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## Trent Rowe's Top Ten Dishes of 2004

By [Trent Rowe](#)

The Ledger

Picking the top 10 dishes of a year is a tough job. Sometimes I would like to choose maybe 15 or so of the best and try them each again before making a final decision.

Here goes with my choices. Each is special in its own way -- taste, imagination, innovation -- that will make them memorable and hard to beat in a new year.

### SEA BASS AT ARABELLAS

Arabellas' owners Brian Rich and Franco Basalone came up with the name for their new Winter Haven restaurant by joining the names of their daughters.

"Franco. Excuse me, Franco, could I get some of the creamy pistachio sauce that came with the sea bass? I'd like to take it home and gussy up some catfish."

The large sea bass fillet had been cooked perfectly -- seared out, tender in -- with the thinnest shards of almonds in the delicate sauce. Break the fish into pieces and roll each in the sauce. Perfect shrimp became a bonus, as did the sticky risotto under the bass.

### VEAL OSCAR AT LAKE ASHTON GRILLE

Chef Vince Taylor made all the difference to Lake Ashton Grille in the golf club community on the north border of Lake Wales.

He brought not only his expertise and eye for detail but also some of his favorite dishes and imagination to create new ones.

Far up on the year's top 10 is Veal Oscar, made by special request without crab in the topping -- no problem for the chef. A large piece of lobster and many shrimp topped a thick veal chop -- really a slice of prime rib -- with a marvelous Hollandaise flavored with cheese and smoked peppers.

Asked to be prepared as the chef thought it best, the butter-tender chop had a hint of pink in the center. The whole combination of meat, shellfish and sauce had to be eaten in small bites to be savored. It truly was the center of a special dining experience.



Baklava at Tony's Diner features thick layers of ground walnuts and honey sauce poured over the dessert. Michael Wilson/The Ledger

## ATLANTIC SALMON AT TERRACE GRILLE

Lakeland's downtown was a desert of fine dining for years. Then we got The Antiquarian (I wish I could review it each year) and the Terrace Grille in The Terrace Hotel.

At Terrace Grille, Wood Grilled Atlantic Salmon Corn Crab Andouille Pudding, Braised Chicory and Balsamic Onions, Port Wine Reduction saw the fish presented on the sausage-studded pudding that could have been the star of the entree.

Searing added tons of flavor to the tender fish. Not an onion fan, a guest nibbled, then tucked into the Balsamicinfused onions on his fillet. He still doesn't like onions, but he admitted they have never been done like these.

## MOZZARELLA AT IL FORNO

A bad Chinese restaurant is gone (thank goodness) and a satisfying neighborhood Italian restaurant is in the space in Merchants Walk in Lakeland.

Il Forno isn't fancy but the food is honest, filling and real Italian. A wonderful variation on a frequently mundane appetizer stands out.

My wife often orders fried cheese as an appetizer because, too often, there is little else that appeals. Il Forno's version, Mozzarella in Carrozza, is different from the ho-hum offering described on the menu -- mozzarella breaded and fried and served with marinara sauce.

A small platter topped by romaine is topped by a fried cheese sandwich. The chef starts with French bread cut on the bias, puts thick, stretchy cheese between two slices, fries it and then bakes it. Two delicious sandwiches, cut lengthwise to dip into hot marinara. A first course well worthy of a spot in the top 10.

## BLUE GARLIC POTATO CHIPS AT TEXAS CATTLE COMPANY

Texas Cattle Company was starting to look a little long in the horns, er, tooth. Sprucing up the decor and putting some pizzazz in the menu made all the difference.

A new appetizer, Blue Garlic Potato Chips, sounded good when our server described them. He brought a platter heaping with freshly made potato chips, salty, shiny and a bit oily, under a mayonnaise-like dressing and a heavy dose of crumbled bleu cheese. If you like bleu cheese, you'll have a hard time leaving any of these.

## OSSO BUCO AT CAFE PANINO

It's never too late in the year to find a winner. Cafe Panino, two in Lakeland and one in Winter Haven, was reviewed just a couple of weeks ago.

The restaurant makes a delicious variation of Osso Buco. Instead of veal shank, the kitchen uses pork, so instead of one bone with marrow, the cut of pork leg has two bones sticking up. Both came out of the meat with barely a tug. This is a large portion, made even better by a chutney sauce.

## CARPACCIO DI SALMONE AT LA DOLCE VITA

La Dolce Vita in the Holiday Inn South in Lakeland is an independent restaurant. It started the year as part of a small chain. The menu and chef stayed when the corporate owner left. It was a toss-up between two dishes.

Carpaccios are raw. A plate of paperthin slices of raw salmon garnished with a carved lemon, one sliced black olive and one leaf of oakleaf lettuce went by the name Carpaccio di Salmone. The family-secret vinaigrette marinade should be shared in the chef's will so the world of the future can enjoy the dish as much as we did.

## BACON AT SHIRLEY'S PLACE WITH A SPECIAL TOUCH

This friendly soul food restaurant in Lakeland serves breakfast six days a week. It doesn't serve anything or anyone on Sunday.

As part of a big breakfast, the bacon, oh, the bacon -- long, crisp, thick, with the rind on -- the kind you haven't seen since Uncle Albert and Aunt Minnerva sold the farm and moved to town 40 years ago.

## CEDAR PLANK SALMON AT BONEFISH GRILL

Cedar Plank King Salmon off the specials menu at Bonefish Grill in Lakeland sounded too good to pass up. The menu promised wild, line-caught King salmon served on a cedar plank, topped with a Lemon Butter Caper Herb Sauce. It was. Even the plank, well-charred around the edges, smelled good enough to eat.

The thick, center-cut fillet absorbed the flavor of the wood, and had been taken off the fire at just the right second to be cooked perfectly.

(The salmon is a summer special, so keep your eyes open in five or six months.)

## BAKLAVA AT TONY'S DINER

A place doesn't have to be fancy to have a great dish. Take Tony's Diner on Combee Road in Lakeland.

Warm baklava is easier to cut than when the phyllo and nut dessert is cold, and I almost always ask for a knife. The knife could stay in the rack for Tony's baklava. A spoon worked perfectly to get through the tender pastry and thick layers of ground walnuts. The spoon helps you get every drop of the honey sauce poured over the wonderful dessert.

Tony says his wife makes this in the restaurant's kitchen. She could sell it by the pan.

During 2004 I tasted more dishes that should be in a "best of" list, but 10 is all we have room for.

Here's looking forward to sharing another year of dining in Polk County -where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, all the children are above average and (with profuse

apologies to Garrison Keillor) all the restaurants are above three stars.

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