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Restaurant Review

This year's fairest of the fare

By **Nancy Leson**

Seattle Times restaurant critic

I've lifted more than my fair share of forks, chopsticks and fingers in the line of duty in 2006. This year's "Best Bites" offer a menu of four-star memories that include everything from an apple-wood-smoked duck breast to a tower of smoked salmon and purple Peruvian potatoes; terrific tartines to delectable dim sum; a classic take on crème brûlée to a creative porcini mushroom brûlée.

Love at first bite

Goodbye, Godiva. Forget it, Fran. I've said "Hello, I love you!" to the boozy foie gras bonbons served at **Licorous**, the cozy cocktail lounge on Capitol Hill. These luscious butterballs of foie are so good, they should be (Shut my mouth, but put a foie gras bonbon in there first!) illegal.

Dinners at **Veil**, near Seattle Center, began with a bite-size gift from the chef, whose amuses-bouches included memorable mouthfuls of crab salad with chorizo; tuna tartare with fennel and parsley oil; and a swoony spoonful of puy lentil salad with a plume of crisp prosciutto .

Hidden away on the plaza level of the Bank of America Building is **O'Asian Kitchen**, whose daily dim sum is a marvelous movable feast that included spicy turnip cake with XO sauce, fried stuffed-crab claws, meaty chicken feet, crisp honey walnut prawns, petite hom bao and a heap of honey-glazed spare-riplets, each savory treat better than the last.

Salad days

The butter lettuce and green apple salad at **Madoka on Bainbridge** was simple and sublime. Dressed with pitch-perfect vinaigrette sweetened with verjus and fireweed honey, it arrived as a nest of soft lettuce leaves

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MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES

O'Asian Kitchen, on the plaza level of the Bank of America Building, offers a marvelous movable feast of dim sum.

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garnished with tart green apple, caramelized walnuts and chunks of creamy Point Reyes blue cheese.

A glass of French-oak-barrel-fermented semillon from Seattle's own Wilridge Winery was enough to make me fall hard for Queen Anne's Italian-accented wine bar, **Bricco Della Regina Anna**. Then I cemented my love affair with a sensational smoked trout salad, prettily presented with roasted scarlet beets and crème fraîche.

Soup's on!

Though sadly short-lived, **Fork** on Capitol Hill will be remembered for its regal rendition of royal cauliflower soup speckled with black truffle, scented with truffle oil and showered with a fine dice of poached apples.

You take Manhattan. And New England. I'll take another bowlful of the aromatherapeutic lemongrass clam chowder at **Typhoon!** Heavy on the clams and delicate on the tongue, this satisfying soup was a summer special at those Thai twins in Seattle and Redmond.

A toast to toast

Pike/Pine's darling **Dinette** is justly famous for its tantalizing toasts — slabs of rustic bread with glam goodies like gorgonzola dolce and prosciutto de Parma. My favorite, though, wears chicken-liver mousse and Mama Lil's spicy pickled peppers.

La Paysanne — caramelized onions and an oozy wedge of crottin — make a very French spread as one of the terrific tartines served at **Saint-Germain** in Madison Valley. Every bit as good was Monsieur Seguin, with its schmear of garlicky goat cheese and rosy smoked duck breast.

Fabulous fungi

The porcini mushroom brûlée at **Tilth** in Wallingford looks like dessert and tastes like a walk in the woods. Deeply flavored with dried porcini, it's topped with a touch of sugar, then torched and given a cap of vanilla-bean foam: divine.

At **Shun**, near University Village,

Hot spots

Asteroid

3601 Fremont Ave. N. (Suite 207), Seattle; 206-547-9000

Bricco Della Regina Anna

1525 Queen Anne Ave. N., Seattle; 206-285-4900 or www.briccoseattle.com

Carmelita

7314 Greenwood Ave. N., Seattle; 206-706-7703 or www.carmelita.net

Cocina Esperanza

3127 N.W. 85th St., Seattle; 206-783-7020 or www.cocinaesperanza.com

Crémant

1423 34th Ave., Seattle; 206-322-4600 or www.cremantseattle.com

Dinette

1514 E. Olive Way, Seattle; 206-328-2282 or www.dinetteseattle.com

Lampreia

2400 First Ave., Seattle; 206-443-3301 or www.lampreiarestaurant.com

Licorous

928 12th Ave., Seattle; 206-325-6947 or www.licorous.com

Madoka

241 Winslow Way W., Bainbridge Island; 206-842-2448 or www.madokaonbainbridge.com

Mixtura

148 Lake St. S., Kirkland; 425-803-3310 or www.mixtura.biz

Monsoon

615 19th Ave. E., Seattle; 206-325-2111 or www.monsoonseattle.com

Moxie

530 First Ave. N., Seattle; 206-283-6614 or www.moxieseattle.com

O'Asian Kitchen

800 Fifth Ave., Suite Plaza 1 (Bank of America Building), Seattle; 206-264-1789 or www.oasian.net

matsutake dobin mushi was the lightest, smokiest of "teas" — a broth made of matsutake mushrooms steeped in dashi, garnished with shrimp and ginkgo nuts and presented in a teapotlike dobin whose lid is removed to release the clear perfume of autumn, distilled.

You say "to-may-to"

The cherry-tomato salad at **Saint-Germain** paired teensy, summer-sweet cherry tomatoes with petite niçoise olives, adding a sprinkling of fresh thyme and bright toss of orange vinaigrette. Voilà! — magic in my mouth.

When some of my restaurant-critic cronies showed up from Points Elsewhere to sample Seattle's best eats, I joined them at **Lampreia** in Belltown, where we reveled in a multicourse meal that included heirloom tomatoes and luscious goat cheese. The precious fruit was served umpteen ways including whole, stewed, sun-dried and as "tomato water."

I say "pa-tah-to"

The bistro frites at Fremont's **35th Street Bistro** are as impressive as they are addictive: a heaping helping of crisp shoestring fries, showered with garlic oil, grated Reggiano cheese, fresh chives and (gilding the lily) crème fraîche.

La causa morada marina translates as Dungeness crab, sandwiched between a lavender-hued mash of purple Peruvian potatoes and crowned with a rosette of smoked salmon — among the many "mixturas" (little dishes) that blew me away at Kirkland's contemporary Peruvian restaurant, **Mixtura**.

I anchovies

Vibrant veggies — carrots, cauliflower and grilled zucchini — took a dramatic dive into a classic bagna cauda at the new **Asteroid** in Fremont. Perfectly pungent, that dippity-do delivered a salty kick via a warm bath of garlic, anchovy and oil.

Perché No Pasta & Vino, near Green Lake, served fabulous fettuccini neri con fagioli e accughi, an elegant tangle of squid-ink pasta, lush with cannellini beans and anchovies.

Egging me on

Perché No Pasta & Vino 1319 N. 49th St., Seattle; 206-547-0222 or www.perchenopastaandvino.com

Shun Japanese Cuisine

2510 N.E. Blakely St., Seattle; 206-522-2200

Red Fin

612 Stewart St., Seattle; 206-441-4340 or www.redfinsushi.com

Saint-Germain

2811A E. Madison St., Seattle; 206-323-9800 or www.saintgermainseattle.com

Sitka & Spruce

2238 Eastlake Ave. E., Seattle; 206-324-0662 or www.sitkaandspruce.com

Sostanza Trattoria

1927 43rd Ave. E., Seattle; 206-324-9701 or www.sostanzaseattle.com

Szechuan Chef

15015 Main St. Suite 107 (Kelsey Creek Center), Bellevue, 425-746-9008

35th Street Bistro

709 N. 35th St., Seattle; 206-547-9850 or www.35bistro.com

Tilth

1411 N. 45th St., Seattle; 206-633-0801 or www.tilthrestaurant.com

Typhoon!

1400 Western Ave., Seattle; 206-262-9797; 8936 161st Ave. N.E., Redmond, 425-558-7666 or www.typhoonrestaurants.com

Veil

555 Aloha St., Seattle; 206-216-0600 or www.veilrestaurant.com

Zinnia

15130 Main St., Mill Creek (Mill Creek Town Center); 425-357-0512 or www.zinniawa.com

Long known for its sophisticated take on Vietnamese cuisine, **Monsoon** on Capitol Hill is now a brunch joint, too. Those daytime delights included carefully coddled eggs en cocotte perfumed with fresh herbs.

Spring brings Yakima asparagus, and at **Carmelita** in Greenwood I ate those toothsome stalks as a grilled asparagus salad dressed with poached egg, shaved Parm and a sublime side of citrus-scented bulgur wheat.

Giving it a shot

Talk about a perfect match. The Moxie Shot, served at **Moxie** on Lower Queen Anne, brought a briny Westcott Bay Euro-flat on the half-shell, nestled in shaved ice alongside an ice-cold shot of Skyy vodka.

Comfort me with pasta

The rustic Campanella Veneziana at **Sostanza Trattoria** in Madison Park was so homey-good, I wheedled the recipe out of chef Lorenzo Ciancusi. Now I make this pasta — bell-shaped Barilla-brand, simmered with ground beef, veal, onion and a wine-enriched demi-glace and finished with cream — at home. (Pssst: His is better.)

You can't be too rich or too, uh, rich. Case in point: the lobster macaroni and cheese at **Veil**. Troffiete (tiny squiggles of hand-rolled pasta) joined mega-hits of fresh lobster in a creamy, sweet vermouth-laced shellfish reduction. Oooh.

Porking out

The roasted pork enchiladas at **Cocina Esperanza** on Crown Hill scored big as four corn tortillas, each filled with tenderly roasted pork topped with a rousing ruddy (not muddy) salsa rojo.

At **Crémant** in Madrona (now open for lunch!), melting fat-enhanced pork rillettes are served in a cunning little French canning jar to spread on toast, or as part of an incredible assortment of charcuterie.

If it quacks like a duck

Sour-cherry-cracked-pepper jus added sweet and heat, the perfect complement to the plump meat and beautifully burnished skin of apple-wood-smoked breast of duck at **Madoka**.

A spring fling at Eastlake's tiny **Sitka & Spruce** involved a farm-raised duck breast, deftly seared and perfumed with lavender, then paired with those delightful young onions we know and love as ramps.

Gifts from the sea

The panko-fried Pine Cone Fish at **Typhoon!**, a thick fillet of fresh halibut, was scored and magically shaped into its coniferous cousin. It offered up crisp meaty morsels plus crunchy skin hidden inside the "cone."

The Szechuan-flavor crab at Bellevue's **Szechuan Chef** was a mighty mess (worth it!) whose fragrant spices made my lips hum the happiest of tunes. It came wokked with scallions, dried Szechuan peppers and chubby peanuts, then carefully cracked for easy extraction.

Tilth's charred-rare St. Jude's albacore tuna, presented as a Northwest version of salad niçoise, wowed with thick slices of silky fillet served with heirloom tomatoes, a brunoise of haricots vert and olives, and a delicious

deviled egg.

The lunch-time kaiseki bento at **Red Fin**, downtown Seattle in the new Hotel Max, was a \$20 bargain: a nine-item extravaganza including sushi, sashimi and exceptional tempura. Fishified highlights included escolar, monkfish liver and fresh king crab.

Cheese, please

Everyone's doing a cheese plate these days, but Belltown's **Brasa** goes one better with a cheese table set out for all to ogle. Choices abound from around the globe. My choice? Pierre Robert, Schwartz & Weiss, an Iowa Amish blue, Spanish garrotxa and two taleggio-like cheeses — one a stinky French number, the other Italian — presented with fruit, rustic bread and lacy slices of honey-coated walnut toast.

A sweet finish

Mill Creek Town Center's bustling bistro, **Zinnia**, gives shop-till-you-droppers a world of excuses to stop by. No. 1, says me, is the coconut cake, a layered lovely hoisted to higher heights with a blizzard of flaky coconut, finely ground pecans and cream cheese frosting.

At **Crémant**, I cracked fissures into a pond of crème brûlée whose bronzed-sugar coat shone in the candlelight like a miniature skating rink illuminated by a full moon. It was — no jive — the best brûlée I've ever eaten.

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