



Joanne Kates

2008 DINING AWARDS

HOW ARE CANADIANS LUCKY? There are too many ways to count, but if an army marches on its belly, a city thrives on good eats. Fortunately, the GTA is one of the most ethnically diverse places on earth, and a decade of prosperity and breakneck immigration have upped the gastronomic ante considerably. Today Toronto has more — and more varied — great food than any city in the world. But great has been redefined; the past year has seen the triumph of ethnic over white tablecloth, bistro over baroque and inexpensive over high-end. **by Joanne Kates**

NORTH TORONTO, LEASIDE AND ROSEDALE

BEST DIM SUM IN NORTH TORONTO

CHA LIU
White tablecloths, murals, plants, halogens and bamboo take dim sum up the social ladder. Cha Liu does splendid soup: shrimp and Chinese mushroom dumpling in chicken broth is fresh dumplings with fat, sweet chunks of shrimp and black mushroom in rich chicken broth with wilted peppery pea greens. Move on to steamed shrimp, scallop and asparagus dumpling, which is thin emerald slices of asparagus atop big hunks of seafood in gossamer wrap. Steamed scallop, celery and mushroom dumpling is even more delicate. If garlic, black bean and spare ribs are your idea of the Holy Trinity, get two orders. Like a little luscious grease? Chinese ham and green onion pancake is thin, flaky and fragile. 2352 Yonge Street, Second Floor (416) 485-1725

CARNIVORE HEAVEN

CLUCK, GRUNT AND LOW
... is what happens when you build a BBQ franchise on the cooking of a French chef. Marc Thuet's beef brisket is the classic southern slow-smoked pulled meat, a triumph of taste and texture: It's sweet and moist and bursting with flavour, thanks to beautifully balanced barbecue sauce. His sweet 'n' sticky ribs feature that marvellous BBQ sauce, and dry rub ribs use a restrained spice mix, miles ahead of the over-salted supermarket spice rub that is ubiquitous on Toronto ribs. 1620 Bayview Avenue (416) 544-0505

PIZZA AS SOUL FOOD

CHEGA
Chega is a soigné restaurant with big generous tables and banquettes and smooth service. Their claim to fame is one ridiculously luscious, improbable pizza: Pulled pork pizza is sweet southern BBQ style pork shreds atop crunchy crust with mozzarella; what could be better? The kitchen is also more than competent at veal loin, and do not neglect dessert:

They deconstruct lemon meringue pie and the result is a tart lemon curd cloud on crumbly shortbread crust, beside a pouffe of browned meringue atop red fruit compote. 3391 Yonge Street (416) 850-5118

DOWNTOWN

DABBLE IN MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY

LUCIEN
When Simon Bower finished licking his wounds after YYZ went belly-up, he opened Lucien, a warm, rosy restaurant, with chef Scot Woods, who uses the lessons of molecular gastronomy — but with restraint, as grace notes and little entertainments, neither to impress nor overwhelm. He wraps pork belly in plastic to seal in juices and then cooks

it very slowly to create soft, fat pink flesh throughout. How smart to set off the divine decadence of pork belly with the bite of kimchi pickle, the liquid of barely poached egg and the snap, crackle and pop of toasted barley on top. His food is inspired. With silken service from Simon Bower, Lucien is as good as it gets. 36 Wellington Street East (416) 504-9990

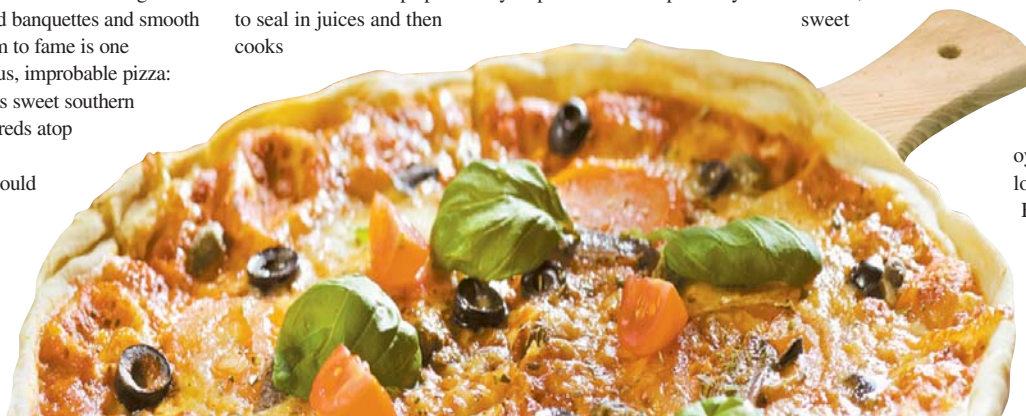
TRY THAI AS A WORK OF ART

SORN THAI
Thai restaurants and pan-Asian places featuring Thai food are a dime a dozen in Toronto, but Sorn Thai stands out from the pack. Their soups are intensely flavourful, especially Thai hot and sour soup, with deep rich flavour and impeccably balanced hot, sweet

and sour tones. Beef with eggplant is tender beef fragrant with basil, chilies and onions, and cashew chicken is superlative, its garlicky orange scent uplifting tender chicken and crunchy cashews. Green mango salad sparkles with flavour, and the curries are hot and smooth. 550 Yonge Street (416) 322-3563

HOLY KOBE

PRIME
The gorgeous new steak house in the Windsor Arms Hotel serves American but not Japanese Kobe beef. Their Kobe strip loin (\$115 for 10 ounces) has fabulous flavour and is significantly more tender than a normal steak, but does not veer into the excess fattiness of Japanese Kobe. Prime also does a Kobe burger for \$27. This hunk of pleasure between crispy buns is a thick, red carnivore's dream. Their fixings live up to the same standard: Clam chowder is light, and brimful of fresh tender clams. Ungreasy fried oysters sit pretty atop a small chunk of lobster in richly tarragon-scented Béarnaise. The frites are fresh, crisp and blessed with dangerously creamy house-made mayo. Windsor Arms Hotel, 18 St. Thomas Street (416) 971-9666



Kates Greats continued from previous page

SAMPLE SUCCULENT SUSHI

KAISEKI SAKURA
Culinary whiz Daisuke Izutsu was chef to the Japanese consul-general here for five years and then worked for a year under Marc Thuet at his bistro. His restaurant offers kaiseki tasting menus. He builds a plate like a Lilliputian palace, mindful of harmonies, mixing and matching media and metaphor. For example, his edible spring garden, a riot of colour, built on sashimi of amberjack, and grouper rolled in rice cracker crumbs. There are pale green minuscule shavings of cucumber, corkscrew curls of raw red and yellow beets, green and red shiso leaves, and daikon pureed with bright red chilies. The server gives us a small grater and a piece of fresh green wasabi root to spike the soy. With the sashimi comes liquid homage to spring: a cocktail of finely chopped cucumber with sake, lemon juice and sugar.

556 Church Street
(416) 923-1010

MIDTOWN

MEET THE QUEEN OF EGLINTON

SEVEN NUMBERS
When Mama Rosa Marinuzzi came back to Eglinton, becs fins lined up for her down-home, delectable Italiana. Seven Numbers is dark and cosy. Having trouble reading the menu on the blackboard? No worries, your waiter will make a joke about reading glasses, and shout above the din to give you the goods. Mama Rosa is in better form than ever, her pasta robust, her salads jazzy, and she charges nine bucks for duck braised in duck stock ... and it's tender and tasty! Ten bucks buys a big plate of osso bucco — not the snazziest meat in town, but the econo-cut is more than made up for by the deep rich meat sauce with chunks of carrot and celery.

516 Eglinton Avenue West (416) 322-5183



Chef Hemant Bhagwani

North Toronto Indian that's second to naan

AMAYA, 1701 Bayview Avenue, 416-322-3270
Ordinary Indian restaurants throw red-marinated chicken in the oven and call it tandoori. Amaya does roasted duck breast, ruby-red slices in orange-inflected sauce with shredded apple. Move over, duck a l'orange. Big, barely cooked shrimp sit in tamarind-scented green mango curry with green chili and fenugreek, sweet and hot and perfectly balanced. Coconut lobster curry is what happened when the Maharani met Marie Antoinette: a sauce so creamy it meets and matches the soft flesh of barely cooked lobster, but unlike a French cream sauce, this one is jazzed with ginger, garlic and cardamom pods. Ditto the thrill of Amaya's breads, their garlic naan being a triumph of flaky delicate bread with toasted garlic and butter to make it dangerously delightful. Amaya is to downmarket curry houses what the Taj Mahal is to a hovel.

A FLAVOURFUL FUSION REACTION

CRU
Chef Shane Waite rolls gnocchi so light and sweet they mimic clouds, and sets them in tarragon-scented light lobster cream along with chunks of barely-cooked, sweet, moist lobster. His six hour slow-roasted Berkshire pork belly is almost erotic. It is crispy crunchy on the outside in that illicit pork crackling way, its meat juicy on the inside. Poached sour cherries and black trumpet mushrooms make clever companions, in a rich, strong sauce of meat stock cooked down and gentled with cream. Cru is a sensitive reno of a 1930s Art Deco Woolworth's store, with ochre walls and gorgeous architectural grace notes.

946 Royal York Road (416) 237-1282

UPTOWN

USE YOUR NOODLE

AJISEN RAMEN
Ramen, the noodle and broth meal-in-a-bowl, was born in China and brought to Japan in the 17th century. After World War Two, Japan was flooded with cheap American flour, which resulted in ramen noodle shops by the

hundreds. When Momofuku Ando invented instant noodles in 1958, the world started adding boiling water to instant ramen. And we still do. But nothing replaces the real thing. Ajisen Ramen has 300 branches worldwide, and two in the GTA. The Ajisen style of ramen uses milky white broth made from slowly cooking pork ribs to extract maximal flavour. (Other styles use either chicken or miso broth.) Ajisen serves the broth with noodles, and a variety of meat, seafood and vegetable garnishes, ranging in price from \$5.95 to \$9.75 — for a full dinner! Takeout may be advisable, for the room is the visual equivalent of heavy metal music: Screaming loud fuchsia plastic chairs/banquettes and a gigantic mural of Sumo wrestlers. One almost needs sunglasses. But the ramen is very fine, its pork broth rich and smooth, its garnishes excellent. Personal fave is sweet chewy pork ramen. 5229 Yonge Street (416) 223-0618 and 7010 Warden Avenue, Unit 23 (905) 470-6318



BEEFED UP KOREAN BBQ

HO SU
Ho Su is an inexpensive and authentic Korean resto, unfancy but pleasant. Their best appetizers are beef galbi (chewy beef marinated in sugar and soy and grilled) and chap chae (glass noodles with great al dente veg and rich sweet/sour taste). Ho Su also does very good kham poong ki (Korea's sweet spicy batter fried chicken) and wonderful bulgogi — tender thinly sliced grilled beef zinged with very lightly pickled carrots and cabbage. 2352 Yonge Street (416) 322-6860

THAI WITH A TWIST

SATAY ON THE ROAD
How great that S.O.T.R. has opened an uptown location, because a) its ambience is a big improvement on most pan-Asian eateries and b) the food is consistently competent. Their best are perfectly cooked satays (beef, chicken and nicely garlicky shrimp) with chunky peanut sauce, unusually light coconut chicken soup, robust pad Thai, and deep rich Thai curries smoothed with coconut milk and rendered aromatic with garlic, chilies and Thai basil. 2003 Avenue Road (416) 488-5153

PARTAKE IN PERSIAN DELIGHTS

ZAFFRON
Zaffron is a cosy, warm room in shades of ochre and blue, with glass French doors that open onto a dining terrace in warm weather. Stick with the Persian menu items and avoid their Italiana. Persians adore eggplant, so try bademjan kebob (eggplants stuffed with sweet/sour pomegranate and walnuts) and kashkeh bademjan (even better — eggplant puree jazzed with mint, garlic, onion and yogurt). For mains there are traditional Persian stews built on veal, lamb and chicken, all beautifully seasoned, interesting and nicely cooked. Skip the charcoal BBQ items, which are far less interesting. Ditto desserts. 6200 Yonge Street (416) 223-7070

905

DEVOUR DIVINE DUMPLINGS

CASA-IMPERIAL
The building that is now Casa-Imperial was built as a farmhouse in 1831, but was more recently a steak house. In that persona it became high-camp Rococo with oodles of huge gilded crystal chandeliers, crappy oils of hunting and ballroom scenes in ornate gilt frames, mirrored panelling and heavy brocade curtains. The Casa-Imperial owners left the mansion that way, and they serve the best dim sum north of Lai Wah Heen — delivered by young Chinese women who speak no English, wear cute black and white maids' uniforms and sport name tags that read PANTRY. Seafood dumpling in soup (served in a gilt-encrusted crock) is an ethereal dumpling in rich chicken stock. Har gow, the standard shrimp dumpling, has bigger chunks of shrimp than elsewhere. Snow pea leaf and king mushroom combine tart and smooth and show fresh green colour through their translucent rice wrapper. Cuttlefish tentacles are almost crisp, thanks to being caramelized, and their taste sparkles with five-spice, salt and sweet. Even steamed pork is way better than average — superbly tender pork and tiny black mushrooms in hot/sweet XO sauce, with crispy fried chilies on top. 4125 Steeles Avenue East (416) 756-2788

Dine in delectable design

C5, Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park, 416-586-7928
On the fifth floor of the ROM Crystal, C5 offers a spectacular view south and west. The room itself is as magnificent as the sky, with two great glass walls punctuated by black girders and white columns, all at angles. Chef Ted Corrado's strength is the big, bold Italian flavours of his heritage, and his explorations of the strawberry theme may be the best desserts in town. On a long white rectangular plate are rum baba topped with strawberry-infused whipped cream and thin strawberry-scented meringue wafers; a tiny cube of excellent fresh strawberry sorbet scented with icewine; a small pile of chopped sweetened strawberries topped with miniature tuile; and the crème de la crème, a miniature mojito, its tiny glass salt and sugar encrusted, with a dollop of melting strawberry sorbet turning it pink as we watch.

C5 chef, Ted Corrado



Bayview's 2008 Restaurant of the Year

A PAN-ASIAN SENSATION AT THE TOP OF HOGG'S HOLLOW

CRAVINGS, 3393 Yonge Street, 416-322-2200
Pearly pleather banquettes, petite crystal chandeliers, a gas fireplace and gracious service put Cravings several cuts above its many pan-Asian competitors. Skip the regular sushi, which is dry. We love UFO — extremely delicate ungreasy sweet potato tempura topped with spicy tuna tartare. And wonderful Shanghai noodles with tender beef and fat noodles in sweet soy. Their hot and sour soup is sesame scented with enough sweet hot flavour to merit a special journey. Gyoza dumplings have tender beef and gossamer cladding, and Thai basil chicken has unusually delicate sauce. Even their coconut rice is creamier than elsewhere. This is a pan-Asian kitchen with panache to spare — and cheap prices.

Chef Chitaf of Cravings





North York's French revolution

STILL GORGEOUS AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

AUBERGE DU POMMIER

After the \$1.3 million reno, it's still one of the prettiest restaurants in town. Like a French country cottage, its look and feel mimic a Michelin-starred French country resto, thanks to stone shelves and mantles, pressed tin sconces, orchids everywhere and comfy armchairs upholstered in black and white toile. The menu is unapologetically old-school French: Butter, butter everywhere and not a sign of lemongrass. Perfectly cooked scallops come with Kobe beef cheek that melts in the mouth like butter, with a "sauce" made of pureed squash enriched with butter. Truffle "cappuccino" is chef Jason Bangerter's trademark mushroom soup with foam on top. They roast squab ruby-red tender and dot the plate with sweet/tart wild grape juice. Quick, pinch me. Am I in Lyon or north Toronto? 4150 Yonge Street, 416-222-2220

Jason Bangerter of Auberge du Pommier

Yorkville's fusion reaction

THE SPICEMEISTER IS BACK

SPICE ROOM

Greg Couillard, has returned, with a jolly jump-up spirit. Despite the strange idea of opening an ambitious restaurant in a mall (Hazelton Lanes), however up-market, the Spice Room is a hidden jewel — both beautiful and luscious. The sauces are vintage Couillard — sweet, hot, a hint of sour, deep and complex and spicy. Topping fork-tender beef tenderloin with tandoori spiced foie gras is like putting Tiffany diamonds on Julia Roberts. Seafood Pondichery grows from Indian butter chili sauce — tomato and black mustard seeds gentled with butter as a rich bath for sea bass fillet wrapped round scallops and shrimps. Red snapper is a hot/sweet hymn to chilies, ginger and fruit. For dessert there is an almost unbearably erotic molten chocolate cake with a dash of chipotle chili in its hot, dark heart. 55 Avenue Road, Hazelton Lanes, 416-935-0000



The Spice Room's Greg Couillard

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THORNHILL'S MOST CREATIVE KOREAN

SARIWON

Having written off Korean cuisine based on several mouth-burning forays on Bloor Street, I was astonished by Sariwon Korean BBQ. The luxe wooden tables with built-in bas barbecues set the stage for a parade of eastern culinary delights. Central to Sariwon is the barbecue experience, wherein the server brings a tableful of fixings to munch with your chosen barbecued meat. My fave are their tender marbled short ribs, which the server cooks on your grill, with onions, mushrooms and garlic cloves. The meat is sweet 'n' soy marinated and the wondrous fixings are 16 different piquant pickles and veg, plus a big bowl of robust spicy tomato tofu soup. We've figured out that one is to first dip the barbecued meat in sauce and then roll it up in a lettuce leaf package with lightly pickled onion and carrot strands. This is great eating.

If there's any room left (good luck with that) also eat their supernal seafood pancake (Korea's answer to Italy's frittata) studded with green onion, sweet peppers and shrimp. And for those who still enjoy the deep fryer, their irresistible kham poong gi, is the ultimate fun food: Batter-fried crispy chicken in perfectly balanced hot sweet sauce. 7388 Yonge Street (905) 881-5103

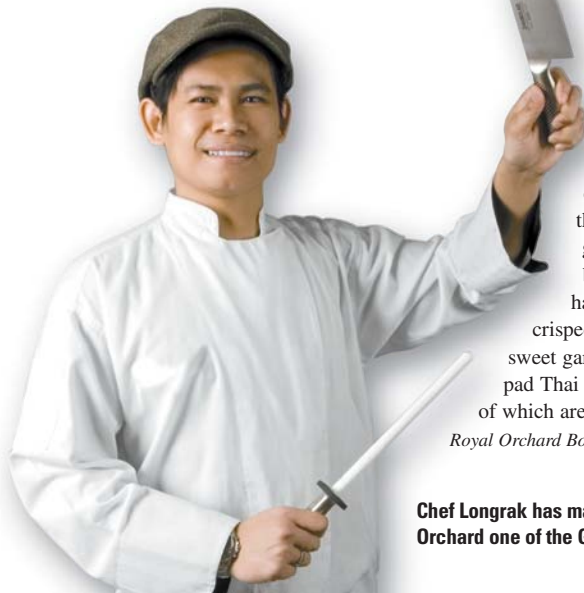
JOIN IN ON JOLLY JAPANESE

AKASAKA

Akasaka's traditional Japanese food is impeccable, but the restaurant has new pleasures in store for the dedicated sushiphile. All of the usual sushi fish are served, with more than usual attention to freshness. The uni (sea urchin) and ama ebi (sweet raw shrimp) are always sweet, never tasting of ammonia in the manner of aging fish. Giant clam and red clam (mirugai and akagai) are tender. Hand rolls, those seaweed-wrapped cones of rice beloved of sushi addicts, are always made à la minute and with roasted seaweed, so that their seaweed shell is crispy. The toro (pale fatty raw tuna) goes down like butter. Vegetarian

udon (fat wheat noodles) in clear broth is a delicate delight, with cute little "sushi" made from grated carrot wrapped in lettuce leaves. Even small things go better at Akasaka: The miso soup is sweeter, less salty, more real tasting than at most Japanese restaurants. Fried dumplings are fresher. Those same dumplings can also be steamed and served in ethereal broth with egg drop, seaweed and tiny shreds of lightly pickled cabbage. And where else in these parts do we eat plump fresh oysters perfectly cooked in sweet miso paste?

280 West Beaver Creek Road (905) 764-9291



TASTE TERRIFIC THAI

ROYAL ORCHARD

Ignore Royal Orchard's bilious chartreuse walls and unattractively dark demeanour. There are several dozen Thai restos between home and there. This is the one. Their kitchen has the Midas touch. Never before in a life of hoovering Thai coconut chicken soup have I met one so flavourful; it's darker than the usual tom kha gai, made more tasty by tomato, chili and carrots. Cashew chicken has crunchy cashews, chunks of orange, al dente veg and perfectly tender chicken in orange-scented sauce. Spicy beef salad is impeccably tender beef and coriander with barely pickled cucumber, red onion and carrot. But the ne plus ultra is garlic shrimp, wherein big juicy shrimps have been lightly crisped on the outside, for sweet garlicky crunch. Skip pad Thai and salad rolls, both of which are merely pleasant. 10

Royal Orchard Boulevard (905) 709-1399

Chef Longrak has made Thornhill's Royal Orchard one of the GTA's top Thai eateries

TRENDS WE LOVE

NEO-INDIAN

Nouvelle Indian is sweeping Toronto. New modern Indian restos: Amaya, Indus Junction, Chakra, Jaadu, and (in terms of cuisine) Eleven. We love nouvelle Indian for the snap, crackle and pop of the Indian spicing fused with white tablecloth service and a lightened hand in the kitchen.

EAT LOCAL, SOURCE LOCAL, GROW LOCAL

For a decade I have watched with chagrin as Quebec has followed New York State and California down the road of local fine food production and ingredient sourcing in restaurants. Finally Toronto is on the bandwagon, with restaurants starting to buy local meats, cheeses and veg and showcase them on menus.

GREENMARKETS

Dufferin Grove and Riverdale farmers' markets have been thriving for several years, but we now have a fabulous farmers' market in the Brickworks in the Don Valley (opens May 24) and another one in the old Wychwood car barns. Saturday mornings at the Brickworks local catering chef Ezra Title sells

yummy breakfast (organic scrambled eggs with pickled wild leeks and BLTs built with local cheese and bacon).

OSSINGTON AVENUE

The former unpalatable strip has been reborn in the past year as Toronto's version of New York's ultra-hip Lower East Side. On lower Ossington, just north of Queen Street, we now have Reposado Martini Bar, Delux and Foxley bistros, and the good old down 'n' dirty but delectable pho parlour, Golden Turtle.

MIDTOWN RESTOS ARE OPENING BRANCH PLANTS UPTOWN

Cluck, Grunt and Low opened on Bayview, Marcello's opened on Rutherford Road, Satay on the Road opened on Avenue Road north, and Jerusalem opened on Leslie Street.

A TREND WE HATE

TOO MUCH TAPAS

Enough already of dozens of tiny plates crowding the table, driving up the tab and confusing the diner... Similarly, restos (like One in the Hazelton Hotel) are starting to sell their sides as separate orders. See my feelings on tapas for my response to that. Not a fortunate trend in a year when restaurant prices are skyrocketing, thanks to stratospherically rising food costs.

2008 Richmond Hill Restaurant of the Year

CHOW DOWN ON UPPER-CRUST CHINESE

GOLDEN COURT ABALONE, 270 West Beaver Creek Rd. 905-707-6628

Golden Court Abalone Restaurant is elegant and beautiful. Chinese restaurants that display (and serve) dried seafood have enormous cachet, and Golden Court does it all. The entrance is a collection of glass cases showing off sharks' fins (do not order these, since they are decimating the world's shark population), dried scallops and dried Abalone. The Abalone is braised in oyster sauce with bok choy and has the sweet/salty taste of the sea. They bake lobster in garlic sauce, for a more delicate outcome than the usual deep fried lobster. Habitues of chinoiserie will order the daily soup, often a complex winter melon broth with dried octopus and pork. Note that the most interesting dishes are only on the set dinner menus, but can be ordered individually.



Restaurateur Wilson Lo