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A mighty trendy year for food

2009's creations range from bacon cupcakes to duck fat fries

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Call 2009 the year of the cupcake.

But it was also the year of bacon. In fact, there was at least one bacon cupcake on sale in Greater Cincinnati this year.

This area also embraced eating locally in a big way. Restaurants got into social networking, cocktails went retro, mobile food trucks hit the road and Julia Child became relevant all over again.

It was a very trendy year.

Oh, and it was a year of flagging sales in a bad economy, and long, hard hours for restaurant owners and other food purveyors, caterers and bakers. So in honor of the late Jim Knippenberg, a dear colleague we lost this year, they all deserve a clapclapclapclap.

And here are some of the best and trendiest things I ate in 2009.

I proclaim the dish of the year Julia Child's beef bourguignonne. So many people mentioned to me they had made it after seeing "Julie and Julia." It is worth adding to your kitchen repertoire, if only because it creates an incredibly enticing aroma.

I can't get enough of farmers markets, and seemingly neither can the region's neighborhoods. I went frequently to the Hyde Park market this summer, where I enjoyed fresh and delicate arugula from Farm Beach Bethel (essential to watermelon-feta salad, an unexpectedly wonderful combination that hit the mainstream this year), Capriole goat cheese and Blue Oven "bad girl" bread. And really, did I eat anything all year that tasted better than a plate of sliced tomatoes from any of the farmers markets I go to? Well, maybe the roma green beans from the tailgate market, or the apples I bought at Turner Farm, or raspberries from Stokes Farm in Wilmington.

Supporting local agriculture didn't just burst on the scene this year, but the movie "Food, Inc." and the growing number of people who've read Michael Pollan put more political energy behind it. Several new

restaurants put their local sourcing front and center: Local 127, Virgil's Bistro and the Green Dog Café, where I loved the vegetarian brown rice bowl with sweet potatoes and spinach. I'm not sure if there's anything especially local about Green Dog's cat-head biscuits, but they are exceptionally good.

Snowville Creamery brought its delicious one-farm, unhomogenized milk and cream to market from Pomeroy in eastern Ohio.



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The fennel salad and a Virgil Cosmo Inferno at Virgil's Bistro in Bellevue.

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Pork never goes out of style: Last year, the fad was pork belly, this year it was bacon used in usually sweet settings: Dojo's Porkopolis gelato at Findlay Market, Sugar's (Milford) pancetta (Italian bacon) cupcake, the amazing foie gras ice cream sandwich topped with bacon at Honey in Northside. Honey does another sweet/savory combo, a pork loin served with crème caramel, that is to die for.

Speaking of animal fats, the crunchy, rich duck fat fries at Covington's Chalk Food + Wine are the best. (Share them.)

The pecan pie brownies from Ann Byrn's book "The Cake Doctor Returns" were the silliest delicious things I had. You buy a brownie mix and a frozen pecan pie. You cut up the pie and mix it in the brownie mix and bake it. It's embarrassingly good.

Food doesn't have to be full of sugar and fat to be good: the yum neua nahm tok, or cold beef salad at Kar-ma Asian Bistro gets its flavor from lime, cilantro, lemongrass, onion and chile.

I had a paella revelation when I tried Paella at Your Place (www.paellaatyourplace.com) at a dinner party, I had a great time meeting good home cooks who let me in to their houses (I'm always looking for more), and I loved my job while trying cocktails like the Fleurs du Mal at the Rookwood Restaurant in Mount Adams. They're made with an eye to craft and tradition. I had a blast at the Chicken Fry-off in Brookville, Ind. Perhaps in 2010 I'll hike the Indiana chicken trail. In the meantime, the Wednesday night fried chicken dinner at Local 127 Downtown is downright down home, if your home includes a talented chef.

Here's a mini-trend: topping things with a fried or poached egg. The burger at Paula's and at Mayberry both have this extra flourish: When you dig in, the egg yolk breaks, creating a sauce. On a more refined, sublime level, there's the deep-fried poached egg on top of a lobster salad at Orchids in the Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza.

Another wonderful fine-dining experience this year was the \$44 three-course menu at the Palace in the Cincinnati Hotel, which included a playful deconstructed Chicken Caesar salad, with sous-vide cooked chicken topped with a white anchovy (itself a newly popular ingredient.)

I may remember 2009 as the year I started tweeting (www.twitter.com/BeingPolly). I meet up with a lot of restaurants out there in the social-media universe, including new mobile food trucks such as Habanero and Burger B Good. They tweet their locations. Now, all we need is a mobile food truck that sells locally sourced bacon cupcakes with a craft cocktail on the side.

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