

Dining: Sacramento restaurant scene in golden era

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What a year it was in the restaurant business.

Dismal economic indicators brought some places to their knees and forced others to work harder than ever to earn customers' business.

Still, this remains the Golden Era of eating out in Sacramento. Never has the city been livelier and the caliber of the restaurants higher.

Throughout 2011, I consumed 1,095,000 calories in search of joints I could recommend that do it the right way.

I followed the newly emerging food truck scene on Twitter and am hoping more trucks and street-food carts get rolling in this exciting category.

When I wasn't eating at restaurants or chasing down trucks, I often was looking through windows to see which places were thriving – Mulvaney's, The Waterboy, Hot Italian, Shabu, Shoki Ramen House, Magpie and Tower Café all seem to be among the many still packing 'em in.

This year, I sliced into more thick, juicy pork chops than I could have imagined. I ate steak, salmon, all kinds of birds, lots of cute things I'd rather not meet in person, snails, gator, tongue, pig's feet, duck liver, beef heart and just about everything from our oceans – uncooked, overcooked and cooked to perfection. I ate some excellent fish from a ranch, too – the high-quality and forward-thinking Passmore Ranch in Sloughhouse.

All over our culinary landscape, I ate the best produce in the world supplied by farms within shouting distance of Sacramento.

In the restaurant business, it was a year of moving out, moving in and moving around.

One seriously good chef, Gabriel Glasier, returned to Sacramento to showcase his talents at a new restaurant, Maranello in Fair Oaks. Other fine chefs packed their bags, including Michael Tuohy at Grange and, just days from now, Kelly McCown will leave a successful tenure at Ella Dining Room & Bar.

Two fine restaurants swapped spaces in east Sacramento – Formoli's Bistro and Gönül's J Street Café (Gönül's changed its name to

Vanilla Bean Bistro).

One excellent chef, Mark Helms, changed spaces and concepts, selling his tiny Ravenous Café in the Pocket area and opening even tinier Juno's Kitchen & Delicatessen on J Street in east Sacramento, a few blocks from his house. Great idea, great location, great food.

Daniel Pont, the famous soup man downtown, sold his revered La Bonne Soupe and, we were led to believe, began a hard-earned retirement in 2011. That 90-minute line for lunch went away, too. But the French gentleman didn't stay idle for long, recently opening the white-tablecloth Chez Daniel in Folsom. Downtown, he served only lunch. Folsom: only dinner. How he does it, at 72, nobody knows.

Mulvaney's will serve very good food in a lively atmosphere, which explains why it is still a tough place to get a table. But Patrick Mulvaney recently announced he is pulling out of the reinvented and greatly expanded Crocker Art Museum. His Crocker Café was doing well, but the numbers with the catering thrown in weren't enough to persuade him to stay open.

The Waterboy, after 15 years, is still one of our best restaurants. Despite a feud between Rick Mahan and yours truly that lasted through a recent weekend, all is well there and here, and I wish the folks at Waterboy many more years of doing what they do so well, especially those sweetbreads.

Figuring out Sacramento's culinary identity is complicated. Part of it is diversity. The offerings are so varied and multicultural, especially when you explore the ethnic restaurants on Franklin Boulevard, Broadway and the wonderfully wide world of food at Stockton Boulevard and 65th Street. Let's hope some of those businesses join the food truck-food cart boom and bring more variety and deliciousness to that new category.

Another part of this area's dining identity is its farm-to-table approach, one personified by Mulvaney's, Magpie, Grange, The Kitchen and many others. We're also a town of casual bistros serving seriously good food – Formoli's, Tuli, The Waterboy, Press Bistro, Bistro Michel.

Serious fine dining isn't dead, but it isn't expanding in this economy. Slocum House is gone. The Firehouse is still going strong in Old Sacramento. Ambience is still an artistic and refined wonder in Carmichael. But this category is having a tough go of it.

Lounge ON20 remodeled last spring and opened an expanded fine dining program this year, featuring modernist cuisine that made headlines but apparently not money. The place retooled and dialed back the cutting-edge food, though we hope Pajo Bruich and Mike Ward can still show off their considerable talents moving forward.

We're a tremendous coffee town now, too, thanks to an infusion of new places in recent years – Old Soul, Temple, Naked Lounge, Chocolate Fish, Broadacre, to go with more established places like Boulevard Coffee and Java City. Peet's and Starbucks are here, too, but many coffee lovers find it easy to support locally owned places these days.

Le Petit Paris, my favorite place to sit outside with my dogs, sip an espresso and watch the world go by, closed its doors on 19th Street, eventually replaced by a venture making gelato so good you'd be too busy eating to notice anything but the bottom of your cup. Thanks to Devine Gelateria and its creative flavors, we've completely forgotten about ubiquitous fro-yo and rainbow sprinkles.

Sidewalks are still great for sipping and supping, and this year I latched onto a good one, Bistro Michel, where I dined outdoors on a downtown block that turns quaint and quiet after 6 p.m. I still recall that warm evening in April and some beautiful bistro fare, including mussels in an intensely flavored broth finished with a dash of cream and a shot of absinthe. The steak frites were also a simple joy when cooked to perfection and included the best french fries in town.

Press Bistro was impressive, too. A great room with an industrial feel and really good food coming out of the kitchen run by chef-owner David English. The place brought new energy and elegance to Capitol Avenue.

Tiny Café Marika was another treat in 2011, whether I sat outside for lunch or, when lucky enough, snagged one of five tables inside. The mere mention of the pork schnitzel, cabbage stuffed with ground pork or the spicy chicken are enough to make me salivate. Just remember it's cash only at this J Street throwback.

Ginger Elizabeth Chocolates remains a destination for lovers of chocolates, and more folks are recognizing that. This year, I discovered that Ginger Elizabeth Hahn's talents are not limited to chocolate. Her ice cream sandwiches, served seasonally, are the most memorable dessert of 2011, an absolute game-changer.

The housemade ice cream is sandwiched between layers of extra-large cookies – the same recipe as for her delectable macarons. Turns out, they don't really freeze, so they're tender, light and amazing when you bite down to the ice cream. I can't wait for the warm weather in 2012 to usher in these treats once again.

In 2011, I brought you plenty of good news and a fair share of bad. I made new friends and a few enemies.

I'm more than hopeful for 2012. I'm excited, and I've already spotted what could be called a restaurant boomlet – the wave of openings and pending openings that looks so promising. I just tasted my first dishes at Monsoon, the new Indian restaurant that took over for Spin Burger Bar at 16th and K streets. I'm impressed by the menu and fresh approach at The Porch, which just opened in the space occupied by Celestin's for many years. A Mongolian barbecue restaurant is set to open at 19th and J streets where Garlic Shack had a short-lived and unfortunate run.

There's more. Coming soon to midtown is the latest and maybe the greatest Squeeze Inn. Where will it be? Just watch for the line of hamburger junkies down the sidewalk on K Street when it opens, all kinds of folks craving that gooey-good cheese skirt with the crispy edges. With a Squeeze Inn within walking distance of home, my calorie count for 2012 surely won't dip below 1 million.

Burgers, bistros, artisan pizza, sandwich spots, produce galore, even a few vegan joints with a loyal fan bases. We've got it good in Sacramento, and the best is yet to come.

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