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## Our '-est' moments--the best brightest, funniest--are worth visiting again (or for the first time)

December 27, 2007

### PHIL VETTEL'S GREATEST HITS OF 2007 DINING

Is it me, or was the good and bad news in 2007 more extreme than usual? Let's take a look at the best, brightest, saddest--all the "ests" I can think of--of the 2007 Year in Dining:

**Best newcomers:** The openings of Aigre Doux (230 W. Kinzie St.; 312-329-9400), Sepia (123 N. Jefferson St.; 312-441-1920) and Table 52 (52 W. Elm St.; 312-573-4000) made 2007 a very nice year for new restaurants.

**Saddest goodbyes:** The closings of Ambria, Le Francais and the Ritz-Carlton Dining Room cost Chicago three excellent restaurants and a huge chunk of culinary history.

**Freshest makeover:** Bistro Banlieue in Lombard turned itself into the higher-end, contemporary-American restaurant Sequel and started wowing west-suburban diners all over again.

**Greenest restaurant trend:** The move away from bottled water, as chefs become more concerned with the "carbon footprint" of the food it serves.

**'Tone'-iest new restaurant:** Sepia (123 N. Jefferson St.) took its name from an old-time photo finish, but that was the only out-of-date aspect to this terrific contemporary newcomer.

**Smartest promotion:** The owners of Boka snagged Giuseppe Tentori from Charlie Trotter's and made him executive chef, which made Boka one of the city's finest restaurants.

**Quickest exit (restaurant division):** Xel-Ha opened with tons of promise at 710 N. Wells St. in January, but Dudley Nieto, citing lease difficulties, closed the place in July. (Chef Nieto now cooks at Zocalo, 358 W. Ontario St.; 312-302-9977).

**Quickest exit (chef division):** Lots of people thought that innovative French chef Eric Aubriot was an odd fit for the Middle-Eastern newcomer Alhambra Palace (1240 W. Randolph St.; 312-666-9555), and they were right: Aubriot was gone within a month after the grand opening.

**Gutsiest entree of the year:** Tripe Florentine (that's cow stomach, folks), one of the specialties at Riccardo Trattoria (2119 N. Clark St.; 773-549-0038).

**Trendiest food item of the year:** Berkshire pork. Particularly, Berkshire pork belly.

**Overworked-est restaurant term:** Anybody else sick of gastropub yet? Painfulest memory 2007: Was it really just 10 months ago that we were writing stories about Bears Super Bowl parties?

**Star-splashiest dinner of the year:** Charlie Trotter celebrated his 20th anniversary as only Trotter can, hosting an invitation-only dinner along with some of the best chefs in the world: Ferran Adria, Daniel Boulud, Heston Blumenthal, Pierre Herme, Thomas Keller and Tetsuya Wakuda. Trotter promised a once-in-a-lifetime event, and by all accounts from the lucky stiffies who got to attend, he delivered.

**Best reasons to pop celebratory corks:** The Italian Village celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2007. Other notable milestones: Twin Anchors, 75; Le Titi de Paris, 35; Mirabell, 30; Rosebud Restaurant, 30; Pops for Champagne, 25; Bob Chinn's Crab House, 25; Frontera Grill, 20; Everest, 20; Charlie Trotter's, 20; Crofton on Wells, 10; Red Light, 10; Cafe Matou, 10.

**Flashiest restaurant opening:** Room 21 had dazzle, and Alhambra Palace was a Middle-Eastern fantasy come to life. But for Vegas-style glitz, nothing quite matched the duo of Osteria di Tramonto and Tramonto Steak & Seafood, both in the Westin Chicago North Shore (601 N. Milwaukee Ave., Wheeling; 847-777-6570 and 847-777-6575). From the zillion-dollar decor to the streetside video screen that showed larger-than-life images of Rick Tramonto and Gale Gand in action, this duo--actually quartet, counting the RT Lounge and Gale's Coffee Bar--was pure eye candy.

**Best blasts from the past:** Veteran restaurateur Bob Djahanguiri (at right, of Toulouse, Yvette and Yvette Wintergarden fame) teamed up with Roland Liccioni (at



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left, Carlos', Les Nomades and Le Francais twice) to open Old Town Brasserie. Between Djahanguiri's accent and Liccioni's, I imagine they're communicating in sign language, but damned if it doesn't work: The restaurant is terrific, and Liccioni's food has never been so price-accessible.

**Best new chef:** Quite a few come to mind, not the least of them Kendal Bougie of Sepia. But Paul Virant of Vie (4471 Lawn Ave., Western Springs; 708-246-2082) while not "new" to most of us, did make the "10 Best New Chefs of 2007" list in Food & Wine magazine.

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**Outstanding-est restaurant:** Frontera Grill (445 N. Clark St.; 312-661-1434) was named the country's Outstanding Restaurant by the James Beard Foundation.

**Least-likely place to find a bad waiter:** Tru (676 N. St. Clair St.; 312-202-0001) received the 2007 James Beard Foundation Award for Outstanding Service.

**Best regional chef:** The James Beard Foundation named Grant Achatz of Alinea (1723 N. Halsted St.; 312-867-0110) the best chef in the Great Lakes region.

**Nicest guy:** Citing his work establishing Common Threads, which serves more than 1,000 children around Chicago, Art Smith, chef/owner of Table 52 was named the James Beard Foundation's Humanitarian of the Year.

**Happiest thoughts for 2008:** Takashi Yagihashi's restaurant, Takashi, should be open any day now. And we've got new restaurants coming that will feature Laurent Gras, Paul Kahan and Terrance Brennan.

**Happiest thought for today:** Chef Grant Achatz, who has been fighting stage 4 oral cancer, announced last week that his cancer is now in remission.  
pvettel@tribune.com

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**FAST-FOOD'S GREATEST TASTES**

After hundreds of fast-food bites, our former "Chain Reaction" writer Kevin Pang chooses his favorites.

**1. Steak 'n Shake's "The Original Double" Steakburger with Cheese Shake** the Normal, Ill.-based chain, makes as delicious and manageable a hamburger as it gets around these parts. It begins and ends with the spectacular beef: cut from the sirloin, round steak and T-bone, formed into medallions then griddled. The result is a patty with an incomparably crispy sear, and a big, bold flavor that yells out beef in capital letters. Splash on a dash of the restaurant's Green Amazon Pepper oil for added complexity.



**2. McDonald's French Fries** There will be no argument over this: McDonald's serves the most satisfying french fries the world has ever tasted. Their pomme frites thickness are tailor-made for picking up three at a time, which when dunked in the slightly sweet ketchup makes for a sublime pairing.

**3. Cold Stone Creamery's Sweet Cream Ice Cream** Don't let all those candy-coated chocolate toppings gild the lily of this simple, luscious, utterly divine ice cream. The flavor of fresh whole-cream milk makes me swoon every time.

**4. Culver's Pork Tenderloin Sandwich** Its genius is in its plainness: a flattened piece of pork loin coated in cracker crumbs and fried, then served on a toasted thick, five-inch diameter Kaiser bun.

**5. KFC Original Recipe Wings** Other chains may fry up their chickens crispier/crunchier, but flavorwise, there's something familiar and satisfying about Colonel Sander's "11 herbs and spices" recipe. The wing portion is the best--the meat around the bones retains the most moisture.

**6. Boston Market's Rotisserie Chicken Carver Sandwich** Unlike the chains that pre-slice and pre-weigh their proteins, Boston Market tears the meat from its terrific rotisserie chicken to order for their Carver sandwiches. The super-moist chicken (usually breast meat) takes on a Dijon-mustard tang, and the toasted roll holds everything without sogging up.

**7. Wendy's Jr. Bacon Cheeseburger** The best 99-cent burger deal around. A soft, fresh-tasting bun, well-balanced flavor of beef, cheese, bread and bacon, and the best part--it's practically grease-free.

**8. Chipotle's Chicken Burrito** The Chipotle folks can talk about their vegetarian-fed, antibiotic-free, "naturally raised chicken" all day long, but how does it taste in a burrito? Great. The chipotle pepper marinade imparts a smoky, resonant flavor. Chopped cilantro and lime juice accent the rice. Add in the roasted chile-corn salsa for sweetness and the tomatillo salsas (red and green) for a swift uppercut to the taste buds.

**9. Burger King's Whopper Jr.** The back-yard taste of beef char-grill is why Burger King has found success the last 50 years with its Whopper sandwich. Consider the Whopper Jr., which has nearly half the calories, fat and sodium levels as the original version.

**10. Pollo Campero's Campero Beans** Pollo Campero's beans are hearty, spicy, and as side dishes go, as good as you can order at a fast-food restaurant. Pinto beans are stewed in a piquant broth with diced tomatoes, onions, jalapenos and cilantro. Bacon and pork sausage add a smoky finish.  
--Kevin Pang

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**BEST HOTEL BETS (WITH NO RESERVATIONS)**

**Hotel with the best downtown location:** Tie between the James Chicago (55 E. Ontario St.; 312-337-1000, [www.jameshotels.com/chicago](http://www.jameshotels.com/chicago)) and the Hotel Cass (640 N. Wabash Ave.; 312-787-4030, [www.hotelcass.com](http://www.hotelcass.com)). The James and Hotel Cass give guests a range of lodging options, from affordable and cozy to decadent and luxurious. And both are a five-minute walk from the Magnificent Mile, Nordstrom, and dozens of restaurants.

**Coolest hotel bar for people watching:** The Bar at The Peninsula Chicago (108 E. Superior St.; 312-337-2888, [chicago.peninsula.com](http://chicago.peninsula.com)). Sometimes, it's just nice to sip a

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martini and watch the big-money guys go to work.

**Coollest suburban hotel:** The Westin Lombard Yorktown Center (70 Yorktown Center, Lombard; 630-719-8000, [www.westin.com/lombard](http://www.westin.com/lombard)). Let's see ... fitness center with heated lap pool? Check. 24-hour room service? Check. Heavenly bed? Big ol' check.

**Best hotel Sunday brunch (otherwise known as the "where-to-impress-your-in-laws-with-a-single-meal" place):** Seasons at the Four Seasons Hotel Chicago (120 E. Delaware Pl.; 312-280-8800, [www.fourseasons.com/chicago](http://www.fourseasons.com/chicago)). Just the thought of veal piccata in a lemon-caper sauce is enough to make my mouth water.

**Coollest bed & breakfast:** Harvey House in Oak Park (107 S. Scoville Ave., Oak Park; 708-848-6810, [www.harveyhousebb.com](http://www.harveyhousebb.com)). This is one of the best-kept secrets in the area, but not for much longer. Book a room, now. And get the Chalet suite if you can. You won't be disappointed.

**Wettest opening planned for early 2008:** KeyLime Cove (1700 Nations Drive, Gurnee; 877-360-0403, [www.keylimecove.com](http://www.keylimecove.com)). The mammoth water park (65,000 square feet) and resort (414 rooms) is set to open on Feb. 29. Look out, Wisconsin Dells.

**Funniest hotel item:** That the Trump International Hotel & Tower Chicago (401 N. Wabash Ave.; 312-588-8000, [www.trumpchicago.com](http://www.trumpchicago.com)) would open Dec. 3 when fire-safety work had yet to be completed. Seriously, that was funny.

--Glenn Jeffers

### THE OUTDOORSIEST

1. Walking through a forest preserve on a winter night, the full moon throwing shadows onto the snow, with a line of fellow hikers carrying red Chinese lanterns. An amazing moment created by Windy City Hikers, a group of outdoorsy folks who also place in the Outdoors Friendliest category (along with all the area's nature reserves). Check them out at [www.windycityhikers.com](http://www.windycityhikers.com).

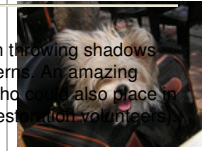
2. Watching birds so close up that you can see bits of seed falling from their beaks as they chew. The ultimate in both bird-watching and comfort, because you are watching from indoors, behind one-way glass at the Gibson Woods Nature Center in Hammond, Ind.

3. Sandstone bluffs and swooping swallows on the lower Fox River Dells, 80 minutes from Chicago. See it by canoe, which you can rent at River Adventures in Ottawa or Ayers Landing in Wedron, but avoid summer weekends unless you like your nature with lots of beer-drinking-while-canoe-paddling company.

4. The feel of a tiny ruby-crowned kinglet in your hand. You get to hold it, and other migrating birds snared in nets, if you volunteer with the Shaw Woods Avian Monitoring Project, an annual research study conducted every May in the Skokie River Nature preserve. Find out more at [www.lakeforest.edu/academics/faculty/gordon/swamp/default.asp](http://www.lakeforest.edu/academics/faculty/gordon/swamp/default.asp).

5. The moon, bright white with sharply shadowed craters, and bright planets like ringed Saturn, as seen through a telescope near the intersection of North Avenue and Wells Street. The jaw-dropping views, courtesy of Sidewalk Astronomy, will be available once the weather turns warm. For the schedule, visit [www.sidewalk-astronomy-club.com/chicago](http://www.sidewalk-astronomy-club.com/chicago).

--Barbara Brotman



### Pets

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### THE NERDIEST

One might say 2007 was pretty good for At Play's nerdier readers. Here are some highlights:

**Science nerd moment:** You're not a true nerd until you've obsessed about something made with chemicals, potentially explosive and requiring at least a minimal knowledge of some sort of science to create. Enter model rockets. The Northern Illinois Rocketry Association told us it's about the countdown, the blast-off and the height. It's all about space in the end, isn't it? [www.coolrockets.com](http://www.coolrockets.com), [www.nira-rocketry.org](http://www.nira-rocketry.org).

**Lonely nerd moment:** Nerds at Heart wants people to celebrate that inner geek with like-minded singles. Play sci-fi trivia, talk software, share your love of stamp collection--anything goes at Nerds at Heart. And hey, you might even find love. [www.nerdsatheart.com](http://www.nerdsatheart.com).

**Anime nerd moment:** Yeah, we wondered too. But the folks at the College of DuPage Cosplayers Club really know how to take an obsession and dress it up--literally. Focusing on Japanese anime and manga characters, as well as video games, the cosplayers create costumes from the ground up, in exacting detail, and then hang out (in character). It's a little bit acting, a little bit costuming and a lot of geeky fun. [codcosplay.suddenlaunch3.com](http://codcosplay.suddenlaunch3.com).

**'Release your inner spaz' nerd moment:** Dance Dance Party Party. This girls-only event lets you cut loose and gyrate to some really awesome tunes, from '80s standards like the Waitresses' "I Know What Boys Like" to modern jams like "Rafiki" by Zap Mama. And you don't have to worry about trying to dance in heels or making sure your eyeliner doesn't smudge; at DDPP knee socks are de rigueur, and there's no one for you to impress because everyone's busy getting down. [www.dancedancepartyparty.com](http://www.dancedancepartyparty.com).

--Cheryl Bowles

### 5 UNDER-THE-RADAR-EST GAMES WORTH A LOOK

**The Eye of Judgment:** It's a little like playing Dungeons and Dragons in front of a camera, which captures your card battles then uses the PlayStation 3 to illustrate the outcomes. Innovative.



**Stranglehold:** You don't just shoot gang members, you do it in stylish slow-motion moves befitting this

sequel to John Woo's cult classic movie, "Hard-Boiled." Don't just fire at your enemies; score more points by felling the neon sign over their heads so that it crashes down. Fun. The movie is on the same disc as the PlayStation 3 game.

**All-Pro Football 2K8:** Take your 11 retired greats against a friend's group of legends in this smooth-playing answer to the "Madden NFL" franchise. All these years later, Gale Sayers still rules.

**Zack & Wiki: Quest for Barbaros' Treasure:** Wave around the Wii remote control to find hidden hot spots on screen, and help a young boy in his quest to become the world's best pirate.

**Konami Classics Series: Arcade Hits:** Rush'n Attack, Track and Field, Time Pilot. Oh, and Gradius. 'Nuff said.

--Eric Gwinn

#### THE SHOPPINGEST

Here's our take on shopping in 2007.

**Rottenest shopping experience this holiday season:** Disorderly merchandise, crowded aisles and--worst of all--dozens of people ahead of me in line waiting to pay, midafternoon on a weekday two weeks before Christmas at T.J. Maxx, 11 N. State St. I left my would-be purchases, walked out vowing never to return!

--Ellen Warren

**Greatest holiday windows:** Step aside, Barneys. The New York-based retailer gets raves from the fashionista crowd, but for the absolute most imaginative windows ever (not just at Christmas) check out the work of Jules Breen, co-owner of Antique Jewelry & Resale (7214 N. Harlem Ave.; 773-631-1151, antiqueandresale.com).

--E.W.

**Best new shop and nicest owner:** Erin Gallagher of Erin Gallagher Jewelry (1017 W. Lake St.; 312-492-7548, egjewelry.com).

--E.W.

**Cutest apparel invention:** The "Hoodsie," from the local T-shirt whizzes at Threadless (3011 N. Broadway Ave.; 773-525-8640, threadless.com), takes tots to new heights of hipness by adding a hood to soft cotton onesies printed with clever graphics in select kids' designs.

--Fauzia Arain

**Record shop with the most fervent fans:** Beverly Records (11612 S. Western Ave.; 773-779-0066, www.beverlyrecords.com).

--Trine Tsouderos

**Best place to get your snowboard while playing "Guitar Hero":** Burton Store (56 E. Walton St.; 312-202-7900, www.burton.com).

--T.T.

#### REST OF THE BEST, TASTIEST AND HEAVENLY-EST

**Most mapped place in Chicago:** "Maps: Finding Our Place in the World" at the Field Museum (1400 S. Lake Shore Drive; 312-922-9410, www.fieldmuseum.org). Curators spent more than a decade scouring the earth for the most important and interesting maps. The result is this show. It's a blockbuster and not to be missed.

**Tastiest brown stew chicken we tried all year:** Why, the cleverly named brown stew chicken at Uncle Joe's Tropical Cuisine (8211 S. Cottage Grove Ave., plus two other locations; 773-962-9935, www.unclejoesjerk.com). Tender pieces of chicken bathed in a savory, tangy sauce over rice--what's not to love? This is comfort food at its best.

**Most eco-friendly bar in Chicago:** Butterfly Social Club, 722 W. Grand Ave., 312-666-1695, www.butterflysocialclub.com. Both the decor and the drinks, many of which include fresh organic herbs and fruits, here are environmentally sound, thanks to the owner and his wife who have a real passion for organics and healthy living.

**Best hour spent coated in algae:** The Arctic Algae Body Treatment Wrap at Jon N Ric Salon and Day Spa (1603 N. Aurora Rd., Suite 101-103, Naperville; 630-983-8400, www.jonricnaperville.com). Who knew being painted with stinky green algae and inserted into a futuristic pod to bake for an hour could be so soothing?

**Slowest restaurant service:** A quick lunch can stretch for hours at Yassa African Restaurant (716 E. 79th St.; 773-488-5599, www.yassaafricanrestaurant.com), overshadowing the outstanding food that, mar the experience at Yassa, where the food is so outstanding it keeps us coming back for more.

**Most Toby jugs in the Chicago area:** The American Toby Jug Museum, which has 6,000 of them, The American Toby Jug Museum, 910 Chicago Ave., Evanston, 877-862-9687, Britishcollectibles.com. Never thought much about Toby jugs? Take a trip to this museum and you'll walk out with a greater appreciation for these jolly little pouring vessels and for the passion, or perhaps obsession, of the collector who gathered them.



**Yummiest bowl of oatmeal:** The bowl of steel cut oats at Su Van's Cafe & Bake Shop (3351 N. Lincoln Ave.; 773-281-0120). Warm and rich and a little bit chewy, this is the quintessential bowl of oatmeal.

--Trine Tsouderos

**Best way to get to know the Chicago River and the backs of familiar buildings while working out:** Cardio Kayaking classes with Chicago River Canoe & Kayak (773-704-2663, www.chicagoriverpaddle.com). They will start again in the summer.

**Most embarrassing way to get in shape while secretly learning dance moves secrets that might come in handy later:** The surprisingly challenging "Pole Teaser" classes at Flirty Girl Fitness (1325 W. Randolph St.; 312-666-2266).



**Heavenly-est smelling coffeehouse in the city:** Metropolis Coffee Company (1039 W. Granville Ave.; 773-764-0400, [www.metropoliscoffee.com](http://www.metropoliscoffee.com)) serves their own coffee but also roasts for some of the city's top cafes. Whenever we step in the door, we close our eyes and say mmmmm.

**Best use of brain matter in Chicago:** The pig brain quesadillas served weekend mornings at Carnitas Don Pedro, (1113 W. 18th St.; 312-829-4757). Crispy creamy and magical. My kids even loved them. And, no, of course, I didn't tell them what they were eating.

**Best dressed cow in the city:** The ssam bap at Elephant (Kokeeri) (4346 W. Lawrence Ave.; 773-205-5680), featuring at least four different leaves (cabbage, red leaf, sesame and napa) to wrap marinated beef, rice and delicious condiments along with a side of outstanding warm mackerel in a cayenne sauce.

**Best reason to look forward to May:** The arrival of those incredible Indian Alphonso mangoes, which came to Chicago for the first time this year and--despite the hassle to the importers who ended up with some whole boxes that wouldn't ripen--will probably be back at Patel Brothers (2542 W. Devon Ave., 2610 W. Devon Ave. and 873 E Schaumburg Rd., Schaumburg) shops next year too.

**Most deceptively named workout for people in a hurry:** Superslow workouts that only last about 30 minutes but are super intense and necessary only about once a week for fitness, devotees claim. You can try them at CityWide SuperSlow (2232 N. Clybourn Ave.; 773-281-7569) or at Strength Clubs ([strengthclub.net](http://strengthclub.net)) and Michael Wolff Fitness ([wolfffitness.com](http://wolfffitness.com)).

**Best reason to get your motor vehicle business done the DMV Chicago North location (5401 N. Elston Ave.):** Smak Tak Restaurant, (5961 N. Elston Ave.; 773-763-1123, [smaktak.com](http://smaktak.com)), where the hearty Polish food, especially the Hungarian goulash in a crisp potato pancake that's topped with sour cream, will make you forget about long lines and failed drivers' tests.

**Best fast-food guacamole in the city:** At Burrito Beach (200 E. Ohio St.; 312-335-0668, [burritobeach.com](http://burritobeach.com)), the guac tastes fresh and boasts nice chunks of tomato, avocado and onion. And chips too for an excellent price of \$2.89.

--Monica Eng

**Truest European bakery:** At Bonjour Bakery in Hyde Park (1550 E. 55th St.; 773-241-5300), the pastries are pretty and delicious, the sandwiches are simple and fresh, and the employees are proficient in French.

**Furriest regulars:** We love four-legged fixtures that hang out at area venues. The bulldog at Flower Flat Cafe (622 W. Addison St.; 773-871-0888) and Radley the black cat at the Empty Bottle (1035 N. Western Ave.; 773-276-3600) are fine representatives for these loyal mascots.

--Fauzia Arain

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