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Flavor stays on palate from best samplings of '04

So there I was, shelling, chopping, dicing, seasoning and sampling lobster salad and all the other leftovers packed from the Christmas dining adventure, and I started to think about some of the food I've had the pleasure to enjoy this past year.

It started out well-intentioned enough in January, with a trip to Sugar Free Sensations in Montclair (412 Bloomfield Ave., 973-783-3336) so all of us who had over-indulged during last year's holiday season could get a jump start on our resolutions.

There were also lots of healthy options at Mrs. Erb's Good Food (20 First Ave., Denville, 973-627-5440) that just happened to taste delicious. In a really pretty, serene setting, Sara Erb and her two chefs -- Frank Pascale and Marie Robbins turn the concept of health food on its head, cooking up robust and flavorful dishes that could compete in any arena even the tofu dishes are dreamy in the prepared foods section of the store.

Pascale and Robbins cook mostly organic, and they also specialize in wheat-free, gluten-free, sugar-free, low-carb, vegan and vegetarian, so whatever your dietary restriction, you can probably put a meal together that will surprise and satisfy you. Even if your birthday cake needs to be dairy- and wheat-free, they'll bake you up something beautiful.

Of course, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, and all that. But Drew and Rosemary Gabbe – two former Manhattan-based chefs with sterling credentials – have managed to take a tiny storefront in Pine Brook and turn it into an outpost for absolutely gorgeous take-out food.

The Fruited Plain (48 Stiles Lane, Pine Brook, 973-808-8862) gets my vote for the finest food I've eaten all year. From luscious veal osso buco to perfectly curried chicken salad to desserts that'll make you happy to forget any diet you're on these two pros have raised the bar on what a gourmet shop can and should be.

I can still taste the Sicilian chicken and the lemon curd tart I ate there last March, if that gives you any idea of how good the food is. The Gabbes also make dozens of hors d'oeuvres, salads, sauces and side dishes to make tonight's casual dinner or your next formal party memorable.

Speaking of chicken, another outstanding dish just came to mind. At FOGO (145 Bloomfield Ave., Newark, 973-485-1114), Arlette Neves and her daughter, Elaine Santos make terrific barbecued Portuguese chicken not to mention grilled pork chops, ribs, steaks, shrimp and salmon. Everything's homemade from soups to desserts don't miss the rice pudding. Even the French fries are addictive at this attractive, friendly spot where locals congregate and out-of-towners who've come because they've heard about the food sit and chat across tables.

It's an interesting crowd, and now that Santos has opened a coffee house/bakery next door, you can share three meals a day with a mother and daughter duo who make you welcome with warm smiles and very good food.

I was also charmed by Robyn Samra's smile to say nothing of her pickles. At Pickle-Licious (763 River Road, Teaneck, 201-836-7800), an old-fashioned country cottage-cute store, Samra makes about a dozen kinds of pickles in wooden barrels. The more a pickle ages, the more sour

and garlicky it becomes. So stop at the sampling table and find your level before choosing. Then ask her to hand-pack you a pint, a quart or a gallon of your favorite. I made the mistake of going home with only a pint and I've been craving the 3/4 sours ever since, so go for a large container these are the best pickles west of the Lower East Side.

For lovely-to-look-at and delicious Chinese pastries and cakes, try QQ Chinese Bakery Café (1517 Route 46 East, Parsippany, 973-263-9808). It's a tiny place where Chester and Kam Kwok bake dozens of varieties of savory and sweet buns, traditional cookies and stunning layer cakes by hand every day. Come for breakfast, lunch or dessert. For Italian bread, hands down the best this year was at Nicolo's Italian Bakery and Deli (6 Baldwin St., Montclair, 973-746-1398). The Zecchino family has been at it for almost 40 years, and they bake hard crusts, soft crusts, semolinas, ciabattas, panellas, French baguettes, rings and all kinds of rolls; you can't go wrong with any choice.

If you love pizza, you just have to go to De Lorenzo's Tomato Pies in the Chambersburg section of Trenton (530 Hudson St., 609-695-9534). It's simple: this is perfection. Don't look for anything else the family only serves pizza. Period. But when you're done, you'll know that's all that matters. There's another De Lorenzo's they're cousins -- across the 'Burg at 1007 Hamilton Ave. (609-393-2952) that also serves superb pie, so make a day of it and, what the heck, try both.

At Mo'Dish Café (1286 Liberty Ave., Hillside, 908-686-5218), owners Tawan Foy and Danielle White have created a great looking place all Southern hospitality combined with stylish uptown charm. As for the food, the delicious blend of their families' traditional recipes and a few contemporary takes on their own favorite dishes make for a great meal in chic surroundings. Try the chicken fried, smothered or barbecued it's all good. The candied yams are the best, the short ribs melt in your mouth and the oxtails well, if your grandma made them this good, you'd still be down on the farm. Southern desserts are usually too sweet for my taste, but White's banana pudding, pecan rum cake and peach cobbler were worth saving room for.

In the fall, it took me two columns to fit in just some of the great food you'll find in the ever-changing, multicultural culinary scene of Long Branch. From the 50-year-old Nunzio's Pizzeria and Restaurant (230 Westwood Ave., 732-222-9798), where the red sauce starts simmering early in the morning to the tasty Brazilian specialties at Minas Grill (560 Broadway, 732-571-6337), there's something good cooking for every taste.

All in all, it was another very good year for food lovers across the state. Looking forward to sharing more Tastes of New Jersey in 2005. Happy New Year!

"Taste of New Jersey" appears every other week in Savor. Please send news of your favorite finds with your name and telephone numbers to Savor, "Taste of New Jersey," The Star-Ledger, 1 Star-Ledger Plaza, Newark, N.J. 07102. All submissions become the property of The Star-Ledger and will not be returned; submissions may be edited and may be published or otherwise reused in any medium.