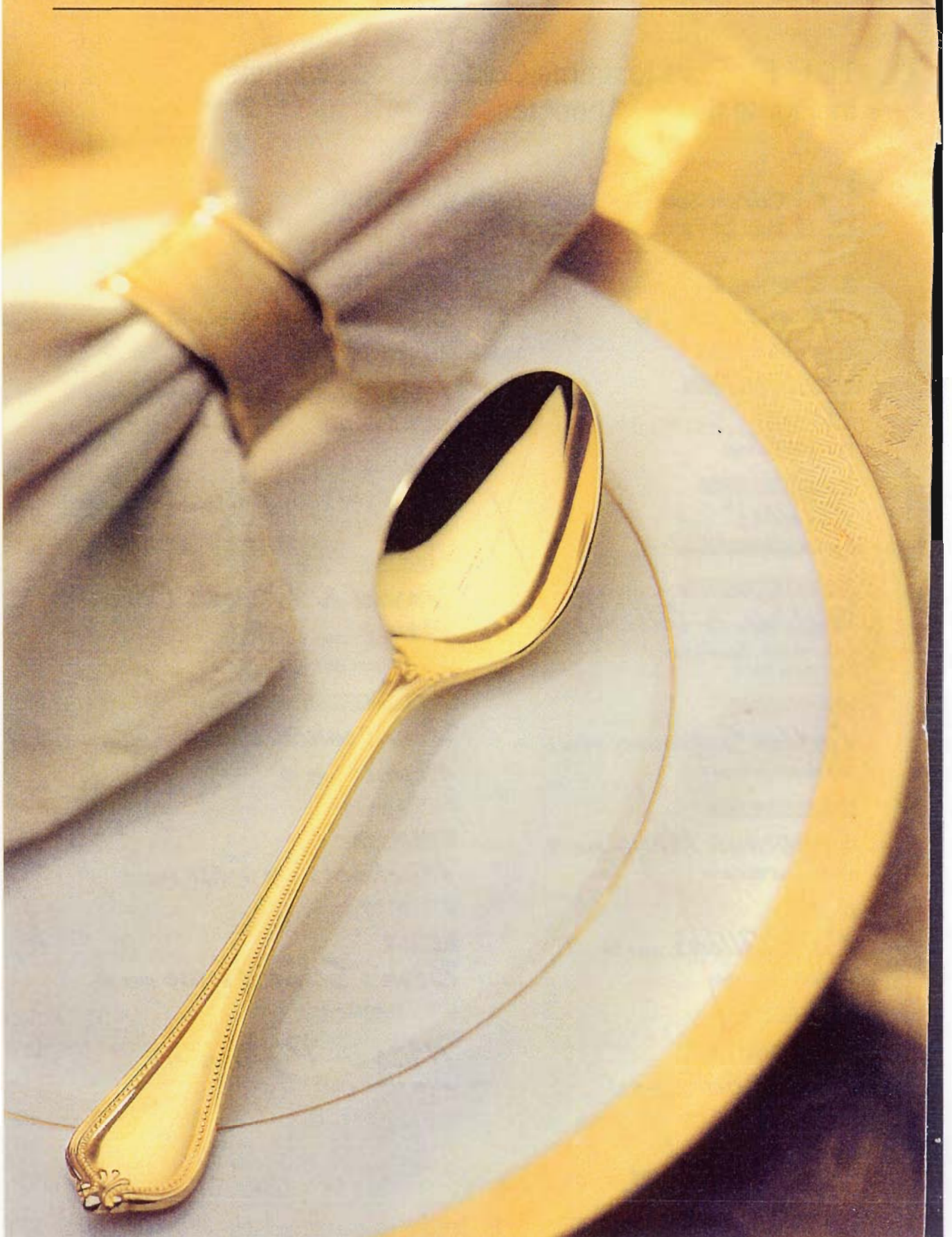


Florida Trend's

GOLDEN SPOON



There has to be better dining on our menu this year.

And not just because 2003 was so dreary, which it certainly was. The best response is cockeyed optimism despite the evidence.

Grand Finale, which led my Best Restaurants list last year, closed a few months later. Fine chefs left other establishments. Newcomers with fabulous first bites quickly gave up the effort. Even longtime favorites - independents with cult followings for their great ice cream sundaes, fried chicken and spring rolls - failed. Little that was noteworthy arrived to fill the gaps. While the restaurant scene rebounded along with economic recovery in other cities, the big news for most Tampa Bay diners was the arrival of Sonic Burger and P.F. Chang, or a Panera opening in their neighborhoods.

I was unnerved in midyear when the Minneapolis Star-Tribune rated its hometown as a two-star restaurant town along with Denver, Dallas and

Phoenix. New York and San Francisco rated four; Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami, New Orleans, Seattle, Washington, D.C., three. Tampa Bay



Cafe Ponte turns passion fruit into artful treats. Clockwise, from left, a caramelized passion fruit tart, a spiked drink called a passion fruit muse, passion fruit sorbet and a passion fruit dessert bombe.



Trio of tuna at Cafe Ponte — sashimi, tartar, and sesame seed crusted with wontons and lemon coulis.

► [Photo gallery - a restaurant sampler](#)

wasn't mentioned, but I thought we might make the two-star league - with a little effort.

A few months later, I got a delicious taste of that effort in a perfect meal at Cafe Ponte. That epiphany and spark of hope was on Ulmerton Road, of all places, from a chef who once cooked at Clearwater's modest Pepper Mill.

More than 10 years ago, a generous Pepper Mill customer saw Chris Ponte's promise and paid his way to the Cordon Bleu. He excelled and went on to the greatest kitchens of Paris and New York. To our good fortune, he returned.

Miracles happen.

After some false starts, Chris and Jenny Ponte took over a middling Italian spot that catered to office park techies in 2002.

The new look was subtle and smooth, almost shockingly tasteful, and the food was high-priced and handsome but tailored for a business class stuck in creamed Continental.

As the months passed, Ponte's courage grew, and so did his customers' adventurousness. He laid out a full measure of modern cooking - pumpkin soup set off with toasted almonds and ginger, roasted beet salad, salmon that smelled of the Levant, and sauces lightly kissed with vanilla beans, truffles or Barolo.

Yes, this is top-dollar dining, but that's where chain palaces squeezed independent restaurateurs the most.

Ponte's success is encouraging, but it is not enough. Our dream menu would have restaurants at all price levels that meet my standards for the best.

The best restaurants know that there's more to the center of the plate than filet mignon, salmon and chicken breast and that medley is not a vegetable; they find good bread or bake their own; they seek local fish beyond grouper and use a wide range of pastas and grains.

To achieve all that, food quality must matter to consumers more than decor, price or brand familiarity. Restaurateurs must also catch up with food-savvy diners, who eat in other cities, devour food magazines and obsess over the Food Network.

We will undoubtedly get more restaurants. The reviving economy has turned up the heat in corporate kitchens and massive places are opening again, often hoping to morph into new chains.

More promising is a new sense that small is not only beautiful but healthful and profitable. Diners love sushi, tapas, bar food, "small plates" and "bowls" that cost a few dollars and a few calories less than big entrees. Independent restaurateurs now find more success in bakeries, takeout and smaller spaces with smaller menus and payrolls, and often smaller prices.

Ethnic restaurateurs, bakers and grocers still cook with robust flavor. We're lucky to have so much Greek, Italian and Cuban cooking and to add dishes from the rest of Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

When I started this annual roundup in 2001, I hoped to tap 40 or 50 restaurants as our best but found only 30. The following year it dropped to 29, and this past year we've lost at least three of those. It would drop more if I named only independent restaurants with committed chefs, smart service and fair prices. But who's counting? Let's be generous, stop cursing the darkness and light up a candelabra. There is plenty to eat here, distinct local flavors, great imports and fun neighborhoods to explore.

[Restaurants are linked to reviews that appeared in the Times]

Best restaurant on Ulmerton Road - and 50 miles in any direction, hands down

Cafe Ponte, 13505 Icot Blvd., Largo; (727) 538-5768.

Against all odds, Chris Ponte returned from Paris and New York to turn an office park cafe in mid Pinellas into a polished outpost of urbanity. Decor and service are as smooth and subtle as the panna cotta. From diver scallops and whole snapper to lamb chops and duck, entrees are plated with imagination, perfect sauces and great sides. Eat your vegetables - beets, wild mushrooms, lentils, celeriac and baby bok choy - gilded with the best French technique and a world of spices.