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## 'Twas a sweet and sour year

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What is a year-end column without a best-of list? To some, it's akin to dinner sans dessert. As a final course of sorts, I have decided to compile a list (in no particular order) of my favourite restaurants reviewed on these pages in 2006. Given my natural preference for sour over sweet, I am also including my list of duds that disappointed the most.

### HITS

Lumière Tasting Bar

Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, my absolute favourite dining destination reached new heights of lusciousness with the introduction of an expanded *à la carte* menu. As I wrote in April: "If Rob Feenie's mascarpone ravioli is sex on a plate, his roasted bone marrow is a Roman orgy." This elegant lounge offers all the élan, sleek service and ultrarich, modern French fare of the Relais & Chateaux, AAA five-diamond original -- at a small fraction of the price. *2551 West Broadway, 604-739-8185.*

Gastropod

Wow. I was pleasantly blindsided by this chic little restaurant that serves modern European haute cuisine at low neighbourhood prices. Chef Angus An's deceptively simple dishes belie a complex juggling of tastes, textures and contemporary cooking techniques. Though I am generally wary of the new "molecular gastronomists," An shows that the latest trends need not sacrifice flavour. Who knew horseradish snow and wasabi sabayon could taste so divine? *1938 W. 4th Ave., 604-730-5579.*

#### La Régalade Côté Mer

Steeve Rayé added another ring to the gilded family tree with this lusty French bistro that rivals the original Le Régalade, owned and operated by his parents. It really is worth the drive to the secluded seaside haven (in Fisherman's Cove, across from the West Vancouver Yacht Club), where the focus is on the bounty of the ocean. Portions are huge, dishes arrive at the table bubbling in home-style casserole pots, sauces are sinfully creamy and sides are decadently rich. Not recommended for dieters or the weak of heart. *5775 Marine Dr., 604-921-9701.*

#### Crave

After 15 years at the Four Seasons, Wayne Martin said adios to corporate life and opened this tiny neighbourhood restaurant that serves some of the best honest-to-goodness comfort food I've ever sunk my teeth into. The pulled pork sandwich -- smoked over hickory wood for 12 hours and piled on a dense potato-scallion bun -- melts in your mouth. The buttermilk-fried chicken Cobb salad is dangerously addictive. The prices are dirt cheap. If I lived closer, I'd dine there every week. *3941 Main St., 604-872-3663*

#### Finest At Sea

In the super-cheap takeout category, I was torn between this environmentally friendly seafood boutique and bistro and The Noodle Box. I love the latter's fiery fusion stir fries and have returned many times, but the seafood shop wins my nod for a variety of reasons: 1) I never thought I'd taste a plate of fish and chips as good as they make it at Go Fish; 2) every critter on the menu is wild, sustainable and caught in B.C. waters using a line or net; 3) I can fill my freezer while I wait. *4675 Arbutus St., 604-266-1904.*

## **MISSES**

Tojo's

Tojo's certainly isn't the worst Japanese restaurant I've ever encountered, but it does rank as one of my biggest culinary disappointments -- ever. This is a legendary restaurant, frequented by the rich and famous and cited in every travel guide as one of the best in the world. On the two occasions that I dined at the master's *omakase* bar, the food was ordinary, the service imperious and the prices outrageous. It will be interesting to see if Tojo stops resting on his laurels now that he's moving to flashier digs next month: *1133 West Broadway, 604-872-8050 (new location)*.

Connor Butler

The former death-metal singer with culinary ambitions that embarrassingly exceed his grasp has apparently lowered the price of

his 10-course tasting menu to

\$130 (from \$160). He's still reaching too high, considering all the flat notes I tasted (not to mention the gloomy Gothic music and room's fusty funereal ambience).

I suggest Butler turn the restaurant into an eccentric tea room before he runs out of the inheritance that financed it. *2145 Granville St.,*

*604-734-2145.*

Rare One

I've already reviewed this restaurant twice and hate to flog a dead horse, but it really was one of the most bewildering bombs I experienced all year. The first time I visited, the kitchen was trying way too hard with too many weird flavour combinations; the second time,

everything was just plain bland. Other critics have reviewed the

restaurant favourably. It has been suggested by many that the kitchen is inconsistent and I just had the bad luck of being there on off nights. That's not an excuse I'm willing to buy, certainly not at \$65

a tasting menu. *1355 Hornby St., 604-699-1256.*

### Habit Lounge

Some habits are easy to break. Take, for instance, this funky hipster hangout that everyone else seems to love. On my one and only visit, I encountered a 40-minute lineup, a table so drafty I had to wear my winter coat, an abundance of cloyingly sweet caramelized carrots (served most offensively in a soupy shepherd's pie), a buffalo-steak tortilla tower still frozen in the middle, a server who pretty much ignored us all night and acoustics so obnoxiously jarring I could hear the party around the corner better than my companion across the table. *2610 Main St., 604-877-8582.*

### Vancouver Parks Board

#### Concession Stands

Last summer, I gave a harsh spanking to the Second Beach concession stand for its tasteless slop and messy premises. A few weeks later, I had a completely different experience at the Sunset Beach concession stand: Service was friendly; the eating area was tidy and trimmed with cheery flower pots; the burgers were fresh and fat; and there were lots of salads, fruit and other healthy fare for purchase. This particular concession certainly made Second Beach look even more decrepit by comparison. But the inconsistencies also made me wonder about the parks board's own lack of standards and enforcement. Will our waterfront dining options really improve once they privatize the entire system or is this just a passing of the proverbial buck?



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