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## Readers eat their way through The Chronicle's Top 100 restaurants

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March 3 was a dreadful night. The sky - a menacing shade of gray - opened up to unleash torrents of rain, the likes of which the Bay Area hadn't seen all year. But Scott White was not deterred. Come hell, or a lot of water, he was going to dinner at Masa's. It was his final stop on a yearlong quest to hit all of The San Francisco Chronicle's Top 100 Restaurants.

This Sunday, readers from around the bay may embark on similar journeys, as - pens in hand - they rifle through crisp copies of 2009's Top 100 issue of The Chronicle Magazine. Many will tally their totals against the list assembled by executive food and wine editor and restaurant critic Michael Bauer.

For 46-year-old White, it's a call to action. When the 2008 issue came out, "I realized I'd only been to three of these restaurants," says White. "My family said, 'Dude, you've got to go out there and start eating.' "

And so he did - big time.

White booked Redd, Cyrus and the French Laundry, packaging it as a gift for his wife's birthday. Yet White isn't your average big spender.

The San Ramon father of two makes his living as a painting contractor. His diet - prior to the past year, of course - consisted of In-N-Out, Applebee's or meals at home. A fancy dinner? That would be Black Angus.

"Redd was the best food I had ever eaten," White says, adding that things only got better at the next two. "It was shocking to me to experience a multicourse meal with wine pairings. My whole system was on overload."

From there, checking restaurants off his list became an obsession. White gained 25 pounds in 12 weeks, working his way through 50 restaurants, and thought he might have to stop. Then he went on an Alaskan cruise.

"I started to lose the weight, I think, when I hit the buffet. My palate had been altered so much that I literally picked at my food."

His wife stopped accompanying him after about the first 20 meals, so White took friends or, more often, ate solo at the bar, where he would strike up conversations with his neighbors, sharing his tattered copy of the magazine (or bible, as he refers to it), entries from his leather-bound journal and plenty of food.

White speaks of four-star meals at La Folie, vegetarian feasts at Ubuntu and philosophical conversations with local chefs. Some of the best moments, he says, were bonding with his teenage kids at Nopa and Pizzeria Picco.

But for Meredith Cooper, another Top 100 passionista, good restaurants and philosophical chefs are secondary to a little fierce competition.

"A friend of mine was going through the list a few years ago, and she was curious to see how many she had been to," says Cooper. "I counted mine and then a few other friends jumped on board."

They decided to make it a contest, to see who could hit the most restaurants by the time the next magazine came out. The rules are simple: One point for every restaurant visited. Whoever earns the most points gets a meal of her choice at one of the remaining restaurants - in addition to bragging rights.

And they take the competition seriously. Cooper recalls a heated debate over Amber India - she had been to the one in San Jose, but only the Mountain View location was listed in the magazine.

"One of my friends had the nerve to e-mail Michael Bauer to make the decision," says Cooper. The result? No point.

Cooper also says that eating through the Top 100 has made for some good date nights.

"We actually noticed a trend. Whoever happens to be in a new relationship that year tends to win." And, says the Mountain View resident, the competition has dictated the way she has dined for the past three years.

"My parents were in town and I tried to plan everything around the Top 100," she admits. "I said, 'If we're going to dim sum, it has to be at Koi Palace or Yank Sing.'"

Cooper also says she's been inspired to eat at a lot of places she wouldn't go otherwise.

But how, especially in this economy, can diners afford it?

Cooper's crew isn't as concerned with visiting all 100, and she says they try to knock off the cheaper

places first, saving more expensive restaurants for special occasions. White says you have to plan carefully.

He would, he says, eat a lot of Top Ramen and Costco lasagna when he wasn't eating at a Top 100. On restaurant days, he simply wouldn't eat anything beforehand. He also took on a lot of extra painting work to fund the adventure.

In the end, White printed T-shirts with a list of all 100 restaurants and what it took to get there: 382 hours and \$18,420.95.

When the new list comes out Sunday, White will be in New Orleans - he's volunteered there every year since Hurricane Katrina hit, driving out with a truckful of painting supplies to help rebuild houses. This year, he might just check out the local cuisine as well.

But he's prepared to help others take the Top 100 challenge. As the last line on his T-shirt says, "Who's next?"

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