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# The Sacramento Bee

TICKET

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## Top Ten:

# Consistently imaginative

**By Mike Dunne -- Bee Restaurant Critic**  
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If this has been another year of growth, diversification and heightened sophistication on the Sacramento dining scene - and it has - why do so many names on our annual roundup of the region's best restaurants look so familiar?

First, a confession: This ranking gets more difficult every year, precisely because of the growth in the number of restaurants that are solid and creative. I had 30 candidates on my initial list.

I whittled the number to 10 by revisiting many of them in recent weeks. I also scratched off some new places I'd reviewed favorably - Spataro Restaurant & Bar, Restaurant 55 Degrees, Kozen, among others - because I felt they hadn't yet settled into an assured groove.

And two dining venues are always problematic, The Kitchen and the Supper Club. While they are novel, reliable and entertaining, they don't abide by the typical restaurant format and schedule, so I eliminate them from consideration, reluctantly, given that their originality and wit help distinguish the Sacramento dining scene.

Bottom line: There's really not much difference between No. 1 and No. 10 on the final list, aside from style of food and personality of proprietors. They're all in the same league (fine dining), but different divisions (regional Italian, provincial French, New American).

They all more or less meet the same standards - they've been around awhile; they provide consistently fine service, though not necessarily without idiosyncrasies; their food is as creative in inspiration as it is steady in execution, which is to say their dishes represent imagination, precision, intellect; and their restaurant designs are individualistic, if not always elegant.

None is perfect. Sometime during the year I'm apt to get a complaint about any of them. Someone won't like the pacing of courses. Someone will feel that a server snubbed them. Someone will grouse about the size of portions. Complaints come with the territory, but the owners of these restaurants constantly try to improve, and to respond with speed and sensitivity when a shortcoming is pointed out.

On the upside, I can't recall anyone ever complaining about noise at any of the restaurants on this year's list, and noise is an issue with an increasing number of restaurant patrons, to judge by phone calls and e-mails I receive. Well, maybe I did get a call about how loud Lucca can be.

They're stable. They represent an enduring professionalism and pride, a key consideration in a year when the local restaurant scene was transformed on many fronts.

Every time you turned around, another restaurant was being made over into something new. The long-vacant spot that once housed celebrity chef Bradley Ogden's Birch Creek at the Westfield Galleria in Roseville became the region's first branch of the Ruth's Chris Steak House chain; long-popular Mace's Restaurant at the Pavilions closed, recently reopening as the first Ruth's Chris branch in Sacramento. The front door of the pan-Asian restaurant Nine Doors opened, then closed, and when it opened again the place was the Italian restaurant Sofia. Max's Opera Cafe is now Taro's by Mikuni. Moxie Jr. morphed into Sapor. In Folsom, Gigi's Cafe became Le Louvre. And in Old Sacramento, California Fat's Asian Grill & Dim Sum Bar became California Fat's Asian Grill & Steakhouse.

This year more than any other in recent memory, chefs at the region's finer restaurants came and went. Horseshoe Bar Grill, Slocum House, the Firehouse, Andiamo and L'Image, among others, all saw significant changes in their kitchens. Despite the spike in turnover, stability in the kitchen still is the rule rather than the exception at the area's best restaurants.

No local restaurant critic looks on the verge of quitting because such turnover quickly dates their reviews, as happened in New York this fall. "Welcome to the zany new world of dining out, where eateries change moods and menus in the blink of a wine-soaked eye. Back when restaurants were smaller and more stable, a review might hold water for years. Today, once critics have moved on, the house mutates without any press attention," wrote critic Steve Cuozzo of the New York Post as he shed the paper's restaurant reviews for a column about news briefs on the New York dining scene.

Change at local restaurants also has accelerated, to be sure, but it could be a one-year fluke, and even at that the revolving door isn't spinning as frantically as it has in New York.

This is a good time to be a food enthusiast in Sacramento. The options for eating out continue to multiply and diversify. There's been a jump in the number of Middle Eastern restaurants. The popularity of Thai cooking continues. And the most industrious development in local dining this year has been the ambition and originality of so many Japanese restaurants.

The physical design of restaurants and the presentation of dishes hit aesthetic highs this year. The former is represented most sleekly by the austere lines and high gleam of Restaurant 55 Degrees along Capitol Mall and most nobly by the looming Fat's Asia Grill & Dim Sum Bar in Folsom. Inspiring and striking food can be found in any number of restaurants where the towering overstatements of the recent past have been succeeded by dishes bright and busy yet comprehensible and manageable, a welcome trend.

And it gets easier all the time to eat well when venturing outside Sacramento. No matter how remote the trek, the bright light of a fine restaurant beckons from woods or plain, such as Salute Italian Ristorante in Yuba City and Gold Vine Grill at Somerset in El Dorado County.

As they say, change is good. It isn't always said convincingly, but this year diners don't have much to quibble about when it comes to changes on the local restaurant scene.

## The Top 10

1. **Biba**, 2801 Capitol Ave., Sacramento; (916) 455-2422
2. **Masque Ristorante**, 3909 Park Drive, El Dorado Hills; (916) 933-8555
3. **The Firehouse**, 1112 Second St., Old Sacramento; (916) 442-4772
4. **Lemon Grass**, 601 Munroe St., Sacramento; (916) 486-4891
5. **The Waterboy**, 20th Street and Capitol Avenue; (916) 498-9891
6. **Le Bilig French Cafe**, 11750 Atwood Road, Auburn; (530) 888-1491
7. **Dawson's American Bistro and Martinis**, Hyatt Regency Sacramento, 1209 L St., Sacramento; (916) 321-3600 or (916) 443-1234

8. **Paragary's Bar & Oven**, 28th and N streets, Sacramento; (916) 457-5737

9. **Lucca Restaurant & Bar**, 1615 J St., Sacramento; (916) 669-5300

10. **La Provence Restaurant and Terrace**, 110 Diamond Creek Place, Roseville; (916) 789-2002

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The contenders, alphabetically:

- \* Aioli Bodega Española, Sacramento
  - \* Bidwell Street Bistro, Folsom
  - \* Cafe Campanile, El Dorado Hills
  - \* Centro Cocina Mexicana, Sacramento
  - \* Mikuni Japanese Restaurant & Sushi Bar, Sacramento
  - \* Mirai Japanese Restaurant, Davis
  - \* Salute Italian Ristorante, Yuba City
  - \* Scott's Seafood Bar & Grill, Sacramento
  - \* Silva's Sheldon Inn, Sheldon
  - \* Slocum House, Fair Oaks
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## **CRITIC'S PICKS**

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