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Bits + Bites

The 20 Best Dishes of 2009



Cane Rosso makes the cut
Erin Kunkel

No longer in a pre- or post-holiday stupor, we finally feel we've got the clarity to reflect on a year of eating. It took some sifting through our notebooks, some brain jogging, some staring off into space: And then it all came back to us with the shocking clarity that only memories of delicious meals can conjure up. Some of these dishes are from new restaurants, and some from old favorites. Either way, they all defined a moment.

JESSICA'S TOP 10

The Brisket Sandwich at Il Cane Rosso

That I ate this sandwich at my desk, hours old, and still feel it deserves inclusion says something. The soft Acme roll is moistened with braising juices, the shredded meat is perfectly tender and the roasted tomatoes that top it (at least, they were on the sandwich back when I tried it) are the ideal sweet counterpoint.

Corn Tortellini at Flour + Water

Back in late August, when we had that freak heat wave that persisted for several days, causing otherwise normal restaurant goers to call ahead, asking hopefully about air conditioning, I had dinner with my entire family at Flour + Water. Crammed at

a slightly-too-small table, sweating (and eating at 5:30 p.m., since that was the latest reservation I could get), my father ordered the corn tortellini. The fluffy pillows of pasta, filled with the very essence of summer, were worth any pain we endured.

Chicken Porridge at Out the Door

A firm proponent of savory breakfast, the jook at Out the Door—basically just rice cooked in rich chicken stock, topped with fried shallots and herbs—is my kind of morning meal. Traditionalists take heart: it comes with a donut.

Heirloom Bean Salad at Bar Tartine

I had this salad in September, shortly after Chris Kronner took over the kitchen, and I haven't stopped thinking of it since. Five varieties of Rancho Gordo beans, each expertly cooked, topped with herbs and a spoonful of lemony aioli. Stupendously simple.

Carnitas at Nopalito

Though I still struggle to get past the food court-ness of Nopalito, I have no reservations about the carnitas. Not only are they adorably presented, this bay leaf-scented hunk of pork—to be pulled apart and consumed at will—makes for some seriously good eating.

Radish Salad at Aziza

To call it a radish salad is to grossly underrepresent this creation, which features radishes, avocado, pearl onions and a sheet of chicken skin as crisp and delicate as a potato chip. Not only does it taste great (did I mention the potato chip chicken skin?), it also will go on record as one of the most beautiful dishes I tried all year.

Veal Schnitzel at Schmidt's

If the radish salad was on one extreme, then Schmidt's schnitzel would be on the other. This massive piece of pounded, battered and deep-fried veal, topped with a fried egg, capers and a few filets of white anchovy, is the kind of thing you'd eat if you honestly believed tomorrow might not come. Wash it down with a beer.

The Panna, Spring Onion and Pancetta Pizza at Pizzeria Delfina

Maybe it was getting a table in the window on a sunny afternoon without a wait. Maybe it was the bottle of rosé. Or maybe it's just that the combination of sweet cream, salty pancetta and tender spring onions is pure genius. This dish was a special, so you'll have to wait until the thaw and hope for its reappearance. It's worth waiting for.

Chicken Mole at Tropisueño

Of all the things on this list, this one was the dark horse. I expected Tropisueño to be a decent downtown Mexican restaurant, nothing more, and was shocked—shocked—to order a plate of chicken mole that had the depth of flavor that so many other restaurants attempt to create but almost always fail at creating.

Chestnut Soup at Frances

This dish squeaked in just under the 2009 finish line. I, who don't even really care for or about chestnuts, nearly turned the bowl inside out—the sweet, ultra-creamy liquid, studded with bits of Boccalone pancetta and tiny cipollini onions, was just the right thing to end a year.

SARA'S TOP 10

Seared Calamari at Perbacco

Sounds basic, but when you take well-prepared, tender calamari and combine it with a bit of pureed Corona beans, preserved lemon, chili and a smattering of fresh arugula, it becomes anything but. I sat at the bar and had the salumi plate to go with this, as well as a glass of red wine. It made me see Perbacco, a restaurant I normally consider rather corporate, in a whole new light.

Burger at Fish & Farm

Of course much has already been made of this, but after our "Burger Bonanza" story—just when I thought I couldn't look another patty of ground beef in the face—Fish & Farm presented me with a pretty glorious, drippy mess between a bun. There's nothing more exciting than coming across something unexpected. After keeping a CIA-like composure through the meal, I did a little victory dance out on the sidewalk.

Tortelloni Di Castelmagno with Marshall Farm Honey and Walnuts at Quince

Quince is a little uptight for my taste, but one cannot deny the excellence of Michael Tusk's cooking. And this tortelloni—rich and salty with cheese and walnuts yet unabashedly sweet with honey—was perfect. You wouldn't want to eat more than a few bites of it, but those few bites were worth three hours of sitting up straight.

Tortilla Soup at Chilango

I've since been back for this soup, only to have it not be as good as the first time. But the first time, it gave its heart and soul to me: Warming, brothy, with bits of fried chilies, soft cubes of fresh cheese,

potatoes (potatoes!), chicken and of course crispy tortillas.

Chicken Liver Everywhere

I'm partial to chicken liver pâté and had some excellent versions last year. Don't force me to choose between **Starbelly's** version, drizzled with olive oil, sprinkled with fleur de sel and served with cherry-apricot pistachio chutney; **Wexler's** chicken liver mousse (of course nice and smoky) and **SPQR's** super rustic crostino topped with chopped chicken livers and Warren pear jam.

Pasta Ceci at Pizzeria Delfina

Ugly yet beautiful is one way to describe this soup, a puree of chickpeas afloat with ragged pieces of pasta, all liberally doused in olive oil. As someone that generally falls for bright flavors and colors, it's totally not something I'd normally love, and I fell for it hard enough to ask for the recipe.

Lamb Meatballs made by Mark Denham for Laiola's last night

For the last nights of Laiola (my husband, Joe's restaurant), chef Mark Denham returned to the stoves to cook up some of the dishes we might be seeing at his upcoming restaurant, Bishop. I was reminded that his grilled lamb meatballs are a work of art. Made with lamb meat that includes ground heart and kidneys, they have cilantro and mint in them, and are served with a smear of yogurt with cumin. They deserve to be renamed.

Chicken (and Waffles) from Little Skillet

There's nothing particularly fancy or different about LS's take on this classic, but the windowfront restaurant really does fried chicken just right. The waffles I'm apathetic about, but I'll take a drizzle of the maple syrup for chicken dippin' any time.

Spicy Miso Ramen at Katana-Ya

Katana-Ya—my longtime go-to for ramen—got even better when I brought my eight-year-old son there one day for a little mother-son bonding lunch. I ordered spicy miso ramen for myself and some California rolls for him. But lo and behold, Silas asked for a taste of my soup (which was truly spicy) and after that, another. He was hooked. It was a proud day for a mother. He keeps asking to go back.

Melon Soup with Chamomile Snow at Commis

Yes, 7x7 doesn't venture to Oakland much, but my dinner at Commis was a revelation worth including here. It was summer when I went and the melon soup dessert with this "snow" was beautiful, ethereal and refreshing. How they make it is a gastro-mystery to me, but the point of this kind of eating is to suspend belief for but a glorious moment, which I was more than willing to do.

By Jessica Battilana and Sara Deseran