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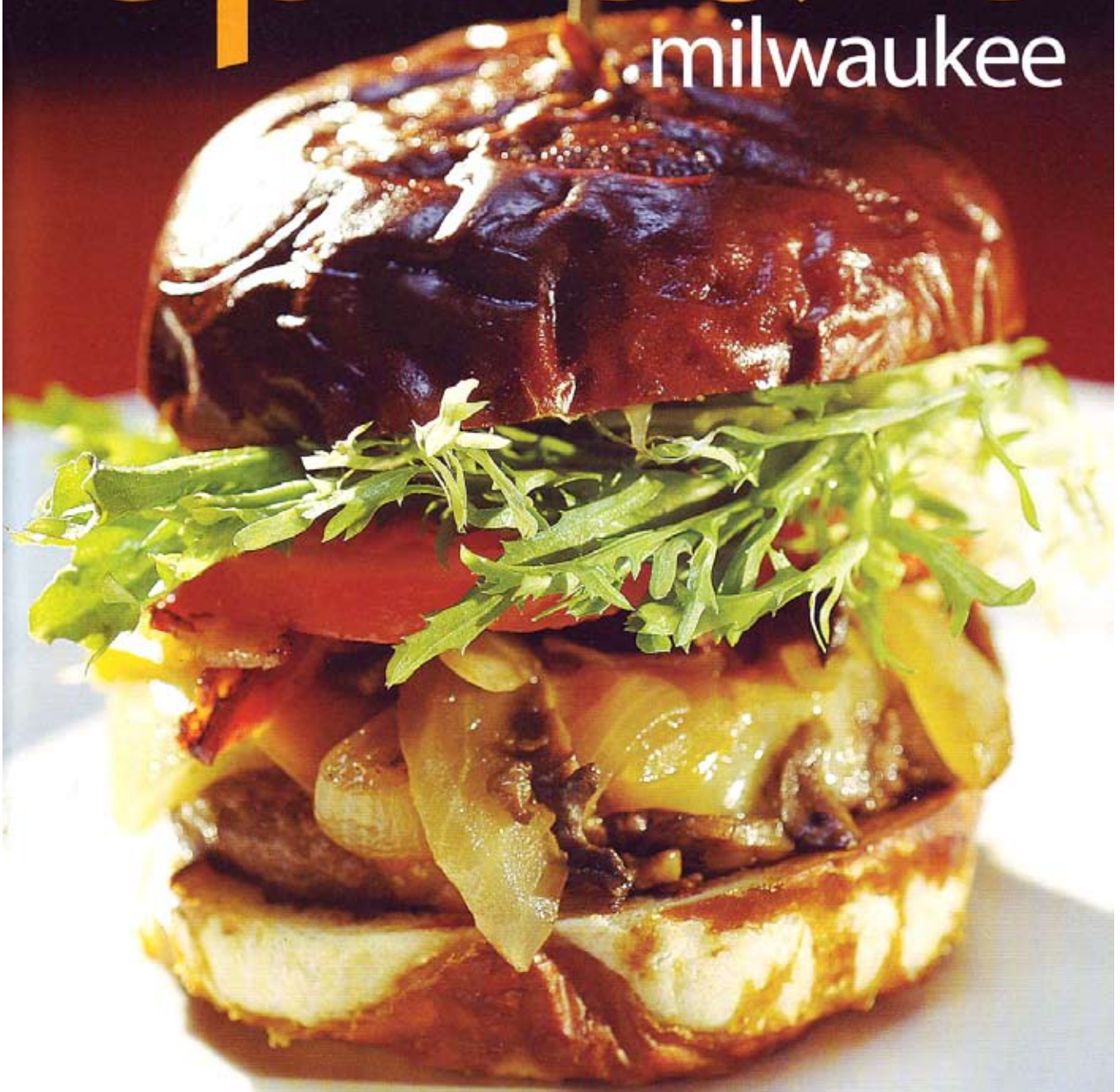
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FOOD WINE DRINK

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The Ultimate Guide to Food+Nightlife from the Publishers of **where**® Milwaukee



Clockwise from left: Seared scallops with wilted spinach and asparagus at Smyth; Branded's signature half-pound prime beef burger; Smyth's grilled veal chop with risotto

Why does **Crazy Water** have so many regulars? Could be the deliciously creative dishes created in the restaurant's teeny open kitchen behind the bar. Watch chef/owner Peggy Magister prepare prime ribeye with chimichurri and ancho chili butter while sampling a glass of wine from the expertly edited list. One bartender says the secret is that "they sprinkle a little magic on everything"; we don't doubt it. 839 S. Second St., 414-645-2606, www.crazywaterrestaurant.com.

It's all about family at Fifth Ward favorite **Marchese's Olive Pit**, whose menu offers items like Cousin Steve's white pizza (cheese, garlic and artichokes) and Big Daddy's antipasto. The warm orange walls are lined with black-and-white family photos, and the back lounge, with its fireplace, leather couches and wedding portraits, is a perfect spot to celebrate an anniversary—or even pop the question. 1100 S. 1st St., 414-384-9555, www.marchesesolivepit.com.

Taking the Fifth

Just south of downtown, the Fifth Ward is fast emerging as Milwaukee's foodie central, with independent eateries from ethnic to good old-fashioned American springing up all over. **MANYA KACZKOWSKI** takes a bite

International tapas destination **La Merenda** was an instant hit when it came on the scene a few years back, and it still is today. The vibe is hip and happening; the menu is ever-evolving and consistently terrific. Try Thai green curry, fried polenta, Jamaican jerk trout, spanakopita and duck confit crepes, all in one sitting (and be sure to arrive early to avoid a long wait). 125 E. National Ave., 414-389-0125, www.lamerenda125.com.

At **Botanas** ("snacks" in Spanish) it's always fiesta time, with painted parrots, torches, trees and Aztec architecture making the place feel like a Mexican garden. Try ceviche, tempiqueña (flat iron steak with cheese enchiladas) or Oaxaca tamales wrapped in banana leaves. Live mariachi bands on Thursdays step up the party vibe. 816 S. 5th St., 414-672-3755, www.botanason5th.com.

You've got three dining options at the trendy, motorcycle-themed Iron

Horse Hotel. How about breakfast in the **Library**, with a blood orange mimosa? At **Branded**, enjoy lunch, cocktails or appetizers (mmm, kobe beef sliders) surrounded by businessmen and leather-clad bikers alike. For dinner, head to the more upscale **Smyth**, whose exposed brick walls and wood beams provide the perfect backdrop for dishes like gin-and-ginger ahi tuna and red wine-braised short ribs. 500 W. Florida St., 414-374-4766, www.theironhorsehotel.com.