

Where to Eat 2004

Where to impress visitors, where to dine on a date, where the chefs eat and more

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Barbecued ribs. Gourmet pizzas. Designer burritos. Indian, Mexican, Baltic, Peruvian, Thai, Italian. Upscale, homestyle, new, classic, dives. Downtown, Mount Adams, Northside, Newport, West Chester.

For a mid-sized city, Cincinnati practically overflows with restaurants filled with palettes of sumptuous, expensive ingredients and simple gastronomic pleasures. Sure, there are more than enough of the TGI AppleRuckers chains that are big on portions and low on personality, but we have some remarkable dining that rivals the larger cities.

I love grazing through New York City, Chicago and San Francisco because there's such an amazing diversity of dining establishments. I'm rarely bored there.

But then I stop to consider that I've eaten some of the best borscht at a Baltic restaurant in Blue Ash. I've experienced one of the most memorable meals of my life at a chef's table in the kitchen of a downtown French restaurant. And I know that the tabouleh made in a diminutive Mediterranean restaurant in Clifton is better than any I've had in Manhattan.

With all of the dining possibilities in Cincinnati, it's no wonder we get excited about spending our time and cash on good food.

As a food writer and reviewer, when I engage in conversation with people they're rarely interested in knowing about the current book I'm reading or my enthusiasm for yoga, architecture or UC basketball. I recognize the look of polite tolerance while *The Question They're Dying to Ask* simmers beneath a mask of feigned interest.

Do they care that I think Over-the-Rhine has stunning examples of Italianate architecture, that Bearcat guard Tony Bobbitt rocks or that Augusten Burroughs' *Running With Scissors* is a wickedly funny memoir? Barely. Hardly.

"Where are your favorite places to eat in Cincinnati?" is the question everyone wants to know.

I've been asked *The Question* -- or variations of it -- at parties, in elevators and while receiving a gynecological exam (the doc even stopped to take notes; no kidding). I open e-mail nearly every week from people visiting Cincinnati, or about to visit, asking advice for which restaurant is best to entertain guests, impress a first date or dine alone.

It's these questions and *CityBeat's* respect for Greater Cincinnati's culinary industry that motivated the dining writers to compile our first "Where to Eat" guide. It's a tough job -- yeah, yeah, go ahead and cry for us -- to cover all the restaurants that ought to be covered, and

there are more dishes to taste and more columns to write about the undiscovered nooks and crannies of the dining horizon.

If you're familiar with *CityBeat*, you'll know that we're not compiling a standard guide to just the upscale, fine dining establishments -- which are numerous. Instead, we're providing answers to the questions we as food writers receive the most.

Simply put, rather than being all-inclusive and comprehensive, it's a highly opinionated tour of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky restaurants from high-end to down-home.

Whatever the ups and downs of Cincinnati's cultural life, we've invested in the people who feed us, and the returns have been admirable. Irrational ebullience? Perhaps.

Now let's eat.

Where The Chefs Eat

Most of us imagine that popular chefs live a fabulous table-to-table life of Bacchanalian feasts, having developed a highly sensitive palate to anything less than the extraordinary and decadent. The truth is, popular chefs are popular because they're passionately bound to their own kitchens. When they do get a chance to dine out, most of them steer toward simple, well-prepared food, occasionally paying their respects to the dining rooms of other popular chefs.

Ron Wise, Chef of Rondo's, Westwood

The Comet, Northside: "Great quesadillas, burritos and beer."

Knotty Pine on the Bayou, Cold Spring: "Best gumbo -- delicious. Great weekly crawfish boil. Great atmosphere all year round. Great selection of beers."

Riverside Korean Restaurant, Covington: "Excellent, excellent Korean food every time. A really neat atmosphere, great service and the food is delicious, especially the little side dishes."

Sebastian's, Price Hill: "Cheap, cheerful and fast Greek food. Delicious gyros, Greek fries, Tiropita and Baklava."