

A Word of Winterlicious Warning

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Photo of Canoe Restaurant by [Sylvain Dumais](#) from the [Torontoist Flickr Pool](#).

Winterlicious, which runs from today until February 12, is like going home with the perfect lover only to find yourself waking up beside a big mistake. For a city that loves its restaurants, the promise of Winterlicious is enticing—an opportunity to taste a classy three-course meal at either a new restaurant or an upscale restaurant that would usually be too expensive. Unfortunately, the taste it leaves behind is often a bad one for both patrons and staff. So why doesn't Winterlicious work the way we'd like? We took a look at the real Winterlicious, what's new for this year, and selected our picks and pans of 2009.



Photo of Chocolate and Raspberry Tartufo at Baladini by

Jen Chan from the Torontoist Flickr Pool.

Ah, Winterlicious. Mention the name to anyone in the food industry and watch the vitriol fly. Restaurant staff—most of them—hate Winterlicious: the two week period of the promotion wreaks havoc on the normal culinary culture. From the kitchen side of things, the sheer volume of visitors necessitates pre-preparation of dishes, creating more work and compromising quality. The lower cost of the prix-fixe menu “deals” forces restaurants to serve smaller portions and use lower grade product in order to meet their budgets. We heard a story about one chef who was so angry when told his restaurant would be taking part in Summerlicious (Winter’s warmer partner) that he punched a hole through the restaurant’s plaster wall.

The Winterlicious experience is mostly miserable for wait staff, too. Restaurant servers perceive Winterlicious patrons as cheap tourists who are ignorant of restaurant etiquette. Customers clutching to the bargain of the meal don’t order drinks and often tip poorly. And again, with the huge volume of Winterlicious patrons, servers find themselves working three times as hard as for customers who show half the appreciation.

No wonder we found a wealth of disappointment when we asked restaurant-goers about their past Winterlicious visits. There’s nothing like sitting down to a pre-heated meal, pre-hated by those who serve it, and the typical experience was one of unappetizing food and bad service. Too often the prix-fixe menu advertised was not what was being offered. Add to that the insult of “upgrades” at extra cost or over-priced drinks, and it’s not surprising that Winterlicious often fails to bring in repeat customers. One diner told Torontoist about a previous favourite: “We were left with a poor impression, and don’t plan to return.” Another avid restaurant-lover declared to us that “my experiences were so bad that I gave up on the whole concept.”

So if the promotion is a failure for both restaurants and diners, what’s the point? One restaurant worker, reaching hard for something positive to say, offered: “I guess it gets people out. It must be good for the TTC.” But then she admitted the bitterness was a little unfair, given that this time of year is typically slow, and at least the two week period of Winterlicious keeps restaurant staff working. Not all the dining experiences were negative either. Newer restaurants seem to try harder to leave a good impression—advice that was offered and panned out for our Winterlicious experience at [Rosebud](#) last year. Another good piece of advice came our way this year: “I often find it easier to go at lunchtime, where you seem to get more attention, and people don’t push the booze as much.”



Photo of salmon entrée (restaurant unknown) by [catekustanczi](#) from the Torontoist Flickr Pool.

In an effort to improve the 'licious experiences for 2009, eligibility criteria for participating restaurants has been [modified](#). All restaurants must now possess a valid green health pass (this new rule disturbs us as it implies that a passing health grade was unnecessary until now). Chains and other multiple-locale restaurants must choose only one participating location. All restaurants must prove that the average price-point—based on the restaurant’s regular menu—meets the festival’s [price categories](#). Finally, the number

of participating restaurants, once deemed eligible, has been capped on a first-come, first-serve basis.

We have some recommendations of our own. This year, Winterlicious patrons should consider ordering a glass of wine with dinner if it's in their budget. If not, at least tip well (the standard is about fifteen percent, after taxes), and appreciate how hard your server is working. If you have a good experience, make a point of going back again on a night when the restaurant can really shine. On that note, here are our picks and pans for Winterlicious 2009, as chosen by our Roxanne Bielskis:

Picks

7 Numbers Danforth (307 Danforth Avenue). A fun and homey atmosphere, amazing Italian dishes, and staff who really care about food. Their Winterlicious menu also has a rare choice of sides for the entrées.

Epic at the Fairmont Royal York (100 Front Street West). Let's face it: the best thing about Winterlicious is going to places you can't usually afford. Bust out your best H&M knockoffs and the shoes you got at Town Shoes on boxing day and get over to Epic. A menu consisting of mostly locally sourced foods and a website bragging that "you'd be lucky to have only five (waiters) catering to your every whim" sounds rawther elegant indeed, non? This is also the first Winterlicious year for Epic, so there's a good chance they will be making an effort.

Horizons Restaurant at the CN Tower (301 Front Street West). When was the last time (not counting the time that your aunt and uncle from Tennessee insisted on taking you) that you actually went to the CN Tower? **Horizons' focus** is on local, regional food that's fresh and in season. It's an extra \$10 bucks for the elevation fee, but that's only around half of what it usually costs.

La Maquette (111 King Street East). Incredible French food and an inspired Winterlicious menu. It's in the highest price category (\$45 for dinner, \$30 for lunch), but worth it.

Paese Ristorante (3827 Bathurst Street). Okay, it's kind of in the middle of nowhere, but the food is well worth it. Even the vegetarian entrée (beet & ricotta cheese frittata braised winter greens & mascarpone polenta), which is usually the weakest of the Winterlicious offerings, looks delicious.

Pans

5th Elementt (1033 Bay Street). While **5th Elementt** is a lovely restaurant and well worth going to, they frequently have specials (including 2 for 1 deals and a regular \$27 prix fixe menu) which are much better deals—and usually better meals—than what they have on offer for Winterlicious.

Fred's Not Here (321 King Street West). This Theatre District restaurant is strictly meh at the best of times, and promises to be more jammed and noisy than usual during Winterlicious. The jumbled, mismatched menu is a pretty good indication of their dilettante-ish approach to food.

Lone Star Texas Grill (200 Front Street West). Why bother going to this salty, heat-lamped chain that feels like Uncle Moe's Family Feedbag come to life (with the addition of obnoxious Texas-themed nicknames, y'all!) on a regular night?

Alice Fazooli's Italian Grill (294 Adelaide Street West). Ditto (sans Texan theme).

Azure Restaurant (225 Front Street West). Reports from last year were of a classy restaurant in a beautifully designed space serving horrific food. There are plenty of wonderful spaces in Toronto where it doesn't cost \$45 for the added bonus of starvation—or worse, nausea.
