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Phil Vettel's Year in Review

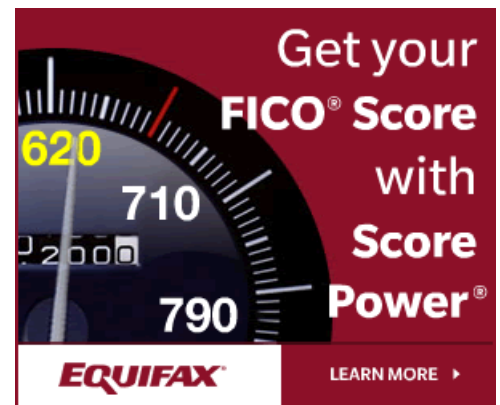
By Phil Vettel

Tribune critic

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Were it not for the nation's financial meltdown, which has put dozens of Chicago restaurants at risk (I hope I'm wrong, but the first quarter of 2009 could be very painful), 2008 would be remembered as a remarkably good dining year. Here are some of the "ests"—the best, the newest, the happiest and saddest—that defined Chicago dining in 2008:

Highest highs: The year started out as a confident affirmation of fine dining. In the first quarter alone the city saw the debuts of Takashi, Takashi Yagihashi's small-plates nook in Bucktown (it technically opened on Dec. 30); Lockwood, the splendid restaurant that brought serious dining back to the Palmer House Hilton; and Sixteen, the dazzling contemporary space on the 16th floor of Trump Tower. To say nothing of Mercat a la Planxa, which opened in the Blackstone Hotel and immediately set new standards for Spanish cuisine in Chicago.



Under normal circumstances, any of those four could have been considered the best new restaurant of the year. But then Rich Melman opened L2O, with the acclaimed, San Francisco star chef Laurent Gras helming the kitchen, and set the bar at unheard-of heights. Gras' seafood mastery and L2O's beautiful physical space made it hands-down the best restaurant of 2008—for Chicago, and quite possibly, the nation.

Well-established chefs struck out on their own, with good results. Graham Elliot Bowles left Avenues to open Graham Elliot in River North. Tony Priolo left Coco Pazzo and opened Piccolo Sogno. Ryan Poli returned to town, becoming executive chef of Perennial, an American bistro in Lincoln Park and another one of the bright spots of 2008.

Lowest lows: First the presumably bulletproof Starbucks announced it was closing 600 stores nationwide. Then Bennigan's shut down every company-owned store in the country—overnight (a few Bennigan's locations may be staging a comeback). And suddenly every restaurant in town was dealing with unreserved tables, penny-pinching customers and skyrocketing food prices. Food prices, at least, have declined somewhat—even the price for white truffles declined, simply because buyers at auction were unwilling to match the record prices of recent years—but customer counts are down and restaurants are hurting. Some, in fact, didn't survive. Copperblue, a good restaurant in an unfortunate location, closed. Ditto for Fahrenheit, a boldly contemporary restaurant in St. Charles that didn't find enough of an audience. Brasserie Ruhlmann, a great-looking restaurant with megabucks behind it, waved the surrender flag. Bob Djahanguiri dismissed his entire kitchen staff (after the departure of chef Roland Liccioni) at Old Town Brasserie and brought in a new and much smaller team—a direct result of decreased restaurant business.

Craziest speculation: Foodies who have never, ever known the name of the White House chef (in itself a clue that it's not exactly a high-profile job) went agog with rumors over who would preside over Barack Obama's kitchen. It's Rick Bayless! No, Art Smith! No, Marcus Samuelsson! Best guess? Cristeta Comerford. Who's that? That's the current White House executive chef, the first woman ever to be named to the post.

Best-est news: Grant Achatz spent most of 2007 fighting oral cancer, which doctors announced to be in remission at the end of the year. So in 2008, all he did was keep his restaurant, Alinea, at peak performance, put out a cookbook that weighs more than a bag of organic flour and, oh yes, win the James Beard Foundation's Outstanding Chef award.

Biggest chef magnet: That would be Chicago in 2008, which lured all sorts of out-of-town chefs to establish operations here. Besides Gras, Jose Garces of Philadelphia (though a native Chicagoan) opened Mercat a la Planxa, Samuelsson of New York opened C-House, Phillip Foss was lured from Le Cirque 2000 (since closed) to run Lockwood, and the much-traveled Australian, Frank Brunacci, came to town to run Sixteen. Even Jimmy Sneed, of The Frog and the Redneck restaurant in Virginia, surfaced in Naperville, operating Sugar Toad. Not to mention Terrance Brennan, the New Yorker set to open a copy of Artisanal on Michigan Avenue until the deal fell through.

Best food festival: Chicago Gourmet, held in September, was Chicago's first effort at an upscale food-and-wine festival. Yes, the two-day event could have used more food stations. But by any reasonable standard, the event was a major success. Of particular note was the glittering roster of participating winemakers; serious imbibers really got their money's worth in the wine tents. And the decision to focus nearly exclusively on Chicago chefs (most other events pull in big national names) was a nice affirmation that, when it comes to putting out great food, Chicago chefs really don't need any help.

Hottest fast-food trend: A number of burger chains previously unknown in the Chicago area arrived here in 2008. Sonic Burger opened stores in Aurora, Algonquin and Country Club Hills; Fatburger made its debut in Orland Park. Five Guys opened in Oak Park, and will open in Lincoln Park on Monday. And The Counter set up shop on Diversey Avenue in Lincoln Park.

Popular-est animal of the year: That would be the pig; Chicago chefs used everything but the squeal on menus this year, no part more frequently than the belly, which showed up as a flavor accent and a main course. Paul Kahan opened up Publican, a market district hotspot with a beer hall's beverage program and a pork-focused menu that included aged hams, sausages, tenderloins and even fried pork rinds. Customers grunted their approval.

Trendiest terms: You weren't a 2008 foodie unless you could define and properly use these buzzwords: Kona kampachi. Locavore. Salumi. LEED. Jamon Iberico. La Quercia prosciutto. Carbon footprint. Korean bbq. Guanciale. Burrata. And anything cooked in duck fat.

The 5 best reasons for getting out of bed in 2009: One: To support your favorite restaurants. Two: To check out late 2008 arrivals, such as Publican, The Bristol, Eve and Province. Three: To see if Olo, Jackson Park Grill and Elvissa Pintxos are *ever* going to open. Four: Sunda, an Asian concept by the Rokit Bar & Grill people, promises to be special. Five: At some point in 2009, "Top Chef" winner Stephanie Izard will open Drunken Goat, a small-plates concept in Wicker Park, backed by Kevin Boehm and Rob Katz, who already own BOKA and Perennial.

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