

Consistency was the key

...for this year's Best Restaurant

By COLLEEN COFFIELD SACHS
Daily News Columnist

Once again I have the pleasant opportunity to thank those who have dined with me this year, supplying valued opinions and eager palates.

A number of diners were new to the review dinner, and I was lucky to have five kids give me their opinions on the family friendliness of some restaurants.

Thank you Nancy, Todd A., Lance, Elizabeth, Suzy, Larry, JJ, Stephanie, John, Debbi, Melodee, Jill, Tom, Els, Ann C., Barry, Charles, Whip, Meg, Georgia, Molly, Russell, Maureen, Sarah Kate, Cornelia, Mary Gene, Ann P., Jeff, Susan, Blane and Tyler.

And thank you to my mom, Sylvia, and husband, Todd, who are my most frequent dining companions. They are up for just about anything no matter the cuisine or location.

Last year I said that Todd was a chowhound in training. This year he has become a full fledged chowhound, who places as much emphasis on good service as good food.

I always look forward to this column each year because it is all about the positives. It highlights the best, most memorable meals of the year.

For breakfast, Silver Sands (at Harbor Docks) produced excellent breakfast fare in ample quantity at a good price. Donut Hole was renovated from the ground up, but happily kept the Texas Sweet Potato pancakes on the menu.

I found myself going back to The Front Porch in Niceville for anything with the Portuguese version of chorizo. Whenever I visit for breakfast I make sure I leave with a Sprouter sandwich lunch bag.

Two restaurants this year were a little unconventional. Sarah K's, a take-out only place, has delicious crab cakes with nearly half a pound of lump crab, and little else.



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Café Thirty-A keeps diners coming back with its consistently high-quality food and service. It is Colleen Coffield Sach's restaurant of the year for 2006.

Dave's Dogs lets you pick up a dog on a buttery grilled bun, and dine while you window shop (at Destin Commons or Silver Sands Factory Stores). Street food at its best.

One of the nicest things I discovered this year is that we can get really good authentic Mexican food here. This spring we had remarkable tortas, sopes and gorditas at Mexico City in Fort Walton Beach. And on a return visit to Coco's in Santa Rosa Beach, I found that authentic tacos filled with lengua, carnitas or carne asada, and tender, flavorful tamales are now served on Friday and Saturday.

After a trip to California that included stops at a number of well-regarded Mexican restaurants, I found that we have food that is as good or

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better right here.

We had good pizza at Jordano's, Fat Daddy's, Helen Back and Scully's on the Bayou. Sai-Kyo brought Vietnamese food to Destin and teamed it with Japanese options. Osaka at Baytowne provided one of the most aesthetically pleasing venues, and good food to boot.

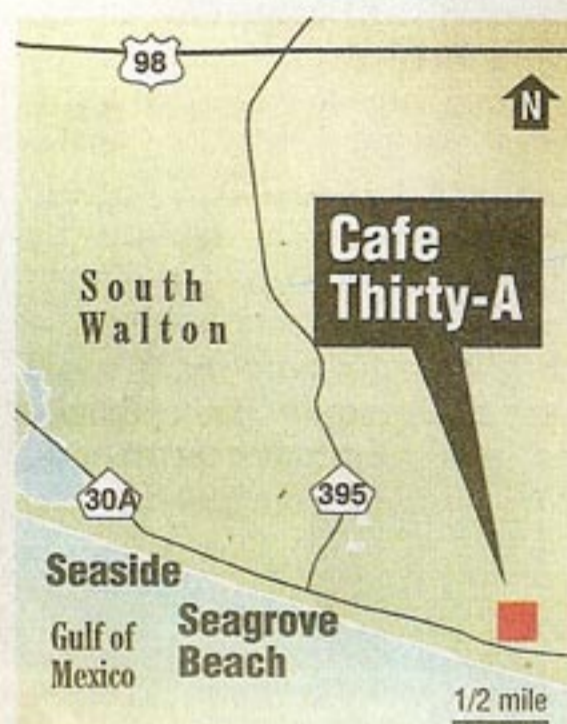
The Boat House provided a great location right over the Destin Harbor surrounded by fishing boats. It isn't much to look at, but provides a great view.

O Sole Mio kept its appeal preparing outstanding Italian cuisine in new, fancier digs. Nim's treated us to mouthwa-

tering Indian fare, and The Grape made wine approachable while giving us lots of food pairing options.

Rutherford's Cuisines of the World menu provided the best value this year, serving a delicious three course meal for less than \$15. Shades at the Loop and Seacrest Cafe were other restaurants with good value, offering consistently good comfort food and atmospheres that manage to appeal to adults and be kid-friendly at the same time.

The best steak I had this year was at stylish Ruth's Chris. My mouth waters just thinking about the buttery filet



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and the Cowboy rib eye on a sizzling plate. At Zampieri's Harbor Grille it was oysters. Whether they were baked, served fried atop a salad, or as part of a perfect po-boy, no one did oysters better. And no one had a more breathtaking view out the windows.

Fish Out of Water provides two views depending on where you sit. Some tables offer a water view, but those sitting at interior tables enjoy a serene and calming stylized version of the water. That the food, emphasizing fresh local ingredients, is elegant, imaginative and delicious makes Fish Out of Water a great restaurant.

With restaurants of that caliber, I realized that I couldn't choose one that was better than the rest. But one restaurant has shown excellence in food, service and atmosphere year after year, setting it apart.

Café Thirty-A has a convivial atmosphere that makes every meal there a delight. The adept staff makes diners feel welcome and comfortable.

With offerings such as the grilled quail appetizer, colorful salads, inventive entrees, and desserts like banana beignets, Café Thirty-A keeps old favorites around, while changing things enough to keep frequent diners interested.

Consistency keeps those diners coming back to this restaurant of the year.