



Top Reviews of 2009

Our Gourmet

Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2009

It's that time again: Christmas is over, the New Year is imminent and it's time to take a look back at the restaurants of 2009.

During the past year, we went to dozens of restaurants, some good, some not so good, but happily very few really bad. New restaurants have opened and a few have closed. All in all, despite the economy, it didn't seem like such a bad year for the restaurant scene in New Hampshire.

Here then, are our top five restaurants — and keep in mind, we reviewed only a portion of the many, many eateries in the Granite State. If we didn't get to it in 2009, we'll work on getting to as many as possible in 2010. It'll be our pleasure.

Buckley's Great Steaks

438 Daniel Webster Highway, Merrimack

424-0995; www.buckleysgreatsteaks.com

Score: 92.5/100

Our Gourmet: Expensive, but worth the price if you're looking for an almost flawless experience. Also my favorite dessert of the year – their baked Alaska was to die for.

The Dining Companion: A well-deserved win by Buckley's. I have to admit that I have rarely tasted a steak as well prepared, and their hamburger was nothing to sneeze at either.

Zampa

8 Exeter Road, Epping

679-8772; www.zampa.com

Score: 91.5/100

OG: Small, romantic and one of the nicest surprises of the year. I rated everything 9 or above and TDC gave the peppercorn cognac filet mignon a perfect 10, which he rarely gives out.

TDC: This was my personal favorite of the year and they were a very close second. I have also asked OG to take me there for my birthday dinner soon and she told me that it was already in the works.

Orchard Street Chop House

1 Orchard St., Dover

749-0006; www.orchardstreetchopshop.com

Score: 90/100

OG: We're hoping our son's band goes to the Dover Band Show again this year, just so we can go back to the Orchard Street Chop House. Very romantic. Not inexpensive, but worth the splurge.

TDC: I enjoyed the ambience of Orchard Street Chop house. The braised beef short rib with creamy onion risotto was probably my favorite appetizer of the year. Definitely deserving of a top five award.

For fourth place, a tie:

Epoch Restaurant and Bar

90 Front Street, Exeter (at the Exeter Inn)

778-3762; www.theexeterinn.com

Mint Bistro

1105 Elm St., Manchester;

625-MINT (6468); www.mintbistronh.com

Score: 89.5/100

OG: Epoch, the upscale new eatery in the Exeter Inn, gave a nice new look and feel to what was sort of a stuffy old standby. Mint Bistro is one of our favorite new restaurants in Manchester. The land & sea tartare was exquisite.

TDC: Mint Bistro is definitely deserving of the score. Two things that stood out: the curry fish soup and the house made desserts. Definitely a place we would visit again on our own dime. As for Epoch got a rare 10 rating for the corn-encrusted Maine crab cake served with a cilantro infused avocado salsa.

Pasquale's Ristorante

145 Raymond Road, Candia

483-5005; www.pasqualeincandia.com

Score: 88/100

OG: An unexpected find in a Candia strip mall, Pasquale's offers authentic Italian cuisine in a cozy atmosphere. Try the risotto alla pescatore.

TDC: I love good Italian, and Pasquale's is very good Italian. Funny that we often find that the strip mall offers some of the best in Italian dining...

Honorable mentions for other categories:

OG: Two places deserve special mention. The first is already on this list: Buckley's. Not only do they serve wonderful dinners, but they were the surprise winner of our Best Burger contest this summer.

Also worthy of special mention is Richard's Bistro in Manchester. Richard's actually had the highest score of the year, but it was based on the \$5 lunch, which is THE best lunch value around. Not to be missed.

TDC: Buckley's uses all the trimmings from their dry-aged steaks for their hamburgers, which gives them a distinct taste that, in my opinion, one shouldn't mask with too many toppings. As for Richard's, you can't get a finer meal at lunch for the price. Just make sure you save room for one of their mini lunch desserts.

If you would like us to try out one of your top five restaurants, we'd love to hear about it. And, if you don't have a top five restaurant, definitely get out and find one in 2010. There are plenty to choose from.