

2007'S TOP NEWCOMERS
THESE 10 TURNED UP THE HEAT ON LOCAL DINING SCENE
SYLVIA RECTOR
FREE PRESS RESTAURANT CRITIC

Not everyone hunkered down last year and refused to take a risk in Michigan's shrinking economy.

While restaurant openings seemed less frequent, a significant number of intrepid chefs and entrepreneurs still believed strongly enough in their skill and vision to craft a menu, light the stove and open the doors on inviting new dining spots.

The newcomers came in every size and style: from small ethnic places, homey diners and sports bars to ambitious restaurants with highly trained chefs, exciting concepts and serious food.

And customers, as always, were eager to check them out.

The most glamorous members of the Class of '07 were at the MGM Grand Detroit, including SaltWater, the 2008 Restaurant of the Year, announced Wednesday.

But generating just as much interest were the smaller, more affordable places in diners' own backyards - restaurants that created buzz with their lively scenes, interesting food and, in most cases, local flavor.

If you missed a few along the way, don't worry.

We've got you covered with our list of the 10 Best New Restaurants of 2007. We looked back over the year to find the fresh new faces we think you'll be hearing more about - the ones to try if you haven't already.

Bon appetit!

Town Tavern

4. Royal Oak

Architect Ron Rea's modern interpretation of a 1930s neighborhood tavern is right on target. There's an extra-long bar, beautiful woodwork and old-time photos of Royal Oak. Pairing perfectly with the lively, loud, local vibe is executive chef Patrick Roettele's menu of modern American comfort foods like lobster-laced mac-and-cheese, braised beef short ribs and pulled-chicken salad. Fresh seafood entrees change daily. Prices range from \$11 for the Tavern cheeseburger to the mid \$20s for steaks. The Tavern is a sibling to the popular Beverly Hills Grill and Streetside Seafood in Birmingham. Like them, it doesn't take reservations, so you may have a wait. (Dinner nightly. 116 W. Fourth, Royal Oak. 248-544-7300.)