

TexasMonthly

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Where to Eat Now 2010

By Patricia Sharpe

I don't know if it was the unsettled economy, climate change, the Saturn-Uranus opposition, or what, but the past year's new restaurants were a confounding mix of high highs and low lows. To start with the good tidings, five of Texas' star chefs launched new operations this year. Equally promising, four relative newcomers are causing a stir. And proving that Texas continues to grow as a player on the national food scene, two renowned out-of-state chefs—Wolfgang Puck being one—established beachheads here.

That said, my gut feeling (we restaurant critics tend to rely on that a lot) is that last year was pretty hit-and-miss. Yes, I had fantastic dishes, but I also encountered some that were outstandingly mediocre, occasionally at the same restaurant during the same meal. Likewise, menus could be all over the map. A few were highly focused, many more were eclectic, and some were just plain random (I mean, pulled-pork sandwiches and duck breast marinated in Galliano liqueur on the same bill of fare?). It was as if chefs were trying a little of everything, desperate to find dishes that would sell, never mind the logic.

So much for generalities—let's cut to the chase. To be eligible for this story, a restaurant must have officially opened between November 1, 2008, and November 1, 2009 (with a three-week grace period at the front end). We consider only restaurants that are new, under which rubric we also count establishments that have changed their name, moved to a new location, and are generally shaking things up. Second or third locations of Texas-based restaurants don't count, although we do permit the first Texas location of an out-of-state enterprise. But all this talk about restaurants must be making you hungry. It's time to see where you might want to make reservations this weekend.

1. RDG + Bar Annie, Houston

Seven months ago, überchef Robert Del Grande took the final step in a change that had been years in the making: He shuttered Cafe Annie, the acclaimed but aging restaurant that had been his home base for 29 years, and moved his operation lock, stock, and blender to a flashy redevelopment a block away. Unquestionably, many sleepless nights accompanied the decision, but from the minute newly christened RDG + Bar Annie opened, any lingering doubts vanished like bubbles in a glass of champagne. Del Grande is back in the game—and how.

Smart and sexy, RDG pulses with an energy that its predecessor had not enjoyed in ages. The crowd, always a bit bipolar in its division between haute and hip, has definitely expanded in the direction of the latter, as young Turks, stiletto wobblers, and other scenesters pack in nightly for drinks and nibbles in Bar Annie. (Incidentally, the restaurant's odd name becomes clear once you're there; RDG is the expansive, quieter rear area with gilt-framed mirrors; Bar Annie is the more casual space, with warm western-red-cedar walls and a fabulous bar made of Persian onyx.)

But the fascinating part of the move is how it has revitalized Del Grande and his chefs de cuisine, Elliott Kelly and Clint Davis. Classic dishes have a new lease on life; new ones pop. You might start with a seared sea scallop appetizer from 1992 (menu descriptions tell when most dishes were introduced, tracing the arc of Del Grande's cuisine through the years). The scallop's interior is as smooth as butter, and it sits atop bacon-studded grits crowned with a poached egg. From there, it's a giant leap forward to 2009's Texas quail, a big bruiser of a bird accompanied by a dusky fig-and-foie-gras jam. There's also a tempting selection of hors d'oeuvres, like the tasty Asian Nachos of yellowtail on jícama, that defy categorization, chronological or otherwise.

For the main event, sentimentalists might flash back to 1988's roasted redfish veracruzana, a dish that validates Del Grande's role as a founding father of Southwestern cuisine; the translucent filet basks in a simple fresh tomato sauce set off by capers and sharp-flavored cilantro. Modernists will no doubt gravitate to 2009's extravagantly marbled lamb chops sided by pan-roasted white hominy and spicy tomato jelly. Wherever you choose to travel in time, there's a dish to suit your fancy. With the transition to RDG, the curtain has been lowered on one era in Houston restaurant history and raised on another. Long live the future. 1800 Post Oak Blvd., at Ambassador Way, 713-840-1111. Lunch Mon–Sat 11:30–2. Dinner Mon–Sat 6–10, Sun 5–9. rdgbarannie.com



Robert Del Grande's RDG pulses with energy.
RDG + BAR ANNIE, HOUSTON
Photograph by Debora Small