

CHEF'S CHOICE



*The crème de la crème of
Portland's culinary
set picks the city's
best restaurants.*

BY JOE KURMASKIE

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hen it comes to eating out, most of us play Russian roulette with our palates. We blindly follow the recommendations of friends and co-workers, set store by the musings of food critics, enlist the fickle wisdom of Internet search engines. Yet for some reason, we rarely solicit advice from those who certainly should know best—namely, the professionals charged with putting food on our plates, our chefs.

So when it came time to determine who and what would be fêted in our first annual Best Restaurants cover story, we elected to poll the creative minds

behind the burners at 86 local restaurants, executive chefs lauded again and again in area guidebooks, newspapers and, of course, the pages of our own dining section. More than half—47 chefs in all—responded to our 24-question survey, jumping at the chance to play food critic for a day.

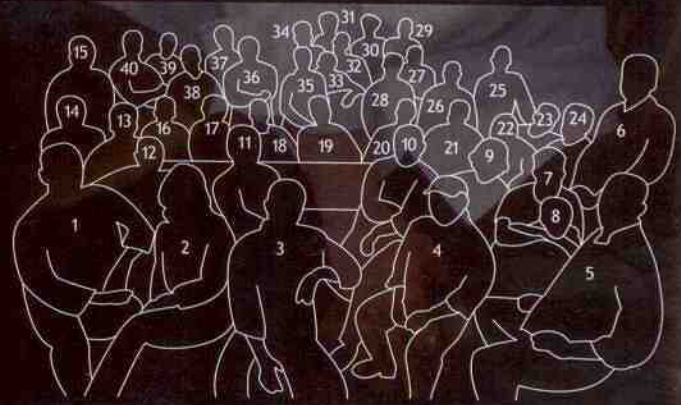
Although our chefs couldn't reach consensus about a single restaurant that epitomizes the city's best (see "And the Winner Is ... ME!" page 78), definite standouts emerged when the chefs were asked to cast their votes in 14 distinct categories of cuisine, from Continental to Tex-Mex. They also dished out à la carte accolades, from singing the praises of underrated peers to anointing the city's most romantic restaurant, best breakfast, most exceptional dessert and most kid-friendly dining rooms. What follows is a smorgasbord of insider information to whet every appetite, a citywide dinner party at which some of the most celebrated culinary talents in town have gathered to bare their souls and share their secrets. So take your seat at the chefs' table, unfurl a linen napkin, and tuck in.

Bon appétit!



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 2004

Portland-area chefs gather around the table to cast their votes for the city's best restaurants, relishing the opportunity to play critic for a day. Pictured here at Mother's Bistro and Bar, co-winner of *Portland Monthly's* Best Breakfast and Best With Kids categories.





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| 1. Vitaly Paley, Paley's Place | 14. Ken Gordon, Ken's Place | 29. Adam Kekahuna, Saucebox |
| 2. Barbara Weisman, Little Wing Café | 15. David Machado, Lauro Kitchen | 30. Josh Lane, El Gaucho |
| 3. Brent Hopkins, Carlyle | 16. Matt Lightner, Eleni's Philoxenia | 31. Tommy Habetz, Ripe |
| 4. Teodoro KuMay, Assaggio | 17. John Taboada, Navarre | 32. John Eisenhart, Pazzo |
| 5. Marco Shaw, Fife | 18. Kenny Giambalvo, Bluehour | 33. Pascal Sauton, Carafe |
| 6. Kevin Gibson, Castagna | 19. Bruce Fishback, Bread & Ink Café | 34. Nathan Read, Porto Terra Tuscan Grill and Bar |
| 7. Matt Johnson, Tabla | 20. Thomas McLaughlin, Serratto | 35. Kevin Peck, Capitol Coffeehouse and Bistro |
| 8. Connor Johnson | 21. Scott Neuman, iOba! | 36. Dave Marth, 3 Doors Down Café |
| 9. Ronnie MacQuarrie, Southpark Seafood Grill and Wine Bar | 22. Bo Kline, Typhoon! | 37. Rolland Wesen, Rivers Restaurant |
| 10. Robert Reynolds, Shogren House | 23. Henry Gilbert, Winterborne | 38. Paul Ornstein, Basilico Ristorante |
| 11. Jerry Huisinga, Genoa | 24. Ralph Stuart, Bacchus | 39. Morgan Brownlow, Clarklewis |
| 12. Lisa Schroeder, Mother's Bistro and Bar | 25. James Angerman, Dragonfish | 40. Brad Root, Roots Restaurant and Bar |
| 13. Pascal Chureau, Tucci | 26. Jason Nielsen, Mint | |
| | 27. Aaron Dionne, Three Degrees/Riverplace Hotel | |
| | 28. Dylyn Coolidge, Lucy's Table | |

Not pictured:
 Jonathan Blakeslee (Bleu),
 Jonathan Clarke (Clarke's),
 Scott Dolich (Park Kitchen),
 Cody Elliott (Morton's),
 Charles Flint (Paragon),
 Alem Gebrehiwot (Queen of Sheba),
 Michele Stultz (Equinox Lounge),
 George Toulouliotis (Eleni's Estiatorio)

PHOTOGRAPH BY OWEN CAREY

Best Breakfast

To hear our chefs talk, Portland's early-morning plate specials and brunch offerings are no false sunrises. For instance, you'll find chef John Taboada of Navarre hoarding pound cake over at **Hannah Bea's** on NE MLK Jr Blvd, a runner-up in our Best Breakfast category. And mornings at the **Bijou Café** downtown (another Best Breakfast also-ran) attract a bleary-eyed, white-hat convention with Lauro's David Machado, Leather Storrs of Noble Rot and El Gaucho's Joshua Lane staking out Formica tabletops.

But when the Best Breakfast votes were tallied, top honors were shared by **Mother's Bistro & Bar** and the **Heathman Restaurant**.

"It's because Lisa's whole attitude makes you feel like you've been invited over for breakfast at her house," Fife's Marco Shaw explains. "Touches like ground cornmeal in the French toast batter will bring you back again."

For her part, Mother's chef/owner Lisa Schroeder pinpoints her obsessive-compulsive nature as the secret to her restaurant's early-morning success.

"I'm obsessive about everything, including doing something different with every breakfast, but I still want it to taste familiar to the customer," says Schroeder. "I'll still put designs on the pancakes for the kids."

Then there's the venerable Heathman, where adult palates reign, with signature dishes like crab cakes, smoked salmon hash, and spinach and tomato eggs benedict.

"It's where you go to be treated like an adult," says Vitaly Paley of Paley's Place.

Noble Rot's Leather Storrs adds: "If you want to feel special even in the slightest, you make tracks down to the Heathman."

'I'll still put designs on the pancakes for the kids.'

Best Indian

Writing off the **Bombay Cricket Club** as some sort of gentleman's sports bar or, God forbid, mistaking it for the Bombay Bicycle Club franchise would be a major affront to curry-craving taste buds across the city.

Most notably, those of our tastemaking chefs.

Chef Bruce Fishback of Bread & Ink Café breaks naan with his teenage son at the Cricket Club every chance he gets. Fishback knows the cuisine has gained such a rabid following because the entire menu is as consistent as a century-hitting batsman and achieved with as much skill, one bowl at a time.

"It's not just a few house specialties," he stresses. "From the fill-you-just-right portions to the robust flavor of the lamb vindaloo and my son's favorite, the chicken tandoori, everything I've ordered smells and tastes fresh."

Chef Vitaly Paley heads to the Cricket Club whenever he feels like he's getting a cold.

"Their curries—goat and the chicken liver—with a piece of their spicy naan, that's the cure," he says.

Best Service & Most Romantic

Never mind the menu that covers a wide swath of Europe and relies on direct-from-the-source local ingredients. Our chefs singled out **Paley's Place** for its intimate ambience (it's situated in a quaint, stately home on NW 21st Ave) as well as its attention to customers, judging it tops in two separate categories.

"They know how to be aware of your needs without feeling overprotective, phony or hovering," says Kevin Gibson of Castagna. "You're being taken care of without having to help them do their job well."

"They read tables better than anywhere in this city; they can tell intuitively whether to be your friend or backdrop," says Marco Shaw.

The light-touch pampering, candle-and-cloth décor, and fresh flowers throughout have helped seal more than a few marriage proposals.

"We try to talk potential grooms out of the risky 'floating ring inside a Champagne glass' or the 'hidden inside sorbet' technique," says general manager/co-owner Kimberly Paley. "We bring the ring out as an *avant* dessert (a before-dessert palate-cleansing pause/treat), compliments of the kitchen. It comes on a plate with flowers. When he gets to his knees, that's our cue to walk away and hope for the best."

Then, of course, there are the newlyweds and couples celebrating anniversaries.

"We know this place can act as something of an aphrodisiac," says Paley. "Diners joke with us that they wish our linen tablecloths were a little bit longer. We're just pleased to give them a great experience. Where they go as consenting adults from here ... well, that's their business."

Best Pacific Northwest

By nature, the restaurant business is all about cutthroat competition, but when it came to naming Portland's best Pacific Northwest restaurant, our chefs practically fell over themselves to heap praise on Cory Schreiber, the creative mind behind **Wildwood**.

"Here's a guy who grew up in Portland, went away to cut his teeth and learn his craft, but came home to try something totally new with familiar Northwest ingredients," gushes ¡Oba!'s Scott Neuman. "It took guts at that time ... and people have stepped up and supported it."

Vitaly Paley echoes this sentiment.

"Cory is just wonderful. He's so true to form with his style, selection of textures, flavors and constantly making the most of ingredients. I adore the flatbread pizzas, anything that comes out of his oven. Those pork chops always come out wonderful."

Dylyn Coolidge of Lucy's Table, for one, aspires to Schreiber's artistry.

"I'm a concept guy in my approaches," he says. "Northwest cuisine is about using and being creative with all the local farm ingredients. Cory starts with the best ingredients, then raises it to art. I was an art major, so when I see this going on with other chefs it inspires me to do the same. I confess that I'll swing by on Sundays and look at his menu to emulate it. I never do the same dishes, although I might use the same lamb or fish he's chosen for quality and seasonal freshness. Cory would be flattered to know he's inspired other chefs in town with his menu."