

THE GOLDEN WHISK AWARDS

Dining critic **RONA GINDIN** whips up an irreverent list of winners and losers for the year.

I've been the dining critic of Orlando magazine for nearly nine years. During that time I sat silently while readers decided in an annual survey what were the best restaurants in various categories. You know, Best Seafood, Best New Restaurant? Now it's my turn to give out awards, but in categories of my choosing. Some are complimentary, others not so much. The following are the recipients of the 2008 Golden Whisk Awards. Why a whisk? It stirs things up.

BIGGEST ATTENTION HOG

THE RAVENOUS PIG. You're tired of reading about The Pig? I'm sick of writing about it, including the controversial name and the "gastropub" tag. But the name and counterintuitive label got people talking about the restaurant, helping propel it to instant stardom in the local dining scene. Point out another restaurant in town that's soared to prominence like this one has and I'll eat my hidden notebook, which The Pig's chefs James and Julie Petrakis could surely make delicious. Since this Winter Park dining spot opened in late 2007 with foodie-pleasing offerings like grilled hamachi (fish) with ramp risotto and carrot foam, the town's cognoscenti rarely dine elsewhere.

BEST LOW-PROFILE RESTAURANT

NONNA TRATTORIA ED ENOTECA. You've never seen an ad for Nonna and its name

doesn't come up at the office water cooler. Step into this happening College Park restaurant, though, and you'll see in-the-know area residents indulging in an Italian menu that's actually *Italian*—not Americanized with the likes of veal parmigiana. Chef-owner Kevin Fonzo serves simple, well-crafted foods the way they do in Italy—combining a few amazing-quality ingredients drizzled with a bit of luscious olive oil.

BEST UNDISCOVERED CHEF

DAMIEN BRESSON. One of our best chefs works *inside* Epcot. At Bistro de Paris, located on the France pavilion's second floor, Bresson turns out a sea scallop and artichoke Napoleon, and pork piccata in a mushroom sauce, as delectable as any entrees I've had this year. And to start? An ethereal appetizer of crab rilletes and tuna carpaccio with parmesan shavings and a Provençal marinade. Who knew?

MOST TALKED-ABOUT CHEF

JEPHANIE FOSTER. She may have presided over two restaurants that failed this year (though, to be fair, she'd severed ties with Midnight Blue before that one went belly up), but the former Blue Bistro chef-owner remains popular among foodies in this town. The self-taught culinarian's flavors at the Blue restaurants were so bold that they shocked, an experience most fearless foodies loved but some folks just didn't take to. Since the restaurants' closings, Foster has taken over the kitchen at Thornton Park's Graze, where her new menu has created some buzz. Is Foster still as bold as ever or has she toned down her style? I'll let you know in the January issue, when I review Graze.



MOST DISINGENUOUS OWNER

CHRIS CHRISTINI. In an interview for OMag's 2008 Dining Hall of Fame awards, the owner of Christini's Ristorante Italiano complained about not getting local press coverage. "It hurts my feelings," he said, although I was obviously giving him ink at that time. I jumped on his eagerness for exposure and made several attempts to get him to appear on *On the Town*, my Bright House TV show celebrating local restaurants. When I finally tracked him down, which took some doing, he brushed me off, sniping, "I'm too busy."

FRESHEST RESTAURANTS

DUX at the Peabody Hotel, **ETHOS VEGAN KITCHEN, HARMONI MARKET, DANDELION COMMUNITÉA CAFÉ, GAYLORD PALMS RESORT HOTEL & CONVENTION CENTER,** and the **WALT DISNEY WORLD SWAN AND DOLPHIN HOTEL.** Pick and choose: Slow Food, locally sourced food, organic food. Whatever the angle, these six businesses take the trend more seriously than most. For example, the Dandelion folks champion the OurLandoLocallyMade movement; the Gaylord Palms has become the unofficial home for multi-course gourmet repasts by the local chapter of the Slow Food organization. Kudos to all for going after farm-fresh ingredients from nearby producers.

BEST HOLE IN THE WALL

TASTY WOK. Glossy barbecued ducks and chickens hang from their feet near the cash register at Tasty Wok. A vase full of polyester roses on top of the beverage cooler is as fancy as the décor gets. But delve into a sizzling scallion pancake, an aromatic pork and dumpling soup, or a heap of garlicky sautéed Chinese broccoli at this Hong Kong-style restaurant in Little Vietnam and you won't give the unsettling surroundings another thought.

BEST VIRTUAL FOOD FIGHT

FUNKY MONKEY VS. POSTERS. Feeling offended after reading a mediocre customer

BEST BLAND CONCEPT

TAVERNS. If I taste another creamy-but-bland artichoke dip, another expensive but unimpressive steak, or another oversized but underwhelming brownie-and-ice cream dessert, I may give up trying the town's new chain taverns altogether. A slew opened over the last year, and they were all alike: an inviting bar with serious cocktails, an upscale-cozy dining room with plenty of booths, and identical menus. Each one sounded like the perfect bridge between Chili's-type midscale chains and frou frou restaurants. Not so. The recipes were developed in corporate test kitchens: No zip. No zing. Just inoffensive food at hefty prices.

review of his downtown restaurant on yelp.com, Funky Monkey co-owner Eddie Nickell responded to the woman who posted the comments. Long story short, the earnest but impulsive Nickell got into a vicious online war with that poster and other former patrons. While Nickell's responses were mostly defensive, such as saying that a guest who was hot while waiting outside to enter for a drag show dinner "could have waited in her [air-conditioned] car," the posters were vile. "Yelpers" called the restaurant "Spunky Monkey," dubbed it "----ing lame" and actually labeled Nickell a "douche." The upside: The restaurant's Web site got 600 hits the month of the ruckus, up from 50 the month before.

BEST CHEF TO HIT THE ROAD

CLAYTON MILLER. Mere months after being inducted into our Dining Hall of Fame along with his boss, celebrity chef Norman Van Aken, Miller bolted from the kitchen of The Ritz-Carlton Grande Lakes Norman's. The up-and-comer took his prestigious award and headed to the D.C. suburbs as the chef at Trummers on Main. Miller isn't the first Hall of Famer to skip town with a shiny OMag plaque for his new office wall. California Grill chef John State left us high and dry for a gig in Michigan soon after receiving his recognition a year earlier.


BIGGEST NEW MENU FLOP

FIFI'S. I am no longer giddy when I go to Fifi's. I am now annoyed. I so loved this upscale Thornton Park French-ish coffee shop when it first opened as Fifi's Patisserie in early 2007 that I was teased for being a "Fifi's Girl." Gone is the osso bucco. Absent is bread pudding. Adios went the always-amazing ingredients. Now called just Fifi's, and billed (more accurately, actually) as a bistro and wine bar, the thoroughly pink place serves BLTs no better than you can make at home and an all-cupcake dessert menu. I do, though, enjoy the *croque madame* sandwich of black forest ham and gruyere indulgently topped with a fried egg.

BEST RESTAURANT TO DODGE TAXES

JOHNSON'S DINER. Call it the Hall of Fame Curse. A 2008 Hall of Fame inductee, Johnson's Diner recently ran afoul of the Florida Department of Revenue over tax payments. Or lack thereof. The owners of the soul food establishment ponied up \$39,000 in back taxes after the Revenue Department shut down the restaurant for three weeks. Johnson's temporary closure only proved Benjamin Franklin's adage: Nothing is certain but death and taxes. Johnson's faced the former when it didn't pay the latter.

BIGGEST SNOOZER OF A NAME

STEAK AND SALAD. No kidding. That's the name of a new restaurant on Mills near Virginia. It doesn't have a menu online, but I guess there's no need for one. Dull names are no stranger to the building housing this placid-sounding place. The previous restaurant in the same location went by the moniker Friends. 

MOST OVERRATED DESSERT

CRÈME BRÛLÉE. Original. Chocolate. White chocolate. Mocha. Mango. Hazelnut. Enough already! Come up with your own dang dessert idea.