

COMING NEXT WEEK IN EATS!

» Patricia Unterman recaps her 10 favorite Bay Area restaurant experiences of 2007.

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BEST BITES OF 2007 » PATRICIA UNTERMAN

S.F. a haven for great tastes

Many of the most appealing meals I enjoyed in San Francisco and the greater Bay Area in 2007 weren't necessarily the most expensive. My favorite dishes ranged from more exotic Indonesian and Moroccan offerings to Chinese delicacies and classic Mexican food. I also sampled some superlative examples of pizza, burgers and fried chicken. Here's a list of my top 10 bites of the year.



Family-style dinner at Basque Cultural Center

1 The Basque Cultural Center in South San Francisco serves huge, delicious, family-style dinners for only \$17.95. The special changes nightly, but here's what I got one Thursday night: velvety spinach soup; a butter lettuce salad in a creamy, green goddess-like dressing; a ramekin of super tender veal cheeks; crisp chicken cordon bleu stuffed with ham and cheese, and excellent spumoni. Or order a la carte — the deep flavored cassoulet, roasted stuffed quail or beef tongue. For dessert, have the signature frozen almond nougat filled with crunchy, caramelly, toasted almonds, sweet yet sophisticated.

599 Railroad Ave., South San Francisco, (650) 583-8091, www.basqueculturalcenter.com



Soondoobu at My Tofu House

2 My Tofu House specializes in soondoobu (\$9.45), a chili-reddened brothy stew of silken tofu garnished with mushrooms, pork, beef, chicken, vegetables, kimchee and ramen. You break a raw egg into the literally boiling-hot stew and stir it with chopsticks, which makes the broth creamy and smooths out the chili. I was struck by the depth and balance — elegant, really. Bibimbab, a stone-ware bowl of rice, radiantly hot from the oven, is topped with different bits of meats and vegetables, an egg yolk, and chili paste. You mix it all together to create a moist, incendiary, irresistible, fried rice-like concoction.

4627 Geary Blvd. San Francisco, (415) 750-1818



Fried chicken at the Hard Knox Cafe

3 Hard Knox is one of those beloved neighborhood spots with a compelling back story. The Vietnamese chef/owner Tony Hua grew up in Texas eating soul food in the kitchen of his black godmother. Now HE makes crisp, juicy fried chicken (\$9) with a choice of two sides plus hot, pleasantly gritty corn muffins; and first rate shrimp po'boys (\$6.45) on a soft roll filled with crunchy, lightly battered shrimp, "dressed" with just the right amount of tomato, lettuce and tartar sauce. Relatively small with seats at a funky wooden bar and a few booths, the café stays busy all day.

2526 Third St. (at 22nd Street), San Francisco, (415) 648-3770



Roti prata at Borobudur

4 This 13-year-old Indonesian restaurant swept me away with fragrant spices and unexpected combinations of ingredients. Start with Borobudur's roti prata (\$6.50), a griddled bread of many delicate layers dunked into thin coconut milk curry. Superb gado-gado (\$7.50), a warm salad of steamed vegetables and tofu, gets a rich, nuanced peanut sauce. Skewers of succulent, aromatic, chicken sate (\$8.50) come with another expressive peanut sauce. The Indonesian couple behind this fine cooking started out by catering for homesick Indonesians from their apartment kitchen.

700 Post St., San Francisco, (415) 775-1512, www.borobudursf.com



Pizza at Gialina

5 At Gialina, the pizzas have super-thin crusts and big, puffy edges. It's amazing how many slices you can put away, especially of a puttanesca pie (\$12), with tomato sauce, olives, anchovies, capers and chiles, topped with a runny egg. Sausage pizza (\$13) is dotted with tasty pork meatballs and little kids love Gialina's plain margherita (\$10). Even if you think you've had enough pizza, steel yourself for the scrumptious chocolate hazelnut pie (\$9), oozing with Nutella. The perfectly executed cooking from Sharon Ardiana pleases the gentrifying Glen Park neighborhood.

2842 Diamond St., San Francisco, (415) 239-8500, www.gialina.com



In-Side-Out Hamburger at Spork

6 This hip little diner, a former KFC, playfully riffs on fast food invigorated by fresh ingredients. Seasonal fruit, mild whipped goat cheese and a pile of dressed watercress make for dreamy salads. The star dish is the in-side-out hamburger (\$14), two thick grass-fed beef patties separated by a center slice of bun slathered with special sauce, which sit on dressed lettuce and tomato. The pile is topped with melted cheese and grilled onions; smashed, twice-cooked red potato halves accompany. Pull-apart rolls with honey butter arrive hot from the oven.

1058 Valencia St., San Francisco, (415) 643-5000, www.sporks.com



Dim sum at Lucky Fortune

7 The dim sum arrives hot and fresh. You check off items on a form and they arrive one by one. Don't miss translucent steamed dumplings filled with pea-sprouts or sweet little shrimp and Chinese chives (\$2.50). Gigantic deep-fried taro puffs (\$1.80), have a crisp, lacy, crust and creamy interior. Silken slices of Chinese eggplant sandwich voluptuous slabs of pink shrimp paste (\$2.50). Baby bok choy with garlic sauce (\$4), represent everything I love about Cantonese cooking — pristine ingredients, simplicity and exquisite balance. Try the \$49 menu for four at night.

5715 Geary Blvd. (at 21st Avenue), San Francisco, (415) 751-2888



Kufta Tajine at Tajine

8 Begin with soft, juicy Moroccan salads (\$6.50) — peppers and tomatoes melted together in olive oil; or fresh beets cut into tiny cubes. Then, on to bastilla, flaky filo dough wrapped around a moist filling of chicken, almond and egg. Namesake tajines, foods slowly cooked in terracotta casseroles, star as main courses. In my favorite, kufta tajine (\$12.95), spicy lamb meatballs and two poached eggs peek out of a bright Moroccan stew of tomatoes and peppers. The vegetables in a couscous (\$10.25) of cabbage, turnip and carrot are tender but keep their personality.

1338 Polk St., San Francisco, (415) 440-1718, www.tajinerestaurant.com