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Food and more

Vigorous local spots replace the high-end



John Kessler

When I stopped reviewing restaurants for this newspaper in early 2005, Atlanta was a different dining town. Atlantic Station was still a construction site. Decatur had as many dusty gift shops as cafes. The few restaurants operating in the Old Fourth Ward and West Midtown were called “outposts.” Two of the nation’s 14

restaurants that merited five stars from the Mobil Travel Guide Five Star – Seeger’s and the Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton Buckhead – stood 1.6 miles apart and routinely stole each other’s top talent. Both have closed.

Now that I’ve returned to the dining beat, I’m discovering a new spirit in town. Today’s Atlanta is a city of neighborhoods

Kessler continued on E4

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ing this buzzy, sensible joint anywhere but Decatur. Chef Billy Alin tweaks his blackboard menu daily, and it's as fine a barometer of the town's food mood as anything.

★ Chef Kevin Gillespie, likewise, has a flawless sense of what it means to dine in Atlanta. A Henry County native and Atlanta Institute of Art culinary graduate, Gillespie assumed the helm at Woodfire Grill last year and quietly excised former chef/owner Michael Touhy's California wine country menu and replaced it with a remarkable and refined vision of fine Georgian cooking. Gillespie (currently the front-runner on Bravo TV's "Top Chef: Las Vegas") has done the near impossible: He has given this iconic restaurant a successful heart transplant.

In the same spirit, Holeman & Finch Public House has glommed onto several national trends (cocktail culture, house *charcuterie* programs, the so-called "gastropub" movement) and woven them into something that breathes the flavor of Atlanta. It also does a canny job of telling the story of Southern food, both in terms of its agrarian roots and its British parentage.

Speaking of Southern food, is anyone getting a little sick of hearing the phrase "Southern farm-to-table"? This may be an

admirable mission statement, but too many restaurants apply it like a decorating theme. Would that a few more take the need to express regional tastes and use local ingredients as a given rather than a conceit.

Still, I'd take today's middlin' Southern farm-to-table restaurants over last decade's middlin' Asian-fusion restaurants any day. And I am thrilled that the genre has facilitated such an amazing explosion of thoughtful mid-range options. I barely know the Shed, Dogwood, Rosebud, Waterhaven, Relish and others that have come on board, but I can't wait to begin my explorations.

Another major change is generational. It seems that a new culture of diners in their 20s and 30s are making their mark on the city's tastes. This is great news, I think, because these people are breathing life and energy into every corner of the metro area. They get that unquantifiable thing called "vibe" in places like Top Flr, Leon's Full Service and Social.

Today's younger dining set may not always have a lot of money to spend, but they want to experience the same rapture from a \$4 hamburger that they would from the tasting menu at Bacchanalia. They are all over the burgers at Flip, and then they are all over the burgers at Grindhouse.

Burgers, pizza, fried chicken: it's all worthy of food obsession. Perhaps this is the best kind of food obsession.

Atlanta is starting to get a little of the spirit of downtown New York, where chefs and restaurateurs open holes in the wall, make one thing really well and earn eternal fealty from the food crowd. This thrills me to no end. We are finally supporting our crackpot geniuses. I think of Kamal Grant, the doughnut maestro of Sublime Doughnuts, and Giovanni di Palma, who runs a daily pizza rave at Antico Pizza Napoletana. Jeff Varasano at Varasano's Pizzeria is a whole other kind of pizza obsessive. I'm still waiting for the falafel freak to set up shop.

Folks who remember me from my restaurant reviewing days know that exploring world cuisines is my passion. In other words, it was kind of hard to get me off Buford Highway.

For this go-round, I have a feeling I'll be spending a lot more time in Gwinnett County, where a huge influx of immigrants has made it into a chow-hound's paradise. In particular, the Korean dining scene has gone through the roof, with such options as Honey Pig for barbecued pork belly and Bonjuk for perfect bowls of rice porridge. International dining remains our city's great calling card.

