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DINING; A Year of Eating Grandly, With 6 Restaurants Rated Excellent

By JOANNE STARKEY

THIS has been a banner year for restaurants on Long Island. In an average year, two or three places receive Excellent ratings; rarely has the number reached five. In 2006, six restaurants were rated Excellent, a record.

Memories that will linger long into 2007 include the spectacular sunsets over the water seen from 18 Bay in Bayville; the charming sight of ducks putting on a show on Lake Lawrence, the setting for the Lake House in Bay Shore; the fantastic food at two new inns on the North Fork, the Jedediah Hawkins Inn in Jamesport and the North Fork Table and Inn in Southold, which have turned that rural region into the Island's hottest dining destination; the return of Maxxels in Mineola, which had closed at the end of 2004, and the festive atmosphere of Besito in Huntington, the island's best Mexican restaurant.

Here are some of the highlights of those restaurants.

Besito, Huntington

There's a fiesta every night of the week here. The fun starts with the guacamole made at tableside and doesn't end till the last of the churros (warm, long spirals of fried dough rolled in cinnamon and sugar), a gratis dessert, are eaten. There are numerous standouts in between, including a luscious tortilla soup, a flavor-packed triumph with pulled white-meat chicken, avocado, cilantro and Chihuahua cheese. It surpassed any version I have eaten in Mexico.

North Fork Table and Inn, Southold

Two of the year's outstanding restaurants are owned by big-name Manhattan chefs who left the big city. Gerry Hayden and his wife, Claudia Fleming, are the principal owners of North Fork Table and Inn. She had been the pastry chef at Gramercy Tavern for more than a decade; he had worked with Charlie Palmer at the River Cafe in Brooklyn and at Aureole in Manhattan.

It was here that I first sampled the oh-so-tender Berkshire pork that now seems to be popping up

everywhere. At North Fork Table, the tenderloin was wrapped in bacon, roasted and cut into thin rosy slices. They were paired with chunks of crispy, fresh bacon that had been braised in truffle juice.

Ms. Fleming delighted diners with outstanding homey desserts, all teamed with housemade ice creams and sorbets. I can still taste the light and buttery upside-down (fruit on top) peach-raspberry cobbler with cream cheese ice cream.

The Lake House, Bay Shore

The Lake House is the other newcomer with a famous chef-owner from Manhattan. Matt Connors had been the chef de cuisine at Veritas from its opening in 1998 till he left earlier this year, returning to his hometown, Bay Shore. His food stole the show from the cavorting ducks on the lake. The dish that made the biggest impression was an appetizer special of airy gnocchi tossed with meltingly tender shards of braised rabbit, pancetta, chanterelles, pine nuts and golden raisins. The dessert I'd go back for is the warm bread pudding with slices of banana and an ice cream topper.

Jedediah's, Jamesport

The Jedediah Hawkins Inn should win an award for the beautiful restoration of this 1863 captain's house in Jamesport. Its restaurant, Jedediah's, doesn't take a back seat to the stunning d?r. Tom Schaudel, one of Long Island's top chefs and a co-owner here, has never cooked better. At his side is Michael Ross, the chef de cuisine, a star in his own right.

The most memorable dish on the menu is deconstructed beef "in the style of Burgundy," which features a filet mignon with a pinot glaze and separate small plates of wild mushrooms, cipollini onions and the tiniest of baby carrots. The meal that lingers in my memory, though, is lunch on the dining porch, which overlooks 22 acres of gardens. The juicy Kobe burger was a treat, and the lobster roll on a split, toasted bun with lemon aioli was as delicious as promised.

18 Bay, Bayville

This is the smallest of the six spots to win an Excellent rating, a jewel with only six tables. It opened in the fall of 2005 but came into its own this summer, with its appealing beachfront location. The two talented chef-owners, Elizabeth Wolff and Adam Kopels, thrill diners with a menu driven by seasonal ingredients. I visited in late spring, when the chefs were playing with seasonal treats like morels, ramps, nettles, artichokes, peas and asparagus. The ever-changing vegetable antipasto is a must-order, as is the crispy striped bass paired with a salad of sliced radishes and Meyer lemons.

Maxxels Restaurant, Mineola

This place reopened in August to shouts of "Welcome back!" The new location boasts eye-catching, whimsical posters, a warm, caring staff (many holdovers from the old place) and a menu that amazes with its diversity. Chinese dumplings share space with little meatballs (a recipe from the owner's aunt in Sicily), a pork chop with Latin flavors and an entree of Thai barbecued shrimp atop a nest of pad Thai. An all-American favorite, grilled rib-eye steak, topped with crispy red onions and roasted garlic butter, puts the headliner at most steakhouses to shame.

On New Year's Eve, I will raise a glass and toast these winners, wishing for an equally exciting crop of restaurants next year.

The Best Eating in '06

BESITO, 402 New York Avenue (Route 110), Huntington; (631) 549-0100; www.besitomex.com.
Dinner entrees \$15 to \$24, wines \$22 to \$90.

18 BAY, 18A Bayville Avenue, Bayville; (516) 628-0124; www.18bayrestaurant.com. Dinner entrees \$18 to \$35, wines \$28 to \$75.

JEDEDIAH'S, 400 South Jamesport Avenue, Jamesport; (631) 722-2900;
www.jedediahhawkinsinn.com. Dinner entrees \$22 to \$36, wines \$24 to \$265.

THE LAKE HOUSE, 240 West Main Street, Bay Shore; (631) 666-0995. Dinner entrees \$22 to \$36, wines \$25 to \$310.

MAXXELS RESTAURANT, 526 Jericho Turnpike, Mineola; (516) 294-3604. Dinner entrees \$12 to \$29, wines \$21 to \$92.

NORTH FORK TABLE AND INN, 57225 Main Road (Route 25), Southold; (631) 765-0177;
www.northforktableandinn.com. Dinner entrees \$25 to \$42, wines \$24 to \$280.

Photos: STUNNING -- The Jedediah Hawkins Inn in Jamesport is home to Jedediah's. (Photo by Deirdre Brennan for The New York Times); OUTSTANDING -- Top, 18 Bay is a jewel with only six tables. Center, North Fork Table and Inn, where the chefs' culinary pedigree shows through. Above, Maxxels Restaurant, which reopened in Mineola in August. (Photographs by Phil Marino for The New York Times); (Photo by Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times)
