

The year's delicious debuts: Best in DFW New Restaurants of 2016

[Leslie Brenner The Dallas Morning News](#) • Dec. 16, 2016 11:54am



Flora Street Cafe's horchata panna cotta with avocado ice cream, tamarind compressed heirloom apples and basil
(Andy Jacobsohn/Staff Photographer)

2016 was the year of 47,254 hot wings, 762,944 overly sweet craft cocktails, 9,222 barrels of marinara-soaked meatballs, 8.5 million fried chickens, 27,847,556 deviled eggs, 54 billion orders of mac and cheese, 373,479 shrimp and 72,466,000 grits.

And that was just in Uptown.



More than a few deviled eggs were consumed in Dallas this year.

File

It was also the year that several thoughtful, interesting restaurants established themselves in and around Dallas, places so deliciously inviting that it's hard to imagine the city without them. A laid-back Roman tavern from one of the city's most talented chefs. A cozy neighborhood Cantonese spot with style and panache. The smashing seafood place that Dallas so desperately needed.

Quality drift was a problem among new and established restaurants alike. It played out dramatically at [Filament](#) and [Whistle Britches](#), both of which I considered — and revisited — for possible inclusion in this list of The Best in DFW New Restaurants of 2016. Here's hoping their managements can pull their cooking and service back up to the level they had achieved when each was reviewed.

Heading into 2017, we're facing what feels like a time of reckoning on the

Dallas dining scene. I think it's safe to say that we have ample steakhouses in North Texas, and enough "modern Southern concepts" within city limits. Word among industry insiders is that many closures are expected in the coming year, as things sort themselves out in a difficult market. My wish for the new year is that Dallas chefs can do less concepting, re-concepting and self-duplicating and start expressing something fresh — as our Best in DFW new restaurants' chefs have been doing.



Chef Tiffany Derry plans to open Roots Southern Table in Trinity Groves in January.

Tiffany Derry Concepts

Fortunately, exciting projects are on the way: soul food from Tiffany Derry at [Roots Southern Table](#); [ambitious wood-fire cooking](#) from Nick Badovinus at Town Hearth; a modern French brasserie [from Bruno Davailon at Bullion](#); an as-yet-unnamed [modern Chinese-American place from the owners of Remedy](#) and chef Kirstyn Brewer, even a [Turkish-inspired restaurant in Frisco from celebrity chef José Andrés](#). The French Room will soon reopen, presumably much refreshed, and new restaurants are planned from the owners of the Joule Hotel. Those are the ones we know about.

An exuberant [global scene](#) is [developing](#) as well, involving restaurants that are often [family-run](#) and without the help of publicists, mostly in the suburbs. As my odometer and our [growing](#) compendium of [stories](#) and [reviews](#)

covering them will attest, I continue to be [on it](#).

Meanwhile, we celebrate the best of this year's delicious debuts.

RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR

Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe at Hall Arts

Texas' most renowned native-son chef debuted his gorgeous [new flagship](#) in the Arts District in June, earning [four stars in a review](#) in August. Since then Stephan Pyles' forward-looking modern Texan restaurant has become even more impressive. The cooking feels less fussy, more focused; early execution wrinkles seem to have worked themselves out.

Weekday lunch service has been added, and already it feels like the city's hottest noonday ticket, with a menu that's sophisticated and original yet approachable. It might start with wild mushroom empanadas, then move on to something like gorgeously cooked king salmon on aji-spiked creamed corn with black-bean-and-prosciutto refritos, crab-and-mango ceviche and crisply fried wedges of ripe avocado. Or go for a luscious Texas prime rib sandwich on house-made foccaccia, slathered with horseradish crema and onion marmalade.



Seared king salmon with black bean-prosciutto refritos, aji-creamed-corn sauce, crab-mango ceviche and fried avocado is featured on Flora Street Cafe's lunch menu.

Andy Jacobsohn/Staff Photographer

Come dinnertime, there are thrills aplenty. Recently I was wowed by aged duck breast flanked by melty smoked cabbage and dabs of pumpkin mole, harissa and sikil-pak — a velvety pumpkin-seed purée with roots in the Yucatan — all of which harmonized in unexpectedly wonderful ways with the superb, deep flavor of the duck. Slices of roasted ballotine of guinea hen set on a date-and-plum marmalade played nicely with mini poblano quesadillas. For dessert, executive pastry chef Ricardo "Ricchi" Sanchez's desserts — like a peanut-butter Bavarian with lime curd and huckleberry sorbet — have come into focus, too.

The talented team Pyles has brought together is a large part of what makes the place so special. The service, as directed by general manager Victor Rojas (who has been tapped by Bruno Davailon to head the dining room at [Bullion](#)), is polished and super-engaged. Head bartender Lauren Festa's cocktails stand out as exceptional in the ocean of sweet craftiness that has swamped the Dallas drinks scene of late. Madeleine Thompson's thoughtful wine list is one of the most exciting in town.

[Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe at Hall Arts](#), 2330 Flora St., Dallas; 214-580-7000. Lunch Monday-Friday; dinner Monday-Saturday.

THE BEST OF THE REST

The following are listed in alphabetical order.

Mah-Jong Chinese Kitchen

This warm and stylish Cantonese spot in northwest Plano opened in the second half of 2015 — early enough that I would have considered it for that year's list, had I discovered it soon enough. As I don't want to punish the restaurant for its lack of a publicist, I'm honoring [Mah-John Chinese Kitchen](#) among this year's selections. Chef-owner Fannie Law's dishes — such as steamed Sichuan-style chicken dumplings, Hong Kong-style slow-braised pork shank with baby bok choy and duck fried rice — are traditional and

exciting enough to appeal to a Chinese-speaking clientèle, yet approachable enough for her less adventurous American patrons.

[Mah-Jong Chinese Kitchen](#), 4025 Preston Road (between Lorimar Drive and Spring Creek Parkway), Plano; 972-403-0163. Lunch and dinner daily.

Montlake Cut

Nick Badovinus' newest restaurant, which celebrates the seafood of the chef's native Pacific Northwest, seems to be packed every night it's open. Oyster-lovers will swoon over the small, cup-shaped, cucumbery, very-hard-to-find Shigoku oysters Badovinus sometimes features from Washington's Willapa Bay; others — tucking into [Montlake Cut](#)'s crab-and-avocado salad — will understand why West Coast natives consider Dungeness to be the most delicious crab in the universe. Clubby, intimate and fun, this is also the place for vibrant tiki cocktails, Alaskan king crab fried rice, petrale sole Milanese, a perfectly cooked fillet of sturgeon and a rum-soaked mini-Bundt cake.

[Montlake Cut](#), 8220 Westchester Drive, Dallas; 214-739-8220. Lunch Monday-Friday; dinner Monday-Saturday.

Sixty Vines

Late August brought the debut of [Sixty Vines](#), the splashy, exuberant new wine-themed restaurant from the owners of [Whiskey Cake](#). It's a super fun place to hang out, sample wines (guided by a knowledgeable, enthusiastic wait staff), chomp on wood-fired pizza, dive into a luxuriously rich, Cabernet-smothered Akaushi beef burger, and sample more wine — maybe even treat yourself to a glass of Madeira.

[Sixty Vines](#), 3701 Dallas Parkway, Plano; 469-620-8463. Lunch Monday-Friday; dinner nightly; brunch Saturday and Sunday.

Sprezza

Lately the antipasti at Julian Barsotti's congenial Roman place on Maple have been smashing: saucy, tender tripe alla Romana; hot, crunchy-soft gnudi filled with braised mustard greens and set on brown butter; escarole salad tossed in a wonderful lemon-anchovy vinaigrette then dressed up with crispy prosciutto, shaved Parm and two halves of a poached egg with a perfect golden just-set yolk. The house-made pastas, however, have been uneven, often over-sauced and salty. [Sprezza](#) earned [four stars in a glowing review](#) in July; these days it's feeling like a promising work-in-progress – one with exemplary service and a lovable Southern Italian wine list. Co-head-chef Scott Lewis recently left to open a restaurant in Fort Worth — Piatello Italian Kitchen — with chef-owner [Marcus Paslay](#), leaving longtime [Nonna](#) sous-chef Ryan Ferguson in solo charge as executive chef, aided by sous chef Paola Samanez. Given Barsotti's impressive track record with Nonna and [Carbone's Fine Food and Wine](#), I'm betting they'll pull it together sooner rather than later.

[Sprezza](#), 4010 Maple Ave., Dallas; 972-807-9388. Lunch Monday-Friday; dinner Monday-Saturday.

Top Knot

While [Uchi](#), [last year's New Restaurant of the Year](#), has dropped significantly in quality (it was dropped to three stars from five in an [update review](#) in September), [Top Knot](#) — its more casual upstairs sibling — is as appealing as ever. Clearly chef de cuisine Angela Hernandez is having fun with her menu: Stir up a bowl of crispy rice with pork belly and kimchi so the spicy gochujang sauce and egg yolk on top get mingle with the crunchy-crusty rice, and you'll taste what I mean. Another new dish, sunomono of white seaweed, persimmon and baby carrots, is tartly original; squash bread pudding with candied pumpkin, spiced cinnamon ice and caramel sauce daringly delectable — and super spicy.

[Top Knot](#), 2817 Maple Ave., Dallas; 214-855-1354. Dinner nightly; brunch Sunday.

Wayward Sons

Speaking of daring, chef Graham Dodds has continued to take risks at [Wayward Sons](#), which opened late in 2015, with results that can be downright exciting. That's particularly the case with his appetizers. Think that deviled egg is really a deviled egg? Think again: It's part of a vegetarian "charcuterie" board — an ingenious faux egg white fashioned from celery root broth magically set in an egg-shaped mold with agar agar and filled with turmeric- and Creole-mustard spiked chick pea purée enriched with cashew cream. For all the technical wizardry, it's actually quite delicious. Joining it were wonderful mushroom rillettes, sunchoke pâté and more. Recently a tender and crisply fried rabbit schnitzel special with roasted rings of delicata squash was terrific.

[Wayward Sons](#), 3525 Greenville Ave., Dallas; 214-828-2888. Dinner nightly; brunch Sunday.