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Hog & Rocks celebrates ham and oysters as well as classic cocktails.

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TOP 100 BAY AREA RESTAURANTS

By Michael Bauer

What would I say about the past year in Bay Area dining?

It was a year of shakedown. A year of highs. A year when some previously stellar restaurants fell off the list while other established places jumped to the top. Overall, however, it was a great year for new restaurants, with the likes of Rich Table setting even higher standards than in previous years.

If there was one trend that summed up what's happened in the past year, it's the further refinement of the bar/restaurant.

Spoonbar in Healdsburg was an early innovator, but fell out of the Top 100 because of uneven food. Now it's back, joined by a bevy of newer places that continue to raise the bar.

I'm talking about places like Abbot's Cellar, a newcomer that treats beer with the same mindset as wine; Mill Valley Beerworks, which offers the surprise of vegetable-heavy cuisine in a brew-pub setting; Trick Dog, where the cocktails and bar bites are in perfect sync; and Hog & Rocks, where ham, oysters and

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classic cocktails are celebrated.

The meticulousness evident on the plate for the last several decades has moved into the cocktail arena at places like Bravas Bar de Tapas in Healdsburg, which specializes in variations of gin and tonic; Bull Valley Roadhouse in Port Costa, which serves pre-Prohibition libations; and Ramen Shop in Oakland, which features Japanese whiskeys.

This year the California and American cuisine categories again dominate the list. Many restaurants use the terms interchangeably and may flip back and forth from year to year. The term has become a grab bag to describe what for many chefs has become very personal expressions of who they are.

That leads to the second big trend: Chefs who have made their names cooking Italian or French food have had the courage — and the support of the dining public — to follow their passions.

I'm talking about places like Hopscotch. It feels like a diner, but chef Kyle Itani adds a Japanese twist to just about every American-inspired dish. At Bar Tartine, Nick Balla relives his high school years in Budapest; and at Plaj, Roberth Sundell adds a local spin to his Scandinavian food. This is not copycat cuisine; it is purely chef-driven.

Last year, 15 new restaurants were added to the Top 100 list; this year, it's 21. It could have been 22, but I combined the new, less-expensive Campo Fina in Healdsburg with its established sister, Scopa, because they both offer soulful Italian food and are around the corner from each other.

A few perennial favorites didn't make this year's list, not because they were pushed out by newer restaurants but because their food seemed lethargic. On



Along with drinks like the Dark n' Stormy, Spoonbar in Healdsburg has its food back on track.

the other hand, some places that fell off the list in previous years, such as Spruce and Gitane, have come back strong.

Other changes are due to closures, with more Top 100 restaurants shuttering than usual. In the 18 years I've compiled the list, just one or two of the featured restaurants, at most, would close in a year. But in 2012 and early 2013, we lost Cyrus in Healdsburg, Masa's and Betelnut in San Francisco, and Sante in the Sonoma Mission Inn. Sante reopened last month, but it was too late to be considered.

Yet for every great place that closed, many others opened. Whether it's the imaginative seafood at Local's Corner in San Francisco, the reimagined Mexican food at Comal in Berkeley, or the wink to history at the Bull Valley Roadhouse in Port Costa, it's been exciting to track the kitchen innovations in this year's Top 100.

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RESTAURANTS BY CUISINE

Here are the Top 100 Bay Area Restaurants for 2013. The restaurants are located in San Francisco unless otherwise noted. Red indicates that the restaurant is on the list for the first time or has returned to the list after being off for at least a year.

American/New American/ Contemporary American

The Abbot's Cellar
Ad Hoc, Yountville
AQ
Benu (Contemporary)
Boulevard (Contemporary)
Bull Valley Roadhouse, Port Costa
(Traditional)
Commonwealth (Progressive American)
El Paseo, Mill Valley (Chophouse)
Fifth Floor (New American)
French Laundry, Yountville
(Contemporary)
Hog & Rocks
Hopscotch, Oakland (with Japanese sensibilities)
House of Prime Rib (Prime rib)
Marlowe
Michael Mina
One Market
Park Tavern
Press, St. Helena (Steak house)
Redd, Yountville (Contemporary)
Spoonbar, Healdsburg
Spruce
State Bird Provisions (Modern)
Terra/Bar Terra, St. Helena
(New American)
Town Hall (Southern inspired)
Trick Dog (Bar food)

Basque

Piperade

California

Auberge du Soleil, Rutherford
Bar Tartine (Bay Area, with Eastern European and Japanese influences)
Camino, Oakland (Northern California; wood fired)
Canteen
Central Kitchen (Northern California)
Chez Panisse / Cafe at Chez Panisse, Berkeley (Northern California/Mediterranean)
Coco500
Col
Etoile, Yountville
Foreign Cinema (Mediterranean)
Frances
Gary Danko (California/French)
Manresa, Los Gatos (Contemporary)
Mill Valley Beerworks, Mill Valley
Nojo (Japanese)
Nopa (Mediterranean)
Osteria Stellina, Point Reyes Station
(Point Reyes Italian)
Outerlands
Piccino (Italian-inspired California)
Prospect (Seasonal California)
Quince (Northern California, with Italian and French influences)
The Restaurant at Meadowood, St. Helena (Northern California)
Rich Table (San Francisco)
Saison
Solbar, Calistoga
Sons & Daughters (Northern California)
Zuni Cafe (Mediterranean)

Chinese

Koi Palace, Daly City
Mission Chinese Food
Yank Sing

French

Angele, Napa
Bouchon, Yountville
La Folie

Indian

Amber India, San Francisco,
Mountain View, San Jose

Italian (Including pizzerias)

A16 (Campania)
Acquerello (Contemporary)
Bistro Don Giovanni, Napa
Bottega, Yountville
Cotogna
Delfina
Dopo, Oakland (Trattoria)
Flour + Water
Giallina / Ragazza (Pizza)
La Ciccia (Sardinian)
Oenotri, Napa (Southern)
Perbacco / Barbacco
Pesce (Venetian seafood)
Pizzaiolo / Boot & Shoe Service,
Oakland (Pizza)
Poggio, Sausalito (Northern)
Redd Wood, Yountville (Pizzeria)
Scopa / Campo Fina, Healdsburg
SPQR (Modern)

Japanese

Ippuku, Berkeley (Izakaya)
O Chame, Berkeley (Japanese fusion)

Ramen Shop, Oakland
Sushi Ran, Sausalito
Wakuriya, San Mateo

Mexican

Comal, Berkeley
Mamacita
Mateo's Cocina Latina,
Healdsburg (Modern Latin)
Nopalito

Moroccan

Aziza (Contemporary)

Scandinavian

Plaj

Seafood

Farallon
Local's Corner
Swan Oyster Depot
Waterbar

Spanish

Bocadillos (Tapas)
Bravas Bar de Tapas, Healdsburg
(Tapas)

Gitane (Andalusia/Southern Spain)
Zarzuela (Castilian)

Thai

Lers Ros

Vegetarian

Greens

Vietnamese

Slanted Door

SOLBAR

Brandon Sharp continues to put out the best food in the upper Napa Valley, which is quite a feat considering the restaurant is in an elegant resort that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. The offerings cover all the bases. He calls his food "California soul food inspired by the seasons." On one side of each menu category are lighter dishes "to nourish your soul;" on the other are hearty combinations "to comfort your body." You can pork out with sliders stacked with bacon or slim down with spicy shrimp lettuce wraps. The dining room also meets a wide range of needs: In winter, there's a modern barn-like interior with a long fireplace; in spring, look to the poolside terrace, where you can bring your dog.

Cuisine: California

Specialties: Lucky pig (pork cooked multiple ways); wagyu flatiron steak; lemon ricotta pancakes and Mount Washington eggs (poached eggs on buttermilk biscuits with ham, braised greens and spicy hollandaise) at brunch.

Seats: 69 (plus 29 in lounge; 100 on patio); private rooms for 60

Prices: \$24-\$37

Noise rating: 

Parking: Free lot

Vitals: 755 Silverado Trail (in the Solage resort), Calistoga; (707) 226-0850. solbarnv.com. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted.