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Where chefs go out to eat

by Lisa Brody

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They're the unknown faces behind the well-known marquees, toiling away to create fabulous food for us to savor and enjoy. At Downtown, we wanted to know where they like to go when they come out from behind their stoves, and what tickles their taste buds. Ask, and ye shall receive. In their own words, here is an eclectic variety of local notable chefs, and their favorite off-duty haunts.

Sameer Eid

Owner/Chef, Phoenicia Restaurant, Birmingham

Best Pizza: Buddy's—their whole wheat pizza is delicious with any topping.

Best Burger: Red Coat Tavern in Royal Oak. Their burger is always juicy and good.

Best Place for Ethnic Food: Spago in Windsor. They have fabulous mussels in marinara and white wine sauce. Their pasta is made there, and the minestrone soup is the best.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: Ever since I started serving bone-in ribeye in my restaurant, I quit ordering steak anywhere else.

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: Ruth's Chris (Steakhouse in Troy) always has fresh seafood, and it always has been good.

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: Frittata in Clawson. It's a small place with a great variety of things other than eggs and bacon.

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: Big Rock Chop House in Birmingham. The variety of desserts is huge, and it is all delicious.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: Streetside Seafood in Birmingham. You can always get a wonderful meal there.

Best Bar/Lounge: Big Rock Chophouse. They make the best martini in town.

Best Wine List: Ocean Prime in Troy. They have a very extensive list.

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

Eid, 71, originally from Lebanon, began cooking "by mistake, by coincidence, by faith," he says. "I was in the custom drapery business in Highland Park, and I used to eat in a Middle Eastern restaurant almost every day, until one day the lady said, Sameer, you are the only one who can run this restaurant. I told her I knew nothing about restaurants. I never cooked. She said this is what you're going to do. Five minutes later, I bought it for \$5,700."

Eid learned to cook, and to run the front of the house. "I have done everything." He upgraded the quality of the cuisine, and ran the restaurant with no name and no sign for 12 years in Highland Park, before moving it to S. Old Woodward in Birmingham in 1982. "I put up a very subdued and subtle sign," he said.

His son Sammy, 31, is now running the restaurant. "He's doing a better job than me. Having him around has brought young people and added a tremendous support to my business." But Eid has no plans to step down. "Dealing with a couple hundred people a day is wonderful. My customers are my best in the country."

Jeffrey Rose

Executive Chef, Toast, Birmingham

Best Pizza: My Cousin Vinny's on Woodward and Telegraph in Bloomfield. It's the closet thing to New York City pizza!

Best Burger: Red Coat Tavern is great because they always serve late! The burger is good. I do an original burger and add American cheese. Why mess with a good burger!

Best Place for Ethnic Food: Phoenicia on Old Woodward in Birmingham for Lebanese. Hung Hua for Chinese. It's the best. Pi Thai on 10 and John R. great flavor, very spicy! Shiraku is the only place for sushi.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: The Clawson Steak House. Good food, great old school feel. Big red leather chairs and live entertainment!

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: Nothing really thrills me. (I'm picky on my seafood).

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: Always an eggs benedict. Toast is the way to go!

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: Cork Wine Bar has the best pastry chef in the state. Tanya Fallon. The financier is to die for! Second is Patricia Nash at Motor City Casino's Iridescence restaurant.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: YaYa's Chicken for a quick "fast food" is real on-the-bone chicken, not processed!

Best Bar/Lounge: Gusoline Alley in Royal Oak; Tony's Sports Bar on Woodward north of Nine Mile; Grasshopper Lounge, Ferndale.

Best Wine List: Forest Grill

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

Rose, 39, began as a pot washer at 14 in his native New Jersey, "and then by the time I graduated from high school, I was doing weddings and parties for 200. I just kept learning and growing."

Now the executive chef at both the Birmingham and Ferndale locations of Toast, he has earned his stripes working for six years at Tribute under Chef Takashi, a year at Iridescence, and four years at Big Rock Chop House. When he's not working, he loves to stand outside and grill.

Josh McCoury

Chef, Peabody's, Birmingham

Best Pizza: Antonio's Town Square pizza in Rochester Hills is great. Fun for the family, pizzeria/ arcade, and large inexpensive beer selection.

Best Burger: My new favorite is definitely 5 Guys burgers and fries.

Best Place for Ethnic Food: My wife and I love to go to Pegasus in Greektown. They have by far the best lamb shanks in town. The menu is very reasonably priced and so are the drinks.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: I have to give this one to Lelli's. Their dry-aged porterhouse monstrosity is phenomenal. This has been my long standing favorite steak. Nobody else has even been able to come close.

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: There are a lot of choices when this comes to mind, but overall I will say it is the Rochester Chophouse and Oyster Bar. Everything from the Maryland jumbo lump crab cakes to the lobster and shrimp

pan roast.

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: The banana pancakes at the Original Pancake House in Birmingham. We drive all the way from Rochester to undoubtedly wait in line every time, and it is still worth the drive and wait.

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: I recently had a chance to review the dessert menu at Cork Wine Pub in Pleasant Ridge, and the dessert menu is really intriguing, and I hope to pay them a visit very soon.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: Definitely a good time to be had at Miyako Japanese Steakhouse in Auburn Hills. My wife, kids and I love the show cooking.

Best Bar/Lounge: Good drinks and live entertainment at the Hamlin Pub in Rochester Hills.

Best Wine List: I'm not that big of a wine enthusiast, but having had the opportunity to read over the list from Coach Insignia in Detroit, it pretty much covered anything one could possibly want.

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

At 30, McCoury has spent more than half his life in professional kitchens, when a research project in freshman English turned into his life's work. "While I had spent a lot of time cooking as a kid, helping my mom and grandma, it was while doing a research project in English interviewing chefs that I was offered my first job, at Acadia, a Brian Polcyn restaurant across from The Palace, as a prep cook. I was a 14-year-old kid working for minimum wage who wanted to be there, peeling vegetables, making rice, absorbing as much as I could at a young age."

He later attended Oakland Community College's Culinary Studies Institute, and worked for the Kruse & Muer organization at Charley's Crab at the Northfield Hilton and Rochester Chophouse, as well as Lily's Seafood in Royal Oak, P.F. Chang's, Big Rock ChopHouse and Chen Chow.

Michael Barrera

Chef de Cuisine, Streetside Seafood

Best Pizza: Amici's in Berkley. Easily the most healthy and creative pizza in town. Their vegan pizza with artichokes and walnuts is amazing.

Best Burger: I usually like making burgers at home, but if I do go out to get a burger, it has to be at Rosie O'Grady's in Ferndale. It's a simple all-American style burger. Their buns are the best, too.

Best Place for Ethnic Food: Taqueria Lupita's in Mexicantown. They have \$1.00 street tacos. The pork al pastor or carne asada are my faves.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: The New York strip steak at the Town Tavern in Royal Oak, hands down. It's not just because we share the same owner, trust me. They give options on sauces or toppings. Don't pass on the cognac sauce. It is great.

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: Streetside Seafood. I mean that. I love the Mahi Tacos. The Rock Shrimp pasta is also a favorite of mine.

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: I will remain biased and say the Beverly Hills Grill. They have the most consistent food and the best daily specials. My kids beg to go there just for the pancakes. I worked there for five years, so I used to make what is known as the Mike BLT. Bacon, Lettuce, Tomato, Fried Egg, Swiss Cheese, and Sriracha Mayonnaise. Not for the calorie watchers, but delicious.

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: Easily the Inn Season Cafe in Royal Oak. They have the best carrot cake in town, when you can get it. They also make this Cardamom Spice cake that is unreal. I have yet to have any vegan desserts that are nearly as good as these.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor. Great bread, great fresh and natural ingredients. and free cheese. Really, you can try as much cheese as you like. That alone is worth the drive.

Best Bar/Lounge: I enjoy Dick O'Dow's in Birmingham. Sam is a great bartender and they have Newcastle on tap. Ye Olde Saloon in Royal Oak is a good dive and that's where most of my sports junkie friends like to hang out.

Best Wine List: Streetside. The Louis Latour or the Ruta 22. A must on any list. I personally love the fact that we have a huge variety of wine. There is something for everybody here.

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

Barrera, 34, originally went to college looking to have a career outside of cooking, but the lure of the kitchen pulled him back in. He wound up in culinary school in Philadelphia in 2000, and returned here in 2005, after meeting his wife, who is a pastry chef at Whole Foods, and having the first of his two sons. He worked at Beverly Hills Grill for four years before recently moving over to owner Bill Roberts' Birmingham restaurant, Streetside Seafood.

In their off hours, he and his wife like to make simple foods, "like roast chicken and rice, but done the right way," Barrera said, "or fine Latin foods."

Luis Reyes

Executive Chef, 220, Birmingham

Best Pizza: Crust: Telegraph & Maple. I love their thin crust pizzas.

Best Burger: Love the big chief burger at Duggans Pub on Woodward.

Best Place for Ethnic Food: It would have to be my own (Puerto Rican). Unfortunately, there isn't any Puerto Rican restaurants around. Ex: mofongo fill with lobster, crab a la salmorejo.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: My 14 oz. hand-cut New York strip at 220 is by far is the best New York I've tasted.

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: Streetside Seafood, and their salmon with braised brown lentils.

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: Beverly Hills Grill, hands down. Their muesli (I'm not an egg type of a person), although their huevos rancheros is quite delicious.

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: 220. It's all made in house. Cream puff sundae w/ pistachio gelato, chocolate semi freddo, warm apple strudel, strawberry mascarpone cheesecake, Tiramisu.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: Unfortunately, Modern Food, in Keego Harbor, but they closed. They moved their business to Portland.

Best Bar/Lounge: Edison's in Birmingham. Live music, a great wine list, dancing, martini menu, quick bites to eat menu and free cover charge. It doesn't get any better than that.

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

Reyes, 44, notes that "this is all I've ever done." Cooking for 24 years, he moved to the U.S. from Puerto Rico to go to school, started washing dishes at Jackson's of Beverly Hills, now Beverly Hills Grill, and "worked my way up."

"As I learned the language, I was very intrigued about food combinations," he said. When Bill Roberts and his then-wife Judi Roberts took over Jackson's and created Beverly Hills Grill, Reyes stayed on and became sous chef. "I then went to open my first restaurant with them, Streetside Seafood, and then took on a bigger challenge, 220, and I've been here 13 years."

Married, with a 19-year-old son, Reyes loves to cook seafood, especially with a Caribbean flair. "I like light food. I'm a firm

believer in true flavors, and in reductions vs. thickening agents."

Brian Henson

Executive Chef, Big Rock Chophouse, Birmingham

Best Pizza: The best I have had in the area is Darios in Garden City. It has been 25 years since I have been there as a kid, but we went there after baseball games and swim meets. I think it is still there. If not, I'm kind of a sucker for deep dish at Pizza Hut.

Best Burger: Miller's. Again, has been a while, but there is something to be said about the old time honor system, it makes it taste better. Port Hope Bar and Grill, although I could never finish half.

Best Place for Ethnic Food: Pad Thai, Siam Spicy. I fell in love with Pad Thai while working for Wolfgang Puck Food Company in Southern California and this is the closest I have found.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: Can I say any at Big Rock Chophouse?

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: Perch at Steve and Rocky's. Simple and perfect.

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: Breakfast in bed served by my family. Father's Day is coming up.

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: Anything Patricia Nash makes at Motor City Casino. And the occasional Blizzard, and my new favorite Ben and Jerry's Red Velvet Cake Ice Cream. I have a big sweet tooth, so I really can go on and on.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: Frank's Anatra. Chicago style hot dog at Home Depot.

Best Bar/Lounge: Dukes in Highland

Best Wine List: Hard to tell because the good ones change their list a lot. Any that would have an Albarino from Rias Baixas, Mencia from Spain and inexpensive reds from Languedoc-Roussillon. Vera's program at Big Rock is fantastic. I also like Tallulah Wine Bar and Bistro in Birmingham and Mon Jin Lau in Troy.

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

When Henson, 38, was in high school, his cousin was a chef and an ice carver at Schoolcraft College. "When I was in 10th grade, he paid me to help and sweep up the shavings. It's how I got started. I entered some competitions, but when I entered Schoolcraft, I switched to cooking," he said.

His first job was at the intimate now-defunct Cafe' Bon Homme in Plymouth, where there was only room in the kitchen for the chef and him. "You couldn't ask for a better first cooking job. There was one person cooking and one person in the pantry. I got a tremendous education, because you couldn't make a mistake because the chef was looking over me." He's been at Big Rock for the last three years. With three kids, he feels settled. In his off-hours, "We try to make quick, good-quality things that are not fast food," he said.

David Gilbert

Executive Chef, The Forest Grill, Birmingham

Best Pizza: Tomatoes Apizza in Farmington Hills

Best Burger: Red Coat Tavern in Royal Oak.

Best Place for Ethnic Food: Mon Jin Lau in Troy.

Best Steak at a Restaurant: Bourbon Steak in the MGM Casino.

Best Seafood Restaurant/Item: Iridescence at Motor City Casino.

Best Breakfast Menu/Favorite Breakfast Item: Frittata.

Best Dessert Menu or Dish: Bread Pudding at The Forest Grill.

Favorite place to go when you don't feel like cooking: Cinco Lago's in Milford.

Best Bar/Lounge: Hamilton Room.

Best Wine List: The Forest Grill.

ABOUT THE JUDGE:

Gilbert, 36, began at a local mom-and-pop place in his hometown of Milford, then worked at Appeteeaser's before heading to the Culinary School of America in Hyde Park, NY. He's worked all over the world since—from The Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas, French Laundry in Yountville, CA, Auberge du Soleil in St. Helena, CA, and in Paris for three years at Le Stranse before heading back to Michigan and becoming chef at The Townsend Hotel.

"Chef Brian Polcyn has been such a mentor to me for 15 years, and he asked me if I wanted to be a part of Forest Grill," Gilbert said. He did, and became the opening chef. His wife, Monica, is the general manager and sommelier, as well. "It's the best blessing I could ask for."