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Posted on Sun, May. 22, 2005

A culinary adventure's end

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who created it.

At La Esperanza in Lindenwold, I savored the smoky and spicy chocolate cinnamon Mexican mole, a traditional sauce the to prepare with a recipe passed down through generations in the owner's native city of Puebla.

I swooned over the coconut-laced chicken curry, one of the chef's childhood favorites, at Monsoon Malaysian Cuisine and Laurel.

At Europa Cafe in Delanco, I sipped the soul-warming cabbage soup, lovingly made by the owner's Romanian grandmoth the Hungarian paprika she toted in tins across the ocean.

I found my favorite crab cake, made with shards of zucchini and chives, at Aldo Lamberti in Cherry Hill, a beautiful restaur Jiffy Lube and Safelite Auto Glass on Route 70 in Cherry Hill.

I enjoyed a lovely seafood soup at Camden's only white-tablecloth restaurant, 20 Horse Tavern, located in the unlikely ind warehouses, cranes and cargo ships at the South Jersey Port Corp.

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I tasted freshly extracted orange blossom honey from the family-run Fruitwood Orchards in Hardingville, Gloucester County spicing African peanut soup and shrimp kabobs at Bahs Restaurant and Catering Service in Runnemede.

One of my very best finds was Rajbhog, an Indian vegetarian fast-food chain in Cherry Hill, where I fell in love with the aumasaala dosa at bargain prices.

The red lentil soup and the Jerusalem mixed grill were two dishes I couldn't get enough of at Maxim's Glatt Kosher in Cherry Hill.

And at Don Franco's Italian Deli in Sewell, I found an ode to South Philly on a roll: the grilled eggplant with a spoon of tomato broccoli rabe, sharp provolone and roasted red peppers on half a loaf of Sarcone's seeded Italian bread.

Eating a mammoth, succulent corned-beef sandwich was truly a religious experience at the Kibitz Room, a New York-style deli in Cherry Hill. And, as you might have guessed from my byline, I am not Jewish.

Although I loved all the ethnic foods around the region, I found there is still plenty of old-fashioned meat-and-potatoes cooking. One of my favorite characters, Dot Devone, a 66-year-old cook and owner of Devone's in Williamstown. Devone spends every day except Christmas, dishing up her gargantuan-size helpings of "plain old American food."

"I just throw it on a plate and give it to you and say, 'Eat it,'" she said. "I'll probably keel over, right in this kitchen. I told my wife to take it aside and don't stop cooking."

Another woman who has made a name for herself with American specialties is Willie Mae Haynes. I met a woman standing in line, driven 40 miles for Haynes' sweet-potato cheesecake. After I tasted it, I understood. Haynes recently expanded to serve in the Virtuous Woman Southern Bakery and Soulfood Cafe in Magnolia.

South Jersey still boasts a respectable selection of homegrown fruits and vegetables, and not only did I find them represented in many local restaurants, I also visited some of the farms myself.

One sun-drenched October day, I drove out to the charming and bucolic Russo's Orchard Lane Farm in Chesterfield, Burlington County. I picked apples and bit into perfection in the snappy, sweet and winy Macoun.

During my travels, I came to truly love sushi, which Sagami of Collingswood brought to the region 30 years ago and which has become one of the best around. It is rivaled by the very fine work at both Fuji in Cinnaminson and Mikado in Cherry Hill.

Tortilla Press was one of the first in a continuing line of trendy new restaurants in Collingswood, a town which has clearly earned its reputation as a restaurant destination. The Mexican restaurant doubled its size and expanded into the space next door one night with patrons turning out for its reasonably priced, gourmet Mexican fare.

The entire Collingswood downtown is bustling with diners, especially on weekend nights, when parking is at a premium in Market Avenue, host to eight fine dining restaurants, with a few more more in the works.

Although it may be hard to believe, 30 months of endless eating has gotten old, so I have mixed feelings about the close of my column. Three days a week, minimum, I had to go out to eat, sampling soup to desserts at fine restaurants, tasting pastries and drinking wine, eating cheesesteaks and Italian hoagies at corner delis. OK, I also sat at upscale bars and sampled flavored martinis and

I know, I know. It sounds like a dream job. Until you hear that there were many nights that I couldn't sleep because my stomach was full with rich food. And many times my whole body ached from eating so much.

So, this is my goodbye.

I want to thank all of my readers who came along for the ride. Many of you suggested restaurants that led to my favorite restaurants in the region.

I also want to thank the chefs who welcomed me into their kitchens and patiently showed me their trade. I have, occasionally, shared my friends and family with recipes and techniques I learned along the way.

My reproduction of the herb-crusted Pork en Provençe, with roasted red pepper coulis, inspired one of my oldest friends to try it. And that was sweet.

Contact suburban staff writer Maureen Fitzgerald at 856-779-3223 or mfitzgerald@phillynews.com. Maureen's restaurant reviews can be found at www.philly.com/mld/philly/entertainment/dining.



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