

# Kevin Gillespie fires up Woodfire Grill

'Top Chef' finalist comes into his own

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SWEETBREADS: A beautifully cooked dish at Woodfire Grill

## ***Woodfire Grill***

**4 out of 5 stars.** 1782 Cheshire Bridge Road. 404-347-9055. [www.woodfiregrill.com](http://www.woodfiregrill.com). Tues.-Thurs., 5:30-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-11 p.m. Full bar. Valet parking.

On a random Tuesday evening, Woodfire Grill's foyer is packed with people. The hostess is trying to deal with the waves of customers entering the space between the bar and the door to the dining room. With a tight but professional smile, she explains, "We are totally booked until 9:30. I already have three couples waiting for a spot at the bar."

It's a vastly different scene from this time last year, when I **originally reviewed the restaurant** under its new ownership. Back then, like many high-end restaurants in town, Woodfire had an almost somber feel to its dining room, which was sparsely seated. The newfound bustle is the result of many things, most obviously the power of television. Chef/owner Kevin Gillespie's star run on Bravo's "Top Chef" has elevated him to celebrity status, and there's no doubt many of the diners crowding the restaurant are here to breathe in that whiff of fame. But the show's success doesn't exist in a vacuum; Gillespie's done so well this season because he's incredibly talented. Which is the other reason so many diners are now packing the tables – in one short year, this young chef has come into his own.

In my original review, I commented on how well Gillespie was continuing the tradition of original owner Michael Tuohy's vision – high-end California cuisine using immaculate, often local, ingredients. But I wished Gillespie would branch out and find his own style. I sensed an undercurrent of talent

capable of greater things than executing another chef's concept, no matter how flawlessly. Since then, he's taken the menu in a decidedly more Southern direction, and put his own spin on the pristine ingredients.

That spin is what makes Gillespie's cooking stand out. If his food looks simple on TV, that's because it almost always is. But what you can't taste through the tube is the extra touch Gillespie adds to bring it full circle. Where other chefs would stop working on a perfectly good dish, or ramp up the plate with gimmickry, Gillespie takes the extra step in *flavor*. A beautifully cooked, perfectly seasoned sweetbread (crispy on the outside, creamy in the center) sits over flame-colored sweet potato and woodsy chanterelle mushrooms. Sound good? It would be, but the addition of lemon zest – unexpected, piquant, balancing the richness of other ingredients – etches it into my permanent taste memory and creates something exponentially better than the sum of its parts.

Three filleted quail sit primly in a circle, their skins crackly with salt and pepper. Underneath them, a jumble of creamed Brussels sprouts and sunchokes are at once fresh, musky, autumnal and comforting. By the time you get to the unexpected sweetness of pear, nestled deeper on the plate, it feels as though the dish is too good to be true.

The twist, the unexpected touch, reigns here. Crunchy radishes and pistachio sauce on a scallop appetizer offer earthy crunch and vegetal foil to the scallop's rich flesh, but the pronounced fennel pollen coating the seared surface sends the dish stratospheric. Duck breast over black-eyed peas marries bacon with turnip greens for total taste harmony, but the shot of intense parsley and other fresh herbs keeps your attention well beyond those first few bites.

None of these dishes would work so well if the basics weren't done exactly right – the ginger-tomato emulsion under roasted okra and sturgeon is a neon glory of a sauce, but the delicate, perfectly cooked white-fleshed fish remains the star.

Gillespie rarely gets hyper-inventive, but he doesn't need to. His simple, deep understanding of salt and acid puts him at an advantage over many, many chefs. The penchant for putting this understanding to use with beautiful ingredients and in thoughtful presentations makes for some of the most gratifying high-end food in town.

The bustle at Woodfire Grill suits the place. The banquettes, with their piles of cushions and the comfortable, low, blond wood booths, are generously spaced out, so that even at full capacity the restaurant feels like a warm gathering. Service ranges widely depending on your server – waiters find and go with their own style here. There's a bit too much of the ubiquitous "have you dined with us before ... let me explain our menu to you" exaltation, but that's practically inescapable these days. And the passionate wine service provided by sommelier and co-owner Nicolas Quinones makes the varied and affordable list even more pleasurable.

As a chef, Gillespie is the most appealing kind of celebrity. His talent is buoyed by a humble spirit, a genuine sense of gratitude, and a Southern boy's humor and pranksterdom. I believe Gillespie deserves to win "Top Chef," but if he doesn't win fan favorite, I'll eat my foot. More importantly, his success appears to have done nothing to alter his sense of what it means to be a cook. Every time I've eaten at Woodfire recently, Gillespie has been right there in the open kitchen, avoiding the preening saunter around the dining room to bask in customer adoration, choosing instead to do his job. Occasionally, he'll step away from the line to talk to a guest or grant a request for a photo, but this guy is still a working chef above all else.

Last year, I hoped the new owners and chef could remake themselves, and evolve into the "next generation of local food champions." Woodfire Grill, and Gillespie in particular, have done more than that – they've given our city an original, comfortable, personable destination that stands on its own as one of our best, regardless of history or hype.

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