

The creme de la creme

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With the year winding down, it's time to take a rueful look at my waistline and cast a longing glance back at the year in dining.



The tuna tempura roll is one of the many intriguing entrees at Kona Grill, one of the

932-9971.

I reviewed 50 restaurants in 2004, which means that a lot of Omaha's vibrant restaurant scene went unvisited. The French Cafe, Brother Sebastian's, Cafe di Coppia - these are only a few of Omaha's premiere dining spots that didn't make this year's list. With new restaurants popping up all over town, I didn't have time to visit many of the established restaurants.

And there are still a ton of intriguing new restaurants that have me letting out a couple of notches on my belt in preparation for a delicious and filling 2005.

Of the restaurants I visited this year, here, in alphabetical order, are the most memorable:

Bob Monkey's Noodle Zoo 4950 Dodge St. There actually aren't that many noodle dishes at this little eatery next to the Dundee Theater. The name comes from the noodles in the restaurant's delicious house salad. But four noodle pots, sandwiches and great salads, as well as a memorable color scheme, made the visit to Noodle Zoo one of the year's high points.

The Drover 2121 S. 73rd St. It just looks like a Nebraska steakhouse should: dim, cozy and vaguely Western, with its dark wood, decorative black metalwork and steer's head over the fireplace. The Drover also offers delicious cuts of Angus beef, and its signature whiskey steak is as good as ever. 391-7440.

Ellada 620 N. 50th St. Another one of those "don't overlook the little guy" situations. Take away sidewalk dining, and Ellada seats about 15 people, a fact that didn't hamper our pleasure during our October visit. Fine Greek food, particularly a well-seasoned red pepper hummus, makes Ellada a treasure - even if it does come in a very tiny package. 991-3320; reservations are recommended.

Grand Fortune 17330 West Center Road, Suite 106 Authentic Chinese cuisine is the draw in this friendly restaurant. Menu highlights include sizzling scallops, honey walnut shrimp, black pepper steak and Cantonese chicken chow mein, while owner Tracy Huey also offers dim sum on certain days. This was the class of the field this year - and relatively inexpensive - as far as Chinese restaurants went. 697-9888.

Guaca Maya 5002 S. 33rd St. Now much larger and housed in a refurbished south Omaha packing plant, Guaca Maya mixes colorful decor and smiling service with a varied menu of traditional Mexican dishes, with an emphasis on seafood. Tortillas are rolled in front of the patrons, entrees are large and well-seasoned, and the restaurant is a fun place to be. Don't miss the jukebox, stuffed with Mexican music. 733-3440.

The Kona Grill 295 N. 170th St. It just sneaked in under the wire, getting reviewed in mid-December, but this new Village Pointe eatery - which offers varied entrees and a sushi bar - stands out for its excellent food. The mix of beef, seafood and sushi, as well as some eclectic menu items such as catfish tacos and avocado egg rolls, should win the affections of Omaha diners. 779-2900

Liberty Tavern Hilton Omaha, 1001 Cass St. The Hilton's new restaurant is a nice addition to the downtown restaurant scene. It offers delicious meals, eye-catching presentation, fine service and prices comparable to Omaha's high-end restaurants. Don't miss the chocolate fondue dessert, a sinfully rich way to end the meal. 998-4321.

Taste 11036 Elm St. in Rockbrook Village A small-plates restaurant with an emphasis on big, bold flavors, Taste offers diners the opportunity to mix three or four small portions of dishes as diverse as a sesame salmon with a white-hot mustard topping and a hearty osso bucco ragu with gnocchi. The small-plates theme makes Taste's menu ideal for sampling and sharing, and the extensive wine list doesn't hurt, either. 884-3175.

The Underwood Cafe 4949 Underwood Ave. The third restaurant in the former Dundee Hardware space in only a matter of years, the Underwood Cafe mixes seafood with heavier lamb, beef and poultry dishes. A first-class fine-dining establishment, the Underwood also has begun developing a popular Sunday brunch. 553-5000.

The Upstream Brewing Co. 17070 Wright Plaza The new west location of this popular Old Market spot mixes comfort foods common among brew pubs - fish and chips, beer-braised pot roast and the like - with dishes such as shrimp Pomodoro, grilled portobello mushroom fajitas and grilled salmon with chipotle barbecue sauce. There also are salads, thin-crust pizzas and hand-cut steaks, as well as the Upstream's own award-winning beers and ales. 778-0100.