



Cafe Bodega, St. James Tearoom tie for Best New Restaurant of the Year

## Year yields pleasant surprises

BY CHARLOTTE BALCOMB LANE  
OF THE JOURNAL

After reviewing more than 54 restaurants in the year 2000, I'm surprised that there could still be surprises among Albuquerque's restaurants. But there are.

One surprise is that my one of my choices in this year's tie for Best New Restaurant of the Year goes to the descendant of the cafe named in 1999 as Best Restaurant of the Year.

My picks this year for Best New Restaurant are Cafe Bodega, which ties with the delightful and charming St. James Tearoom. I named Cafe Bodega's predecessor, Cafe de las Placitas, Best Restaurant of the Year for 1999.

Many people don't know that Cafe de las Placitas closed last summer and reopened in Albuquerque with a new name and new menu as Cafe Bodega. The chef and owner, Matthew Besse-Brewer, and his wife, Barbara Besse-Brewer, essentially transferred intact their skills in food and service to the new location.

At the same time, they eased up on the formality, giving the new restaurant the genial air of true "cafe."

When Cafe de las Placitas closed, Matthew Besse-Brewer said he was hoping to make the new cafe a place where folks could go once a month, instead of once a year. It has already happened. In the few months it has been open, Cafe Bodega has developed a fleet of regular customers for both lunch and dinner. Reservations are highly recommended, especially for choice weekend seats.

A rather thin personal budget is the only reason I'm not a regular at Cafe Bodega. Dinner for two can run about \$40 to \$60. Lunch for two runs about \$30.

It's well worth it. The food is rich and cosmopolitan and in tune with the seasons. Besse-Brewer mixes Asian, French and Spanish flavors and ingredients, but the result is completely American.

The servers are true professionals, good company while at the table, but not inclined to linger past their welcome. In two meals, I had two servers who both enhanced the dining experience with their knowledge of the menu and the wine.

St. James Tearoom ties with Cafe Bodega for excellence in food and service. This charming Victorian-inspired tearoom resembles little else in Albuquerque. It's a place of dainty teacups, hand-painted china, silver spoons, fresh flowers and overstuffed furniture. It's a place where time is deliberately forgotten, an oasis of fragrance and gentility,



KEN SHOEMAKER, CENTER, HOSTS A WINE TASTING AT CAFE BODEGA. THE NEW RESTAURANT OFFERS FOODS WITH INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES, EARNING IT TOP BILLING THIS YEAR BY THE JOURNAL'S RESTAURANT REVIEWER.



ANN DINIUS, LEFT, AND SHELLY FRITZ HAVE AFTERNOON TEA AT THE ST. JAMES TEAROOM IN OLD TOWN, NAMED BY JOURNAL RESTAURANT REVIEWER CHARLOTTE BALCOMB LANE AS ONE OF THE YEAR'S TWO BEST NEW RESTAURANTS.

seemingly worlds away from the stresses and hustles of the 21st century.

The restaurant opened this time last year and has already expanded once to accommodate more customers. It can only handle a few customers at any given time because each group is seated on comfy chairs around tea tables, rather than at typical restaurant-style tables. Make a reservation and your place is reserved with a beautifully paint-

ed sugar cookie with your name written in icing.

The owner, Mary Alice Higbie, has not only created a peaceful atmosphere, but she serves wonder-

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### Cafe Bodega

WHERE: 4243 Montgomery NE in Granada Square; 872-1710

WHEN: Lunch: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays

Dinner: 5-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

RESERVATIONS  
RECOMMENDED

BEER & WINE  
NO SMOKING

ful food to match — delicate scones, luscious lemon curd and melt-in-your-mouth desserts. A complete tea, featuring a three-tiered tray of savories, pastries and sweets, costs \$14 a person. It's a lot of food, meant to be eaten slowly and

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### St. James Tearoom

WHERE: 901 Rio Grande NW Suite F-140; 242-3752

WHEN: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays (last reservation accepted at 4:30 p.m.)

RESERVATIONS  
RECOMMENDED

NO ALCOHOL  
NO SMOKING

patiently.

The teas are from all over the world and the servers are able to fully explain their finer points.

### Best New Asian Restaurants of the Year

Two restaurants also tied for Best New Asian Restaurant of the Year. One is Samurai Grill & Sushi Bar and the other is Ma's Garden.

Samurai is a Japanese "event" restaurant in the same way that Garduños Restaurant & Cantina is a Mexican "event" restaurant. Both restaurants offer a highly theatrical, somewhat staged version of an ethnic reality.

But hey, a good restaurant is a little like good theater. It entertains the mind as it nourishes the body.

At Samurai, customers receive good, familiar Japanese food: sushi, tempura, teriyaki and teppan. They can elect to eat in the happy confusion of the red sushi bar or in the quieter reaches of the dimly lit dining room.

My favorite items at Samurai are the combination meals, which are served in rectangular bento boxes.

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