

★ THE BEST NEW RESTAURANTS OF THE YEAR SEE PAGE 110

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KAY VS. RICK

★★★★★
IT'S ON
AND IT'S GONNA
GET UGLY.

BY

PAUL BURKA



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A salad of heirloom tomatoes, figs, and goat cheese at Voice, in Houston, our number one restaurant

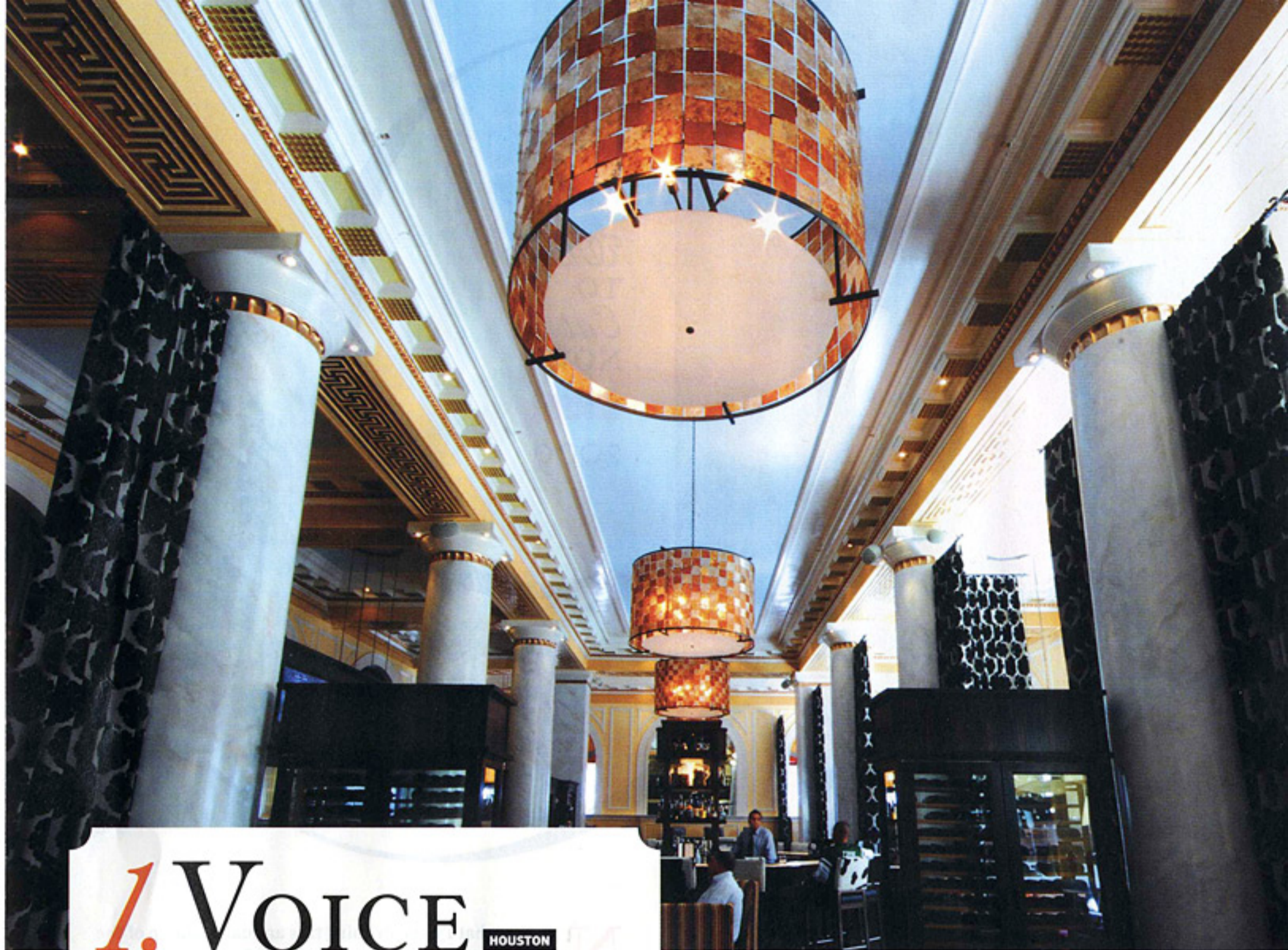


Where TO Eat NOW

2009

Now that I've been doing this annual roundup of the tastiest new restaurants in Texas for seven years, patterns have started to emerge. As usual, Dallas had a raft of exciting newcomers. Houston turned out fewer, but they were generally stronger. Austin produced several dining spots that had early promise but proved exasperatingly inconsistent. The big news was San Antonio, a city where historically I have scrounged to find even one interesting, sophisticated new restaurant. San Antone rocked last year, practically re-creating itself along North Side thoroughfares like Loop 1604 and Sonterra Boulevard. Fort Worth, I'm sad to say, did not have a single contender in the top ten, although it would have if the rules had let me count Lambert's, where I had a spectacular meal. ¶ And speaking of rules, here they are. The current culinary year runs from November 1, 2007, to November 1, 2008, with a three-week grace period. Eligible restaurants must be brand-new or, if in an old location, have a new chef, a new name, and a new concept. Second locations of Texas-based restaurants don't count, even in a different city (sorry, Lambert's). However, I will allow the umpteenth location of an out-of-state restaurant making its first Texas appearance. ¶ With the rules out of the way, it's time for the grand reveal. If you can, please patronize these establishments. The economy has not been kind to restaurants recently, and I'd like for these guys to be around a year from now.

BY PATRICIA SHARPE



1. VOICE HOUSTON

Chef Michael Kramer is having some serious fun at Voice, the best restaurant to open in Texas last year. Located in the Hotel Icon, in downtown Houston, Voice took over the space previously occupied by the restaurant Bank. With grand structural bones dating from the early twentieth century, when the space was indeed a bank lobby, Voice could have ended up the sort of stodgy dining hall you take that dotty rich aunt who's thinking of changing her will. But cool details like bold black-and-white fabric panels have injected a welcome modern touch. And Kramer's French and Mediterranean menu is just right for the space: classic and contemporary at once.

The mushroom soup "cappuccino" was the dish that made a believer out of me—and to think I almost missed it. Tricked out like the frothy coffee drink, most cappuccino soups are, not to put too fine a point on it, a cliché. I saw it on the menu and thought, "Oh, please." But my friend wanted soup, and the minute it arrived, I was captivated. From the creamy truffle foam to the powdered porcini "cocoa" on top, the illusion was spot-on. And the taste—earthy and seductive—was mushroom to the max.

Appetizers are a strength overall. Kramer's blessedly airy gnocchi are brushed with *beurre blanc*, then scattered on the plate with

brussels sprout "petals," shreds of prosciutto di Parma, and chanterelles; Kramer is big on these spread-out, precise arrangements. He's also conscious of evocative flavors: The gnocchi combo cleverly evokes three elements of a Southern Sunday dinner—ham, potatoes, and greens.

Which comes as no surprise, given that the L.A. native spent eight years at McCrady's, in Charleston, South Carolina, honing the chops he learned at Spago, in Beverly Hills, and the Mansion on Turtle Creek, in Dallas. Slices of organic suckling pig come with a thick, cider-infused applesauce and cubes of butternut squash: the epitome of Southern. Morsels of pink, honey-lacquered roasted duck speak of woodsmoke and other dusky flavors. Alongside is a fig mostarda, a mustard-zapped Italian fruit condiment that is the *rage du jour*. The combination put me in mind of burning leaves and country cookouts.

And that is what I like so much about Voice: Kramer's melding of flavors sets off echoes in my head. My Texan/Southern heritage helps, but I imagine he could stir memories no matter where you're from. And to me, that is one key thing that distinguishes a highly competent chef from a remarkable one. The former feeds the body, the latter also nourishes the soul.