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Top 10 memorable meals of 2008

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Looking back over a year's worth of dining out -- at 51 restaurants, to be exact -- many meals have faded from view. But some etched impressions that will linger long past 2008.

Sure, impeccable service helps. And not-to-be missed ambience makes memories, too.

In the end, though, it's really about the food.

What follows are 10 unforgettable meals enjoyed at these restaurants -- listed not by preference but in alphabetical order:

1. Asia (1102 E. Susquehanna St., Allentown; 610-798-7777; <http://www.asia>

orientalcuisine.com)

With dishes rooted in Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Indonesian and Chinese cuisines, this restaurant delivered the exotic and intoxicating flavors of the Far East.

I enjoyed watercress stir-fried with chopped ginger and garlic that played cha cha in my mouth, and another stir fry that featured interesting, dense and meaty Japanese eryngii mushrooms along with chicken and shrimp. But the restaurant's chicken lettuce cups made the most lasting impression.

A just-warm filling of minced chicken, water chestnuts, onions, snow pea pods and carrots played beautifully against the lettuce cups' crispy cool freshness. Crackling rice noodles and crushed peanuts added more texture as well as nutty richness. Three dipping sauces -- hot and spicy Szechuan, chilled ginger sesame and fresh basil cashew -- brought the flavor to new heights.

2. Bolete (1740 Seidersville Road, Bethlehem; 610-868-6505; <http://www.bolete>

restaurant.com)

Dinner at this urbane reinvention of the former Inn of the Falcon was like an epicurean ballet -- elegant in orchestration and sophisticated in its reach for excellence.



Everything at this fine-dining restaurant is made fresh from the day's freshest ingredients. Classic cuisine forms the foundation of Bolete's inspired menu, which finds innovation in creative combinations and tantalizing ingredients such as caviar, quail eggs and truffle vinaigrette.

I was in a culinary Canaan here, dining on seductive foie gras and voluptuous bluefin tuna sashimi. So it may come as a surprise that what I remember most are the rolls -- fresh from the oven with thyme and sea salt. Hot and savory, these puffs of flour and air, laced together with yeast and licked with natural sweetness, were perfection. And if the rolls rated that much attention in the kitchen, you can imagine what the rest of the meal was like.

3. Braveheart Highland Pub (403 Main St., Hellertown; 610-838-6555;
<http://www.bravehearthighlandpub.com>)

The roasted red pepper ketchup served with "boxty" (potato pancakes) tipped me off immediately: Braveheart is not just any old Scottish pub.

Prawns in whiskey cream with aged cheddar crostini were another sign that the fare here would rise above bar food. And rise it did. Scottish standards such as "mince and tatties" (ground sirloin in beef gravy with Yukon gold mashed potatoes) and "bridies" (beef tenderloin meat pies topped with onion gravy) were good enough. But pan-seared pork loin with caramelized onion, fennel and apple compote raised the bar beyond all expectation.

Still, it was Braveheart's sticky toffee pudding cake I won't forget. Served in a pool of black-as-midnight toffee sauce, this bold change-of-pace sweet left my taste buds doing an Irish jig.

4. Casa Toro Mexican Grill (7001 Route 309, Fairmount Village Shopping Center, Coopersburg; 610-282-8888)

The caliber of food at this Mexican eatery belies its strip mall location.

"Ensalada fresca" -- salad greens topped with slices of buttery avocado and queso fresco (cheese), simply dressed with olive oil, vinegar, lemon juice and cilantro -- illustrated the restaurant's commitment to fresh fare.

And "pollo en mole," chicken with mole sauce, showcased Casa Toro's flavor repertoire with depth and complexity. But the chorizo enchilada and carnitas went over the top. Chorizo ramped up the enchilada's flavor exponentially, adding spicy heat more tingly than biting, reminiscent of the warm richness of cinnamon.

But I still recall closing my eyes and chewing just a little slower to savor the tasty tap dance offered by the carnitas -- slow-cooked pork simmered in butter, brown sugar, chipotle peppers, onion, garlic and spices. Now there was lusty flavor.

5. Crazy Jakes' BBQ Pit (2527 Freemansburg Ave., Palmer Township; 610-250-8836;
<http://www.crazyjakesbbqpit.com>)

At this fast-food style eatery, the fare is homemade with TLC -- and there's nothing fast about that.

Meats are slow-smoked for hours over hickory, apple and cherry wood, and the tomato-based sauce is Crazy Jake's own. The resulting authentic Midwest barbecue flavor unfolds with even, deliberate

rhythm, like a slow dance.

Here pulled pork filled my mouth with sultry, smoky flavor notes, and lingered an enjoyable moment or two longer. Piled high onto a large bun, dressed with sauce, pickles and onions, this pork made the quintessential barbecue sandwich.

The memorable pork ribs were so tender the meat melted off the bone.

6. deLorenzo's Italian Restaurant (1210 Knox Ave., Easton; 610-438-6026; <http://www.delorenzosrestaurant.com>)

The family affair that is deLorenzo's -- mom in the kitchen, dad at the bar and adult children as servers and hosts -- seems natural in light of its traditional menu, based on recipes passed down for generations.

Tradition certainly gets its due in the eatery's rigatoni Bolognese. Its veal and beef ragu, sautéed with onions, carrots, celery, plum tomatoes and fresh herbs, featured the sort of complexity that comes after years of trial and error. Traditional ingredients in the antipasti salad, such as salami and sopressato, prosciutto and provolone, combined to offer a farmers market of flavors.

But it was the oven-roasted red bell pepper soup that brought my taste buds to life.

7. Flow (268 W. Broadway, Jim Thorpe; 570-325-8200; <http://www.thecccp.org>)

This farm-to-table restaurant served up some interesting fare when I visited in September.

Bay leaf sauce finished a plate of golden brown scallops atop garlic-ginger risotto. Pumpkin-seed stuffing contributed perfect texture to a roasted free-range game hen. And pan-fried panko pork was topped with blueberry basil sauce that was at once sweet and savory.

It's the memory of steamed mussels at the meal's start, however, that stays stuck in my culinary gray matter. A mixture of rich bread crumbs and spinach, poured over the dozen or so bivalves at serving, upped the ante in combination with sherry cream sauce, adding texture along with to-die-for flavor.

8. Honey (42 Shewell Ave., Doylestown; 215-489-4200; <http://www.honeyrestaurant.com>)

What a grand meal I had at this smart, cosmopolitan, bistro-like eatery. I found surprising, adventurous, sensual twists and turns of flavor and texture in the inventive combinations of Honey's appetizer-sized "small plates."

Favorites included warm mushroom salad with grilled sourdough bread. Its earthiness was in fine balance with manchego cheese, a fried egg and sherry wine reduction; an exceptionally crispy potato nest added textural brilliance. Black tea glazed spare ribs -- an inspired study of contrasts, deep with sticky, sweet flavor -- were beautifully partnered with salted pine nuts and sensational ginger ice cream, at once cool and hot.

Truly unforgettable, though, was the PB&J dessert -- an adult take on the Fluffernutter. Grilled peanut butter and marshmallow brioche, topped with strawberry jelly sherbet, was served in a pool of caramelized banana sauce.

9. Josefina's (1104 Butler St., Easton; 610-258-2910)

From the looks of this restaurant's exterior, you'd never guess the quality of its South American fare, served up with sensual, sultry flavors that seduce like a samba.

Gutsy "arepas rellenas," a biscuit-like corn "cake" stuffed with shredded beef, diced tomato and green onion, was hearty and invigorating. Beautifully plated, "estilo de Chef Pete" -- boneless, skinless chicken breast slices stuffed with shrimp and crusted with mashed plantains -- was a delight to the eye as well as the palate.

But I absolutely fell in love with "mofongo." This mountain of mashed, fried plantains mixed with garlic and pork rinds had flavor as bold as the colors of the Mediterranean-style plate on which it was served. The plantains' dense texture carried the garlic's depth well, and the house-made avocado vinaigrette and hot sauce added perfect notes of brightness.

10. Twenty Four East (24 E. Third St., Bethlehem; 610-867-5979)

The fare at this Asian bistro and sushi bar includes soups, salads, noodle dishes, and teriyaki and hibachi entrees.

From the sushi menu, I enjoyed meltingly tender rainbow roll (California roll topped with tuna, salmon, yellowtail and avocado slices) and jungle roll (spicy tuna roll topped with toasted eel) that was a textural study with its crunchy crisped eel counterpoint.

But since my visit early in April, I have longed to return for one of the most amazing dishes on this year's list -- tuna guacamole.

So luxurious, so luscious, was the combination of finely chopped raw tuna marinated in wasabi sauce, topped with homemade guacamole, it made my taste buds do a tango. The wasabi's subtlety caressed more flavor from the fish. So simple, yet so splendid.

And so I close the 2008 chapter of the Book of Culinary Memories with a toast to the inventive chefs across our region devoted to creating food that offers more than sustenance: Here's to more adventures of the palate and the search for the top 10 memorable meals of 2009.

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