

[Our Annual Home Tours Issue!]

Mpls St Paul

SEPTEMBER 2009 MSPMAG.COM

Home Tours

→ Inside the Homes
of Local Notables

- + WCCO's Michele Tafoya
- + Yum!'s Patty Soskin
- + PBS's Mary Lahammer
- + Anne Cashill & Jose Vido
- + Hoteliers Ben & Lindsay Graves

CONTENTS PG. 15



KEVIN KLING
AND OTHER
GARFIELD AVE.
ECCENTRICS

STILLWATER
RESTAURANT
ROUNDUP:
10 GREAT STOPS

FASHION TRENDS,
LA CROSSE WEEKEND,
RETREAT CENTERS,
AND MORE!

OUR PICKS!
FALL ARTS
PREVIEW
P. 166



The Silver Lining

Restaurants are closing, but even more are opening—and things are about to get really exciting.

I get letters to my inbox all the time asking for restaurant recommendations. Most fall into the category of suggestions for special-occasion restaurants.

Dear Sir,

My husband and I are celebrating our 30th wedding anniversary and we are looking for a fantastic restaurant for a memorable dinner. Any suggestions?

I used to have a nifty list—Cosmos, Aquavit, Goodfellows, La Belle Vie (Stillwater, even!), Vincent, Levain, Heartland, Alma, D'Amico Cucina, Lurcat, Manny's, Morton's, Oceanaire. Today, many of these restaurants are closed, while others have lost their chefs, or have entered bankruptcy, or have retooled menus to reflect tough times when the tastes of the dining public—and their spending habits—have changed radically. A few (think Cucina) closed of their own accord after a spectacular run. Several have beat the odds and made small adjustments to remain vital but haven't given up on their founding principles. That takes guts and talent, and those restaurants deserve an award for grace under fire. Alma, Heartland, La Belle Vie, Vincent, Lurcat, Manny's, and Oceanaire are all in that category.

While struggling to get my arms around just what has happened in the restaurant community this past year, I tallied a list of the losses. I am sure I am missing a few, but here is a list off the top of my head:

- Babalu
- Bayport Cookery
- Bellanotte
- Café Havana
- Campiello—Uptown
- Chambers Kitchen
- Clicquot Club Cafe
- Cue
- D'Amico Cucina
- Fugaise
- Gusto Café and Wine Bar
- JP American Bistro
- Morton's
- Three Fish
- Times Bar & Café
- Tin Cup's
- Via

Some big names are on that list, and a few restaurants that were DOA. As I was trying to make sense of it all, I remembered a time in my own past. I was working in Manhattan in the late 1980s when Black Tuesday struck. Expense-account dining dried up almost overnight, and the entire Manhattan restaurant world was shaken to its core.

I had been working at a fancy Midtown restaurant and it closed, so I took a job at a year-old restaurant in Tribeca called Rakel, whose chef was someone I was desperate to learn from. It was a great year, and I learned a lot about food, but it was oftentimes depressing. Some nights were very slow, the menu was constantly contracting, and staff started jumping ship. I learned a lot as I hopped around the kitchen from station to station, following every move the chef made and sucking up all the knowledge I could.



But he started to see the writing on the wall. Closing was the only option, really, and he left, allowing the owner to remake the eatery into a more casual concept.

The new concept didn't last either (rehab rarely do), and the restaurant finally went under for good. The chef thought his career was a flop and that perhaps his shot at culinary superstardom was gone. A few years later I moved to Minnesota. I see the chef from time to time, and he's done okay for himself. His name is Thomas Keller, arguably the greatest American chef of his generation. He went on to open The French Laundry, Per Se, Bouchon, et cetera.

His vision for Rakel was ahead of its time; there were only two other decent restaurants in Tribeca when he opened, and Keller's cuisine was radical stuff back then. But amazing things came out of that crazy downturn, and the Rakel story was not a unique one. Chefs left restaurants and went out on their own to open new types of restaurants in neighborhoods not yet developed.

Real cooking took place as chefs tried to milk more juice from their lemons, styles shifted, extravagant place settings disappeared never to return, and dining rooms got lighter and became fun places to hang out. I can see many parallels from that era to what's happening today in the Twin Cities.

On that note, many new restaurants have opened here in the last year or so:

- Barrio
- Birch's
- Bradstreet Craftshouse
- Brasa (St. Paul)
- Burger Jones
- Crave (MOA)
- Galaxy Drive In
- The Kitchen
- Northeast Social
- Red's Savoy (Stillwater, Uptown)
- Risotto
- Sea Change
- Tavern on France
- Victory 44
- Wakame Sushi

And more openings are planned as we speak:

- Anchor Bar
- Bar La Grassa
- Birch's (Loring Park)
- Cooper
- Crave (St. Louis Park)
- D'Amico Kitchen
- Figlio (newly retooled)
- Gastronome
- Lake Street Cafeteria and Support Group

So here's the good news: This past year sucked, but it's always darkest before the dawn. Commercial real estate prices are down in some great neighborhoods, and some of the most talented chefs in the Twin Cities are without their own kitchens. I think the next 12 to 18 months will show some unbridled creativity, often in small restaurants owned by young chefs who will realize new opportunities in a new economic climate. It will be easier to take risks, and creative solutions and bold ideas will be easier to execute. I'm confident that if eating out were a stock, now would be the time to buy. Let's see if I'm right. ▲

Not Enough Zimmern?

AZ dishes on restaurants, chefs, and all things food on his blog Chow & Again at mspmag.com/chowandagain.