

Water Hub  
or Not?  
by Barbara Miner

Goodbye  
Midwest Airlines  
by Capt. Dave Phipps

Life of a  
Ballet Dancer  
by Paul Kosidowski

Gov. Doyle's  
Iffy Legacy  
by Marc Eisen

MAY 2010 // \$3.00

# Milwaukee

MAGAZINE

## 25 Best Restaurants

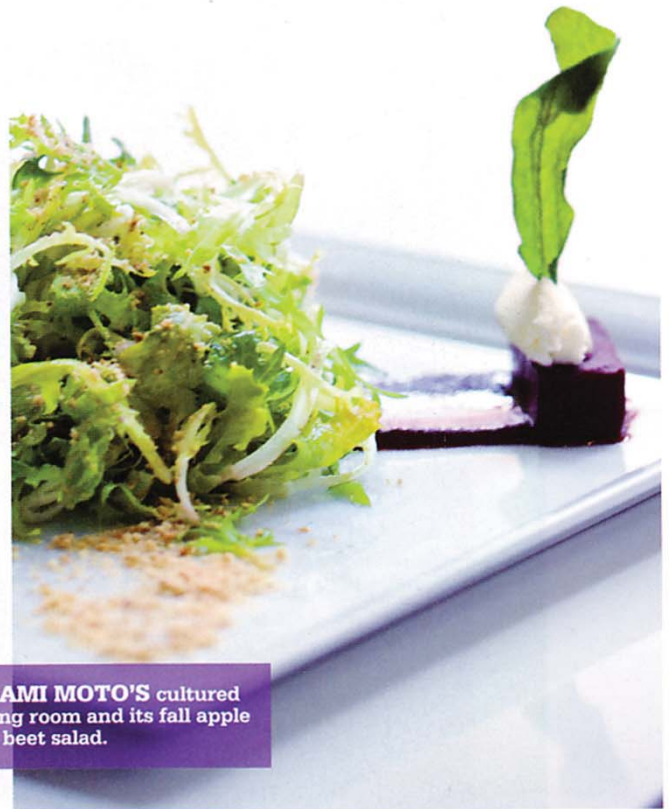
Critic Ann Christenson picks the town's best dining.  
*PLUS:* the 10 most promising newcomers.



Sanford's  
Grilled Scallops  
& Lobster



**UMAMI MOTO'S** cultured dining room and its fall apple and beet salad.



When I was little, I was more than a finicky eater. I was an epicurean delinquent. I took great delight in vandalizing my cousins' food at holiday dinners. (When someone would leave the table, a glass of milk might meet the contents of, say, a salt shaker.) So it's with some marvel – my relatives say – that I became a dining critic.

But something took hold of me in my teens. I started reading cooking magazines and paying attention to the way my aunts made gravy and rolled out pie crust. Unlike Ruth Reichl, the former *New York Times* dining critic whose mother served the family moldy food left in the refrigerator, I ate 1970s casseroles made from recipe cards my mom collected. Simple stuff that I still love. How does a dining critic develop? In ways that might include a can of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup.

May is our month to serve the heartiest, headiest, high-octane-est dining issue of the year. In the two years since our last Top Restaurants feature, the industry took a hit, understandably so, given the sluggish economy. Yanni's steakhouse was one of the high-end closings of the last 18 months. On a midpriced family-dining scale, there was the denouement of Heinemann's after 86 years in business.

It's no embellishment to say the economic angst has made many restaurants work harder. Mason Street Grill is one of several high-ends that responded with lower-priced prix fixe meals. Others, like Washington Heights' Meritage, give diners a simple punch card. After a certain number of dollars spent, they get a gift certificate to the restaurant.

Running parallel to the industry's woes is the growing interest in keeping the focus local – buying directly from farmers and changing menus seasonally. La Merenda and Le Rêve, for example, work with a local organization that operates as a conduit to the farmer, making it easier for the restaurants to keep their menus fresh.

So while some of this list's names – which are not in any particular order – will be familiar, they are changing in interesting ways and working harder than ever to get to the top – and stay there.

### RISTORANTE BARTOLOTTA

In 1993, locals started to know the name Joe Bartolotta. The then-new restaurateur centered his first effort, this rustic Italian, on State Street in the Tosa village. Bartolotta's co-founder was his brother, Paul, then a year from winning the James Beard Award for Best Midwest Chef. Joe B likes to say that his firstborn restaurant triggers an "emotional reaction" in people that makes them want to come back. The warmth from the old family photos, gregarious chatter and heat of that potent blend of wine and starchy food makes his argument not far from the truth. Juan Urbietta, who worked for Paul at the Chicago restaurant Spiaggia and has been in charge here for eight years, does some fine work. The pappardelle in a duck ragu; and the grigliata mista di mare (grilled seafood) are a couple of classic greats. And check out the seasonal menu. In late April, it will include a mushroom, spring onion and foie gras tart; and braised whole stuffed duck with Amarone wine and pomegranates. Entrées \$19.95-\$36.95. (7616 W. State St., 414-771-7910)

### LA MERENDA

Tables and chairs of various dimensions and styles fill the room. The warm wall colors suggest a place where someone would drink sangria, a lot of sangria. Plates – of empanadas, duck confit crêpes, Korean braised short ribs – cover the tables. Chef/co-owner Peter Sandroni walks out to deliver an order or greet diners. La Merenda's small plates – 25 or so in all – transcend their size. With rice, prosciutto, mozzarella and sweet peas, this tapas retreat can conjure up Italy. But there are other countries to evoke – China, Peru, Morocco, Jamaica, France, Greece. The flavors are big and international, though many of the ingredients come from farms as close as possible. The menu's spring additions feature Jamaican jerk trout over coconut-pineapple rice, Thai green curry and a Mexican red mole-lamb dish served on potato and commmeal sopos. \$4-\$9.25. (125 E. National Ave., 414-389-0125)

### SANFORD RESTAURANT

The sale just weeks ago of Coquette Café – and the closing of Harlequin Bakery several months ago – has freed up owners Sandy and Angie D'Amato to focus on the restaurant they opened 21 years ago in the old D'Amato family grocery store. It's a playground for people who view a meal as akin to a performance by the New York Philharmonic. Sandy is getting back to his roots – creating art on the plate with something as small as a poppy seed or as large as a pig carcass. With skilled chef de cuisine Justin Aprahamian in tow, spring couldn't look brighter. A few additions: lekvár-glazed duck breast with peppered apricots and wilted watercress; seared lobster and sea scallops with glazed radish and sorrel spring onion emulsion; and warm molasses Indian pudding cake with rhubarb compote. Entrées \$29-\$39. (1547 N. Jackson St., 414-276-9608)

### UMAMI MOTO

The restaurateurs of Milwaukee Street have worked, more than any other area, to create dramatic spaces. There's no subtlety to Restaurant Row. But as for achieving a serene feel, nobody does it like Umami (named for the "fifth taste," which joins salty, sour, sweet and bitter). Tile walls, wave-like panels and stone-

covered pillars suggest the slow, calming movement of water. Executive chef Dominic Zumpano keeps a clean look to his plates – Asian fusion with more twists and turns. The 32-year-old Chicago expat is inspired by oysters Rockefeller. It becomes a nori roll – one of many exotic, snake-like creations. Kung pao is one of Zumpano's favorite Chinese dishes. On the appetizer list: kung pao duck with lychee salsa and scallion corn pancake. You can't accuse Zumpano of overdressing his food. The succulent miso sea bass, a crisp coating covering creamy flesh, rests regally on bamboo rice. That beauty just might be the *sixth* taste. Entrées \$14-\$39. (718 N. Milwaukee St., 414-727-9333)

sea scallops with potato-andouille hash. \$18.25-\$39. (4313 W. River Ln., Brown Deer, 414-354-1995)

### MASON STREET GRILL

Since early 2009, Mark Weber has been the Pfister Hotel's executive chef, a position that ties in closely to Mason Street Grill, the hotel's signature restaurant. If the kitchen is grooving along, which it has been, Weber is doing his job. If you're being frugal these days, Mason Street's \$20 three-course Sunday dinner hits the spot. But I'm willing to drop some dough on the regular menu's rich bone-in ribeye and relatively light veal piccata. And



### RIVER LANE INN

If you walked into River Lane five years ago, it wouldn't look much different than it does today. The status quo works fine for owner Jim Marks. In 2007, Mike Kusch worked his way up in the kitchen to head chef. Like every chef before him, Kusch has the fish touch. River Lane is both a place for quality fish and a good value. Entrées come with starch and side salad. Three of the best choices are longtime signatures: mustard-crusting rare ahi tuna, calamari Parmesan (a thin steak), and cedar-plank salmon with horseradish cream sauce. The specials – written on a hand-held chalkboard – can make an evening. Some recent: Arctic char with glazed apricots; grouper with lobster hash and Creole Choron sauce; and Cajun

talk about a good hotel burger – topped with Muenster and honey-glazed onions. Entrées \$10.75-\$50. (425 E. Mason St., 414-298-3131)

### COQUETTE CAFÉ

On the March day that this modest but stylish Third Ward French bistro was officially signed over to its new owners, founder Sandy D'Amato described the reaction of new co-owner Chris Hatleli after the attorney congratulated him: Hatleli "kind of flipped out. He let out a sound, then came over and hugged us," says D'Amato. For Hatleli and partner Nick Burki, this is the realization of a dream. Both have worked for the D'Amatos and at places like The Social and the Milwaukee Art Museum's Café Calatrava. They say maintaining