like. Nida's Thai & More not only gave us simply excellent Thai food, but added respectable Philippine, Italian, Mexican, Chinese and American fare to the menu.

As always, there was lots of Italian food to be had, and pizza was the star of the show at most of those restaurants. DeVinci's in Navarre gave us Fast Eddie's Clam & Garlic Pizza, while Navarre's Vinnie R's had excellent hot Italian sausage. Theo's in Miramar Beach brings St. Louis-style pizza to the area (and makes a fabulous roast beef sandwich as well).

But the best pizza of the year

was found at Amore in Gulf Place at Santa Rosa Beach. The thin-crust pizzas feature high-quality toppings in delicious combination. Two of my favorites are the pancetta with crushed red pepper and caramelized onions, and the melon with Parma ham. Sandwiches are also excellent, and a pesto bruschetta served with an onion marmalade is an example of why this small restaurant earned 4 stars.

Grayton Beach clearly became a place to go for breakfast. Another Broken Egg Café opened there this year, serving spectacular omelets and other breakfast dishes, along with good sandwiches and salads. And Hibiscus turned in a 4-star performance with its excellent (and deceptively healthy) breakfast food served with a hug. Breakfast was also a treat at Sugar Loaf Café in Navarre (big fluffy biscuits).

We found healthy, but tasty fast food this year in the form of Camille's Sidewalk Café located in the Silver Sands Factory Stores. I am a big fan of their fresh-tasting tomato soup, and the turkey habanero panini.

Beef O'Brady's and Buffalo's Reef both served excellent hot wings in a variety of sauces. They also both provided individual televisions in booths so that diners could change the channel whenever they wanted.

The Busy Bee in DeFuniak Springs won me over with their Busy Wings (hot wings with a sauce of honey, hot sauce, garlic, and cilantro) and Crunchy Key

Largo Fish sandwich. I also liked the sandwiches served on pretzel bread at Johnny O'Quigley's in Destin.

Both Kenny D's and Blue Orleans pay tribute to New Orleans with authentic food from a city known for wonderful food. All I have to do to be transported back to the Big Easy is take a bite of Blue Orleans' shrimp po-boy. Of course it doesn't hurt to follow it up with a beignet or two.

Local seafood was on the menu at Frankie's Crab House in Niceville, and Hog's Breath and AJ's in Destin. Hog's Breath also brought us tasty barbecue. Destin gained another good barbecue option when Boar House Barbecue opened this year.

Options in the steak category ran from casual to over the top, and all were good. We did the cooking at Rock Star where our filet (and tuna and shrimp) was served on hot rocks. High quality, expertly prepared steak, and favorite dishes from a variety of restaurants, were found under one roof at Perry's in Niceville.

Pandora's in Fort Walton Beach has consistently served up excellent steak for decades, and excels in quality of food and professional service. Not much changes at Pandora's, and that is a good thing, as loyal diners return often wanting the bone-in rib-eye, buttery filet, and delicious fried eggplant topped with crawfish and Andouille sauce.

It is hard to say much more about Seagar's except that the restaurant is simply perfect. Dining at Seagar's is as much

about the perfectly prepared steaks and seafood, as it is about the service that is timed to the millisecond of perfection. An exceptional staff anticipates everything diners could want. With tableside preparation of a number of dishes, plus a show kitchen at the front of the room, Seagar's is truly theater for dinner.

The most difficult task I have each year (but also one of the most enjoyable) is choosing the restaurant of the year. This year was no exception. There were contenders such as Seagar's and Pandora's. Other 4-star possibilities such as Hibiscus with its wonderful breakfast, and Amore with its fantastic pizza, were more modest, but equally deserving.

But in the end, one restaurant emerged at the front. Beach Walk Crystal Beach managed to put everything together in the areas of food, service and value to be 2005's restaurant of the year.

While the casually elegant character of Beach Walk remains constant, things are always being adjusted to make it the best restaurant possible. When reviewed in June, there were minor service issues that the restaurant took to heart, and has overcome beautifully. And while Beach Walk it is not inexpensive, the value is high, and the restaurant is more accessible than some other upscale restaurants in our area.

Beach Walk has a lovely setting, with an attractive room that provides a beautiful view of the gulf. But the star of the show at Beach Walk is the food. Local seafood, excellent quality meats, and fresh produce are highlighted. Tastes are crisp and clean, with influences borrowed from around the region and around the world.

While I can always find old favorites on the menu, Chef Tim Creehan is not afraid of innovation, and delicious new possibilities are always ahead. That will continue with the recent addition of Executive Chef Clay Lichterman (who interned at venerable Seeger's in Atlanta).

What makes Beach Walk excel is that it reaches out, and tries something new. New things are in store, and I can't wait.

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