

**What we LOVED this year: Restaurants**  
**Distinctive cuisines made memorable dining experiences**  
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**BY IRV DEAN AND CAROLINE LEE**

Distinctive cuisines with anything but ordinary menu choices are traits shared by the top 10 picks of the Gazette's restaurant critics for 2010.

The restaurants singled out are not similar, however, in most respects. They range from an ethnic local dining spot run by a Peruvian and Salvadoran couple to a classic Greek restaurant with authentic Hellenic cuisine to a rehabilitated hotel in a once posh spa community in Schoharie County.

What the selected restaurants do have in common is their promise of a memorable dining experience for a reasonable price, especially important in the current economy.

You can order a toasted cheese sandwich or a hamburger in most of these places, but why would you want to?

**Cafe NOLA**, 617 Union St., Schenectady

Authentic New Orleans Cajun cuisine landed in Schenectady this year, and seems to be winning over the hearts and stomachs of local diners. The food is well prepared and presented attractively, and service, after some early bumps, is pleasingly efficient.

The decor is pure New Orleans with an alligator here and there, little statues of musicians, masks on the walls and background music evocative of Mardi Gras, as are the beads that customers are presented upon leaving. It's the food, however, that matters most at any restaurant, and Kevin Brown and family are doing it right.