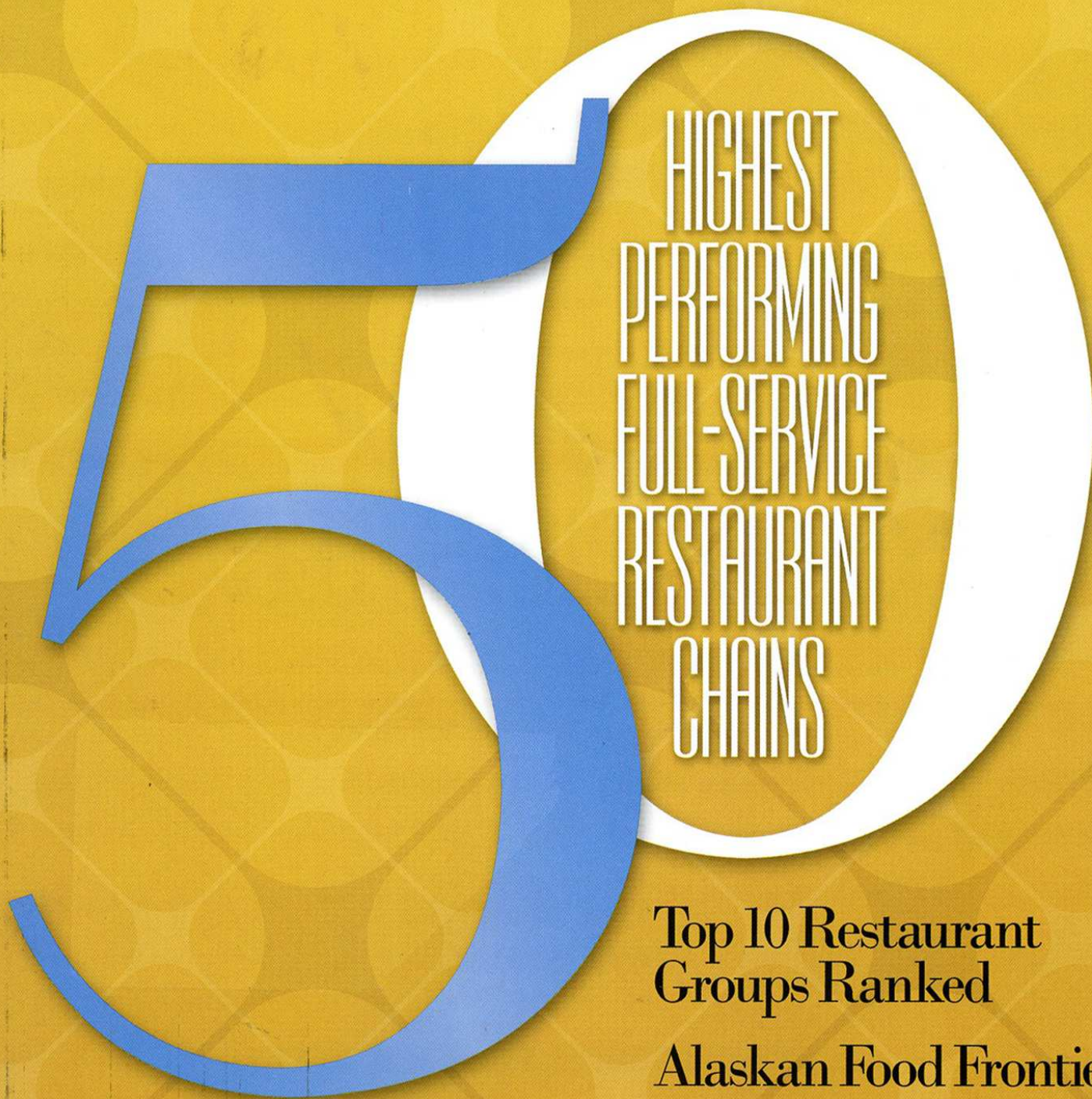


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EXOTIC AND EXCITING COCKTAIL GARNISHES // REPORTING RESTAURANT HEALTH SCORES



CHEF/OWNER DAVID BECKER REPLACED BORING WHITE PLATES WITH HIS OWN COLORFUL HANDIWORK AT SWEET BASIL IN NEEDHAM, MASSACHUSETTS.

Chef Steps Up to the Plate

A daytime hobby of throwing pottery became a part-time job for one chef/owner, who may have accidentally started the art-to-table movement. *By Sonya Chudgar*

In the suburbs of Boston on a typical afternoon, Dave Becker, chef/owner of Sweet Basil in Needham, Massachusetts, is getting down and dirty. Fingernails caked with clay, glaze dripping from his palms, Chef

Becker throws pottery, and his hand-spun dishes have slowly replaced what he calls the “white boring plates” at Sweet Basil. It’s his take on the local-to-table movement—only in this instance, it’s art-to-table

and the local aspect is neighborhood clay.

“It’s been a mild obsession,” he says. “Actually, it’s not so mild; sometimes, it’s pretty nuts.” Pottery, he says, has become his part-

time job, and his passion is evident, from his insistence on reusing glaze that others wash off their hands to his intricate knowledge of the oven-baking technique.

It takes Chef Becker about a month, from start to finish, to make one plate. These days, he makes sets of 20 at a time, so he always has something coming down the pike. His standards are lower for restaurant sets, he admits, than sets he gives to friends. He looks for three things: the footprint matching, so plates stack; the thickness of the plates, so they hold the heat of the food; and the roundness of the lip, so they slide into the dishwasher without breaking at the edges.

"I haven't been blowing the trumpet, as far as the art goes," he admits, adding that he's never considered himself an artist. "I'll just go and make [the pottery]. It looks all haphazard and crazy."

Despite his approach, guests love the styles, and his obsession has developed into a competitive edge for the restaurant. In the beginning, some people specifically asked for white china, but that crowd has tapered off. "It's not so much about making them perfect; it's that they're so obviously hand-crafted," he explains.

The other aspect that goes into Chef Becker's pottery is Massachusetts clay. He uses all recycled clay, material that otherwise would have been thrown out at the studio, and finishes his plates with recycled glaze, which rinses off hands and pottery tools when other potters wash them in the sink.

"It'd be a shame if I was making all this local pottery and the plates are all about local everything, and we're treating our farmers like rock stars, and then it turns out the clay is coming from, say, Missouri," he says. "That would just defeat the whole purpose."