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## DFW's best new restaurants of '08

DFW's best new restaurants include some multi-ethnic masterpieces.

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The economy may have us flirting with the ramen-noodle diet of our college days, but local restaurateurs have given us plenty to enjoy when we're ready to treat ourselves to a good meal out.

2008 brought us an interesting mix of new dining options, from rancho deluxe, Middle Eastern and Thai in Fort Worth, Caribbean and gourmet takeout in Arlington and Mansfield, pan-Asian in Haltom City, and cunningly authentic French and Italian in Dallas. Two of the year's most anticipated restaurants were Grace, Adam Jones' downtown ode to modern American cuisine, and Keith Hicks' Buttons, bringing us his newest in retro-but-sophisticated food for the soul to Fort Worth's west side just this week.

In no particular order, we offer a look at our favorite dining options that opened in '08. If you haven't tried these yet, put them on your list of New Year's resolutions.

### Thai Tina's

Amphone Tina Vorachack is no dummy. Seeing a big void in Fort Worth's Asian dining scene that cried out for great Thai food, she brought the certifiable success that she has enjoyed with a Watauga cafe to Cowtown. Sprucing up a rundown former Italian joint, Vorachack and partner Jay Lanning Jennings consistently have wowed a quickly growing crowd of devotees to her fresh, vibrant flavors from Southeast Asia. Among the pleasures are her grilled beef salad with herbs and lime; hot basil duck or quail; whole crispy red snapper; and ginger-rosemary-grilled lamb chop with massaman curry. There's now a beer-and-wine license, so you don't have to BYOB. Moderate prices. 703 N. Henderson St., Fort Worth; 817-332-0088.

### Dali

It's called a wine bar, but it's so much more. It's small – there's seating for 70 inside --- but it packs a wallop, not just because there's also seating for 185 on the patio. Named for the famous surrealist painter, this hotspot in downtown Dallas' One Arts Plaza begs deep and frequent inspection. Owner Paul Pinnell serves a brilliant selection of wine, many of which you haven't heard of, and most of which you'll want to try time and again. For every wine that carries a steep price tag, there are plenty affordable options, and for every glass and bottle, there is a stunning menu item that will pair perfectly. You can snack on brie in pastry or phenomenal scallops in a chardonnay treatment or take on big plates of osso buco, pan-roasted duck or lobster with pasta. 1722 Routh St., Dallas, 469-385-9360; [www.daliwinebar.com](http://www.daliwinebar.com).

### Neighborhood Services

Nobody will ever say Nick Badovinus underwhelms. This chef is a force of nature, which you know if you've ever eaten at Fireside Pies, Hibiscus, The Porch and other Dallas establishments he brought to glory while with a corporate restaurant group there. Now, he's flying solo and has just opened his own joint just west of the Park Cities, doing a lot of impressive but casual food in a hang-out setting. You want stick-to-your-ribs grub? Get the Berkshire spare ribs, rubbed in black coffee with an ancho glaze, with onion rings. Want to behave yourself? Get the salmon with grilled asparagus salad. Want a snack with that glass of wine? Try the white bean-pecorino hummus. Just don't try to make a reservation (none accepted) or bring a large group (no parties larger than six). 5027 W. Lovers Lane, Dallas, 214-350 5027; [www.neighborhoodservicesdallas.com](http://www.neighborhoodservicesdallas.com).

### Chadra Mezza Grill

After running a modest but solid-hit Middle Eastern diner near John Peter Smith Hospital, Nehme Elbitar figured he was ready for prime time. He was right: His Chadra Mezza Grill — named for a northern Lebanese village — has earned a regular following for fresh, healthful dishes on the lunch buffet and an evening menu laden with appetizers, grilled meats, vegetarian choices, pizza and sandwiches. Items that urge your palate to demand a return visit include muhammara, a thick dip made of roasted red bell pepper, roasted garlic and crushed walnuts, perfect for spreading on hot pita bread; ablama, the traditional Lebanese dish of sweet yellow squash stuffed with ground sirloin and swept in a tangy tomato sauce; and the Greek wrap, folding grilled chicken and feta inside a pita. Try a Lebanese wine or the jet-fuel Turkish coffee, and watch for live music on the patio, where your pups are welcome. Moderate prices. 1622 Park Place Ave., Fort Worth; 817-924-2372; [www.chadramezza.com](http://www.chadramezza.com).

### Grace

Pampering diners for 20 years while running downtown institutions like Prego and Del Frisco's prepared Adam Jones for going out on his own to serve Fort Worth's most demanding clientele. After studying classic dining establishments from Napa Valley to Rome, Jones used elements from the Four Seasons in New York as inspiration in the creation he opened in November with his wife, designer Caroline Grace Jones. There, you can sup on an organic Meyer Ranch filet, perhaps topped with black truffle butter, or on veal Milanese, two of numerous American classics by chef Blaine Staniford, with a wine specially chosen by sommeliers Ryan Tedder and Jenny Kornblum. Just want a drink and a snack? Perch at the bar to sip a Bosc pear martini and nibble short-rib sliders. Expensive prices (moderate bar menu). 777 Main St., Fort Worth; 817-877-3388; [www.gracefortworth.com](http://www.gracefortworth.com).

### **Tei An**

Teiichi "Teach" Sakurai rocked our world with his first Japanese restaurant entries on the Dallas scene, Teppo and Tei Tei. Now Sakurai tops himself, which we hadn't thought possible, with his noodle shop, another new sensation in One Arts Plaza. It may not sound impressive on the face of it, but with a bite or two of the food here, the earth moves and the angels weep -- assuming you love good Japanese food. The handmade soba noodles -- you can see him doing it at noontime -- are served either hot or cold with a magical variety of dipping sauces. Servers help you figure it all out, but if you're like us, you'll love the pecan, walnut, soy and black sesame versions. There's a memorable curry soup, too, as well as tempura for those who want something a bit more familiar. Sake cocktails are among the popular beverage options. 1722 Routh St., 214-220-2828.

### **Buttons**

No wonder Keith Hicks' theme music is by Al Green; eating this charismatic chef's food just makes you feel like getting your groove on. He has been winning legions of fans since he cooked at Gunsmoke Grill, and his following grew to almost mythic proportions at Ovation. Now he's strutting his stuff at Buttons, which opened Monday in the Chapel Hill shopping center in the former 29 Degrees Tavern. The restaurant got a whimsical overhaul with '70s styling by local designer/architect Julie Kim. Ask for a seat at the chef's counter, where you can watch Hicks and his team whip up his famous chicken and waffles, pot roast, smothered chicken, oxtails with tomatoes and yellow squash and -- of course -- Let's Get It On Oysters. There's live blues on the stage on weekends, a Sunday gospel brunch and a full martini menu, with choices named for Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Bob Marley and Eric Clapton. Expensive. 4701 West Freeway, Fort Worth; 817-735-4900; [www.buttonsrestaurant.com](http://www.buttonsrestaurant.com).

### **Lambert's**

West Texas ranch native Louis Lambert parlayed his smash-hit Lambert's Downtown Barbecue in Austin into a new favorite for Cowtown with this hip but dependably comfortable hangout just north of the Seventh Street Corridor renaissance. Renovating the former Pedro's Trailer Park and Jack's Off the Wall by sticking javelina and steer heads on the wall and suspending saddles from the ceiling, Lambert introduced us to spiffed-up versions of the foods he has loved since he was a kid in Odessa. Among the bona fide bets are the grilled T-bone topped with red chile enchiladas; the oak-smoked, braised beef short ribs; smoked San Angelo lamb chops; cauliflower gratin; and coconut cream pie and blackberry cake-cobbler. There's a separate bar menu with gratifying snacks and live music on weekends. Expensive. 2731 White Settlement Road, Fort Worth; 817-822-1161; [www.lambertsfortworth.com](http://www.lambertsfortworth.com).

### **Oliver's Fine Foods**

Owner-chef Todd Bush decided Mansfield needed a fancy grocery shop with gussied-up takeout, and boy, did he deliver. An alumnus of the Culinary Institute of America and the corporate restaurant world, Bush goes out of his way to provide all the makings for a fabulous dinner party; all you have to do is decide who's doing the cooking. You can pick up a wide variety of prepared dishes, with venison shanks, lasagna, crab cakes and Texas chili among the choices, or you can head for the butcher case to choose lovely steaks and assorted sausages -- such as venison cherry or chicken-apple -- to bring home for your grill. There are shelves packed with desirable hors d'oeuvres makings, as well as a good wine selection. If you're merely in the market for a fine version of a salad or a sandwich, this is your place. Inexpensive to moderate. 2751 E. Broad St., Mansfield; 682-518-6339; [www.oliversfinefoods.com](http://www.oliversfinefoods.com).

### **Mi Tierra**

If you're longing for but can't afford that Caribbean vacation, you can appease yourself with flavors of Puerto Rico and Cuba, as well as those of South America, at this modest charmer near the University of Texas at Arlington. Damaris Torres, an American Airlines alumnus, opened the restaurant inside a restored century-old home last spring to put dishes of her native Puerto Rico and those of her Cuban-born husband on Texas

palates. Tops is the churrasco, a marinated, grilled skirt steak dabbed with the Argentinian herbal sauce called chimichurri, as well as the stuffed mofongo, a bowl of mashed plantains topped with spicy, garlicky beef or shrimp. Look for specials like pumpkin cream soup and paella, and remember to BYOB. Inexpensive to moderate. 603 W. Abram St., Arlington; 817-861-9144.

### **Mochi Kitchen**

A former chef at Reata in Woodland Hills, Calif., and in Fort Worth, Ped Phommavong knows how to feed diners with high expectations. A Laotian native raised in Thailand, Phommavong called on his Asian roots when he was ready to open his own colorful, friendly cafe last spring in Northeast Tarrant, and he applies his diverse background with aplomb when he puts food on your plate. He appeals to the heat-seeking taste buds with his Blazing Noodles, a platter of wide, flat rice noodles that he stir-fries with crunchy carrots, green beans, onion, mushrooms, petite red chiles and beef; and his Fire Cracker, a platter of crisp wonton chips piled with spicy tuna and chopped avocado. Mild but dramatic nevertheless, his volcano chicken is a huge mound of coarsely chopped barbecued chicken with stir-fried onion and bell pepper. In the mood for sushi? He's got more than 100 variations, all freshly crafted while you watch. It's BYOB. Inexpensive to moderate. 4613 Denton Highway, Haltom City; 817-656-7028; [www.mochikitchen.com](http://www.mochikitchen.com).

### **Nonna**

If you've traveled in Italy, you realize that the heavy Italian foods we grew up on here bear little resemblance to the delicate, clean, natural cuisine served there. Chefs like Julian Barsotti at this tiny treasure chest in Highland Park understand what we're missing, and he's on a mission to keep our aching at bay. Naming his bistro for the Italian grandmother who ran a New Jersey restaurant, Barsotti produces delicate dishes, such as an appetizer plate of warm, crisp asparagus crowned with a poached egg and a dusting of fresh Parmesan cheese and an entree like the roasted halibut with sweet plum tomatoes, fennel, capers and olives. From a wood-burning oven comes pizza in the style of Naples, with a lovely, supple thick crust, perhaps topped with clams, sweet onion and myriad fresh herbs. Moderate to expensive. 4115 Lomo Alto Drive, Dallas; 214-521-1800; [www.nonnadallas.com](http://www.nonnadallas.com).

### **Rise No. 1**

Don't you dare scoff at the idea of all souffles, all the time. The notion really works, if left in hands as skilled as those of Hedda Dowd and Cherif Brahmi, owner and chef, respectively, at this North Dallas foodies' magnet. The salon spirit comes in spades, thanks to the decor savvy of Dowd, a dealer in French antiques. The food triumphs can be attributed to Brahmi's Lyon heritage. As close to perfect as possible, the smoked salmon souffle comes topped with a just-browned cloud, as do others, with truffled mushroom, creamed spinach and sun-dried tomato and pesto among choices. Equally winning, the steamed artichoke appetizer provides a pretty prelude, and the hefty beef filet with bearnaise sauce sates the heartier appetite. Choose wines from a thoughtfully prepared list. Moderate to expensive. 5360 W. Lovers Lane, Dallas; 214-366-9900; [www.risesouffle.com](http://www.risesouffle.com).

### **Brix**

Chef-restaurateur Daniele Puleo became a culinary sensation upon opening Daniel Osteria in Dallas in 2004. Last winter, the Sicilian native chose Cowtown for the next place to reveal his stylish cuisine. This time out, it's all about pizza and other goodies from a wood-burning oven, bringing the best sensibilities from Naples and New York to our palates. We were wowed most by the Brooklyn pizza, topped with fresh mozzarella, sliced meatballs, fresh basil and tomato, with a runner-up in the pie topped with prosciutto, shaved parmesan and spinach. Good for sharing, the bruschetta platter gives you various topping combinations – such as gorgonzola and baby artichokes -- on freshly baked, crunchy focaccia. Bring some friends, order some wine, lollygag in a booth for the evening. 2747 S. Hulen St., Fort Worth, 817-924-2749, [www.brixpizzeria.com](http://www.brixpizzeria.com).

### **Winslow's**

There's a funny thing about this immensely attractive wine café that opened on Fort Worth's west side's brick boulevard last summer. It's a wonderful place to hang with friends over some lovely choices in wine, but it can offer some of the more frustrating experiences in town. Yes, the food can be good (we really like the shrimp cocktail with hearts of palm; lobster ravioli; and the Jim Bowie pizza, topped with barbecued chicken, smoky Cheddar and jalapeño), but sometimes getting the nibbles is a challenge. The servers have tended, more often than not, to be either poorly trained or nitwits, and management spends a lot of time making nice after glitches occur. On a busy night, parking can be an issue – particularly if the dismissive parking valet won't offer any help. But if you just want a glass of wine and a cheese board, be brave and go for it. 4101 Camp Bowie Blvd., 817-735-6515; [www.winslowswinecafe.com](http://www.winslowswinecafe.com).

**Not so new, but still hot-hot-hot restaurants**

**Esperanza's:** The new south-side outpost of the Stockyards-area original, this little sister of Joe T. Garcia's does some of the best migas, huevos Mexicana and green enchiladas you're likely to try anywhere, but it's also an outstanding evening option for steak ranchero, grilled snapper, Mexican-style combo dinners and those legendary margaritas. 1601 Park Place Ave., Fort Worth; 817-923-1992.

**Lili's Bistro:** Opened a little more than 18 months ago, this comfortable dining room in the south side's medical district is packed daily at lunch and dinner. Owner-chef Vance Martin puts satisfying food in front of you at a fair price, and everyone's smitten with the joint. Perfect for a business lunch or meeting the parents, it's where you go for waffle fries topped with gorgonzola, excellent tabbouleh salad, King Ranch chicken, and chicken-fried steak. 1310 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth; 817-877-0700; [www.lilisbistro.com](http://www.lilisbistro.com).

**Tokyo Cafe:** With the hiring of chef de cuisine Scott Kaiser from Nobu in Dallas, this west-side standby became a destination for exceptional Japanese food. Sure, you can find an assortment of sushi rolls, but there are inspired creations, ranging from black cod in miso and soup made from the Japanese winter squash (called kabocha) with persimmon crème fraîche to spicy tuna tower and salmon crudo. Check out the blackboard specials, as well as the intriguing wine list, too. 5121 Pershing Ave., Fort Worth; 817-737-8568; [www.thetokyocafe.com](http://www.thetokyocafe.com). (Note: Closed through Jan. 7, 2009, for holiday vacation.)