



Chew on this!

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I've seen many restaurants come and go over the years, but two recent closings in particular have given me pause. Not just because Red Palace and Tasca Brava were exceptionally good, though both undeniably were. Or because they were well-established with a strong local following. They're hardly the first worthy restaurants to close their doors after many years.

What struck an especially resonant chord in me was the fact that, in both cases, the owners remained true to their vision for their restaurants, even though it went against conventional wisdom. Rather than follow the proven formula for success with a cookie-cutter menu of familiar Chinese-American fare, Red Palace owner/chef Wen Tao Lu insisted on offering authentic Szechuan dishes. Tasca Brava owners Juan Samper and Marta Brewer-Samper were serving stuffed piquillo peppers, tortilla Española and other Spanish fare long before tapas became fashionable, first in Cary and more recently in North Raleigh.

Musing on these two restaurants inevitably led to thoughts about others with similarly uncompromising philosophies. Here are a few that I'm thankful are still going strong.

- The Roast Grill, Raleigh -- The granddaddy of no compromise, serving hot dogs grilled the old-fashioned way in a tiny shop that hasn't changed since 1940. Still open for lunch only, and last time I checked, you still entered through a screen door. Don't want a hot dog? You're in the wrong place, because that's pretty much all they sell. And whatever you do, don't ask for ketchup.
- Chops Steakhouse, Garner -- A steakhouse that dry-ages its own beef on premises is rare, though I suppose it wouldn't be too shocking to learn that one is opening in some trendy spot such as Glenwood South. But the outskirts of Garner? Where a dry-aged 14-ounce rib-eye will only set you back \$26.95? Including sides?
- Jibarra, Raleigh -- In a region where, just a few years ago, getting avocado slices on your Tex-Mex combo plate was considered cutting-edge, Jibarra's elegant fine dining take on Mexican cuisine is daring indeed. And most welcome.
- Piedmont and Rue Cler, Durham -- After several false starts, it looks like the downtown Durham renaissance is finally for real this time. A lot of the credit goes to these two excellent restaurants, whose openings less than a month apart in late 2006 were the among the first signs of life in a long-dormant area.
- Skipper's Fish Fry, Apex -- Talk about daring. How about opening a New England-style fish fry in the heart of Calabash country? Fortunately, those of us who grew up believing in the sanctity of Southern-style cornmeal-breaded flounder can assuage our guilt over enjoying cracker meal-breaded cod with a side of hushpuppies.

I'd like to hear from you, too. Which restaurant(s) would you add to the list? Which have enriched our dining scene by going against conventional wisdom? Let me know on my blog at blogs.newsobserver.com/epicurean.

A final note: The owners of Red Palace and Tasca Brava have said they are searching for new locations for their restaurants, and they hope to reopen soon. I wish them success, for our sake as much as theirs.

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