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2007: A Year of Dining Delightfully

By The Foodies

We've taken to calling Huntington the restaurant capital of Long Island and during 2007, it's lived up to the name. And we're not talking just Huntington Village – though its reputation as a dining mecca is well-deserved – but townwide. From the shores of Cold Spring Harbor to charming, old-town Northport Village, to deceiving strip malls on Jericho Turnpike, the Town of Huntington boasts some of the finest dining on Long Island, and a few gems are up there with the best in the Metropolitan area.

Over the course of the past year the Foodies team has sampled hundreds of creations from the area's finest chefs. Ask us to recall and a handful roll off of our tongues without thinking. But the more we think, the more we come to realize that something memorable comes with every Foodie excursion, and nearly every restaurant – whether it's a roadside clam bar or a white cloth establishment striving to add another star to their rating – adds at least another wrinkle on our collective brains. And like foods that leave an aftertaste, there are restaurant experiences that our minds keep on reliving long after the meal is gone. Come along for the ride as we do just that with highlights from "A Year of Dining Delightfully."

The Serious Stuff

The Foodies single most memorable meal of the year, hands down, was just across the border at Oyster Bay's Mill River Inn (160 Mill River Rd. Oyster Bay, 516-922-7768). We called it "dining ecstasy." This unassuming gem in a charming cottage off the beaten track dazzled us not only with its French-influenced, creative American fare, but for service that's "on par with the best Manhattan has to offer."

The five-course chef's tasting menu was a long, slow dance that included the largest, sweetest and most tender seared diver scallops we've encountered; a Hudson Valley foie gras infused with a red wine sauce; and a sesame crusted tuna with lemon-infused tuna tartare, daikon radish with a hoisin and sweet piquillo pepper sauce that blew us away.

And the desserts... "Oh my God!!!" Another tiny gem closer to home, Bravo Nader (9 Union Place, Huntington 631-351-1200) is unassuming, atmospherewise, but chef/owner Nader Gebrin makes up for it with outstanding creations from his kitchen, the best of them featuring fish Nader caught himself. His crab cakes – sweet with hints of mustard seed – are legendary, as is the calamari fra diavolo. The special on the night of our visit was a crispy skinned duckling stuffed with chestnuts and wild rice, and glazed

with a surprising sauce based on Mozart chocolate liqueur.

We'll put Greenlawn's Ruvo (63 Broadway, Greenlawn, 631-261-7700) in a similar class for creative cookery and a commitment to locally harvest seafood. Executive Chef and owner Joe DiNicola, who recently pleased a lunchtime crowd at New York City's James Beard House, pleased our palates as well. Like the best chefs, DiNicola learned to cook in the family kitchen and our favorite – crabcakes again – featured grandma DiNicola's lentil salad with red peppers. A sea bass with Mandarin Orange sauce exemplified DiNocola's light and skillful touch. The dessert selections, a trio of family recipes, reminded us where he learned to cook.

Not far from that culinary map, our experience at Huntington's Piccolo is the jewel in Dean Phillipis' three restaurant empire (he also owns Mill Pond Inn in Centerport and Sweet Mama's in Northport). Dinner at Piccolo is always like dinner with family – you're sure to see someone you know, and the wait staff, while exceedingly attentive, kidded and teased us like an older brother. Formal without being pretentious, Piccolo is the kind of place where a regular might order a \$200 bottle of wine and a simple platter of rigatoni Bolognese. But he could choose that \$135-an-ounce caviar if he liked. We recommend letting the chef do his thing. Twice-roasted duck is a specialty, as is anything seafood, and we're still looking forward to trying those mission figs with warm goat cheese.

The figs and goat cheese were a favorite of screen star Lindsey Lohan on a recent visit to Huntington's Honu (363 New York Avenue, Huntington, 631-421-6900), and they were a favorite of the Foodies as well when

we visited the New York Avenue nightspot shortly after a midsummer makeover. Honu Kitchen and Cocktails burst back on the restaurant scene with a sophisticated new look and a complete menu makeover that features small plate offerings – bigger than an appetizer, smaller than an entrée, and made for sharing – that allow diners to sample a wider selection of menu offerings. We, too, loved the figs, along with our “must try” selection – Lobster with fire roasted corn, a small plate of chunks of tender lobster meat on a bed of roasted fresh corn that managed to evoke the flavor of a full New England clambake. New décor gave Honu a more grown-up look than its previous incarnation, and as always, it bustles in the night hours.

Honu owners John and David Tunney, and partner John Reiger are the guys behind the success story across the street from Honu – Besito (402 New York Avenue Huntington, 631-549-0100). Besito means little kiss in Spanish, though around here it spells “sophisticated Mexican.” We're talking Tacos De Cochinita Pibil, tender pork seasoned with achiote, cooked in banana leaf with Yucatan pickled onions and sweet plantains, and Foodie favorite Budin de Mariscos, a tortilla pie of shrimp and jumbo lump crab layered with spiced tomato salsa and baked with a poblano cream sauce. As sophisticated as the menu gets, however, they don't forget to have fun at Besito, and as our Foodie put it, “they know how to whip up a tasty bowl of guacamole that works wonders during happy hour.”

Old Standards

The best restaurants have staying power, and for a reason. The Foodies enjoyed many of the town's standards during the past year. Places like Frederick's (1117 Walt Whitman Road, Melville, 631-673-8550), where Chef-

owner Kristopher Wolff, formerly of the Four Seasons in Manhattan, presents a varied menu of German, Italian, French, English and even some Caribbean dishes. Favorites included Maryland crab cakes, clams posillipo and coconut shrimp.

Northport's La Cappanina () earned praise for a Bufala Mozzarella and tomato salad that stood out for its freshness, and the signature Lobster Ravioli. At 34 New Street (34 New Street, Huntington, 631-427-3434) we discovered that Chef Rich Niznik and create "fabulous combinations of unexpected flavors" and as the lengthy menu attests, he has the ability to cook just about anything. Pistachio-crusted Seared Tuna served over wasabi mashed potatoes with a toasted sesame aioli is our favorite so-far.

Another standard bearer, 105 Harbor in Cold Spring Harbor, has been a success story for well over a century. The Foodies were dazzled with the charming proprietor, a killer view and, yes, even the food. "You might have guessed 105 Harbor excels at seafood selections," we wrote, but also warned to "Expect the unexpected if you order the Maryland Crab Cake; it's served with a chipotle corn beurre blanc peppered with nicely contrasting black beans and a surprising and flavorful bit of mango." A creative approach and high level of sophistication – both in menu and atmosphere, earned high marks for 105 Harbor. And a recent overhaul beckons us to return.

And speaking of returns, we look forward to doing just that as Foodie favorite Jonathan's Ristorante (15 Wall Street, Huntington, 631-549-0055) rolls out its new menu. It's been more than a year since the Foodies reviewed what owner Roberto Ornato and Chef Tito Onofre cook up, but that pumpkin ravioli with sage butter and amaretto cookie dust -- well, we can

still taste it. Upscale and sophisticated, yet entirely comfortable, Jonathan's remains a favorite.

New Kids on the Block

The Foodies took you to some of this year's freshman class: Northport's Smokin Sloe's (southern comfort food); Quetzalcoatl (a Mexican showstopper also notable for its architectural detailing); and Marcia's Brazilian barbecue, among others. Keep your eyes open for news of just-opened DaNu, in the old Wild Fin on New York Avenue (we'll find out just what chef Daniel Nunez means by Asian-Latin Fusion); and NoMa, and acronym for North of Main, in the former Indigo on Gerard Street. Enjoy! Prime (117 New York Avenue, 631 385-1515), the newest achievement of the RMI Group, best known for Tellers restaurant in Islip, opened a year ago at the former Coco's on the Huntington Harborfront. Executive Chef Richard Farnabee has created a menu worthy of the Bohlsen family's architectural designs that bring out the best of the spectacular waterfront location.