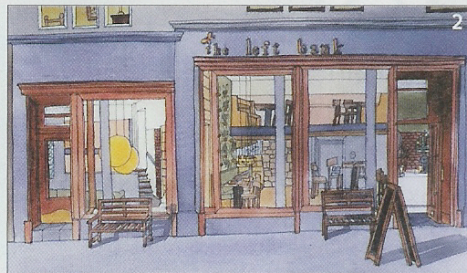
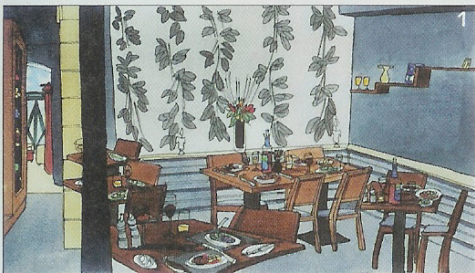


# Joanna Blythman

Originality and dedication to quality have made these restaurants the top five favourites for 2006



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I CAN compose the typical Scottish restaurant menu in my sleep. There will be chicken breast (intensively reared, of course), farmed salmon and farmed sea bass because these proteins are cheap and ubiquitous. There will be tuna (even though it is overfished to the point of extinction) and goat's cheese (as if this was the only cheese you could ever cook with) because lemming-like chefs all copy one another and think these ingredients are trendy.

There will be steak, steak and more steak because (a) even the most ill-trained commis can usually manage to grill it, and (b) it is always a sure-fire hit with the liqueur coffee-swigging, golf clubbing, rotarian businessmen who keep many otherwise doomed establishments afloat.

The places that really grabbed me in 2006 all demonstrated a bit of originality, served up with a dash of flair. By far the boldest and most exciting entry on the Scottish restaurant scene has been **The Kitchin (0131 555 1755) (1)** in Leith. Tom Kitchin deserves a gold medal for electrifying the stuffy, conservative, copycat Edinburgh dining scene. It takes guts, talent and imagination to put on your menu dishes like pig-head meat wrapped in tongue, served with crispy, shredded pig's ears, but I swear this was one of the tastiest

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dishes I ate all year. Kitchin is that rare animal, a chef with the experience and ability to take risks. I hope his highly successful, wholehearted espousal of seasonality inspires others to do the same.

In Glasgow, I have my fingers crossed for **Hotel du Vin (0141 339 2001)** which seems to be doing great things for troublesome One Devonshire Gardens. Paul Tamburrini is an immensely capable chef with sound credentials, but here he has relaxed a little bit, easing the stays of his 'fine dining' corset to great effect. The result is confident, often classic food with meticulous attention to detail, but free from cheffy fussing. His ability to line up flavours that complement one another shines brightly.

**The Linen Room (01387 255689) (4)** in Dumfries was another establishment that shone in 2006. Chef Russell Robertson's eye for the intelligent selection of local and seasonal ingredients is matched by skill and attentiveness in the preparation. The menu is

refreshingly free-thinking and different. As long as Mr Robertson doesn't lose the plot with Heston Blumenthal-esque flights of fancy, then he should go from strength to strength.

In Inverness, Adrian and Susan Pieraccini have opened the swanky **Rocpool Reserve (01463 240089)** and fired it up with an original Italian menu which is more Slow Food than Dolmio. Dishes such as carpaccio, char-grilled ribs of beef with sage and aged balsamic, zabaglione to kill for and silky, home-made pasta make the staid meat/veg/spuds hotel dining that dominates in Scotland look dead in the water.

Over in Oban, **Coast (01631 569900) (3)** has stirred up the local dining scene. The kitchen shows prevailing good judgment and taste, takes care sourcing its raw materials and is careful in their preparation. The originality lies in its sauces and the creative effort it lavishes on vegetable garnishes and accompaniments, such as cauliflower and crunchy green beans in a slightly spicy,

saffron-scented pickle as an accompaniment to fish.

In a more casual setting, **The Left Bank (0141 339 5969) (2)** in Glasgow uses bold, exotic flavours and ingredients – chipotle chillis, Maldivian fish chips, Alfonso mangoes – with confidence and accomplishment. This is an intelligently put together, globe-trotting menu at pleasantly low prices. I have heard several complaints about service, though, a consequence, perhaps, of the Left Bank's sudden popularity.

Back in Edinburgh there are more seductive, pungent flavours to be had at **Mezbaan (0131 229 5578)** the first Indian restaurant in the capital to make a prominent feature of south Indian dishes like idli and dosa. The food in this small, unpretentious restaurant has a home-made savour and freshness to it. Its thali meals (both at lunch and at dinner) represent exceptional value.

Finally, hats off to the plucky little postage stamp that is **The ParLOUR (01382 203588) (5)** in Dundee for breathing life into the stodgy soup'n'cake café scene. This is Scotland's equivalent to Leon, the café/takeaway that has done so well in London. With its superfood salads, its hot flatbreads, its aromatic soups and astonishingly excellent bean burgers, The ParLOUR is healthy, delicious and cheap. What more do you want?