

knife & fork

The Insider's Guide to Atlanta Restaurants

Food



Recommended

Creature Comforts



Cost

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UPDATE

Woodfire Grill ★★★××

1782 Cheshire Bridge Rd. 404-347-9055
Reviewed Mar '03, Rated ★★★××

Journalists in general (and food critics in particular) aren't supposed to bring their expectations to the table. Let us admit that we were mildly skeptical when, as a result of a tip by a trusted reader, we went back to a restaurant whose ups and downs culminated in the chef-owner, Michael Tuohy, moving to Sacramento and selling the business to young folks (Nicolas Quinones and Bernard Moussa, both front of the house at **Loca Luna**) whose pedigree seemed fairly insignificant. The kitchen story--former sous-chef promoted to top guy behind the stove--is one that rarely holds special magic. Add the fact that we have never liked the building and you can imagine that we were mentally prepared to write off **Woodfire Grill**.

Chef Kevin Gillespie, all of twenty-six and climbing out of obscurity, is, to put it mildly, a promising rising star. And while the dining room recently stripped of its Mediterranean frippery may not collect many cool points, everything about the new **Woodfire Grill** feels fresh and hopeful. The wine program is still wonderful, with an abundance of tasty matches for a menu that changes every day and feels infinitely more local and less Californian.

Look to the bar menu for special treats such as a delightful presentation of fried oyster pakora loosely mounded over a chickpea and yogurt purée with masala-spiced olive relish. Switch to the main list to find "petite kohlrabi farci" stuffed with winter vegetables and garnished with a cream of local broccoli and a mushroom rice fritter or perfectly pan-sautéed sweetbreads with slightly bitter greens, deeply-orange seven-minute egg, caramelized pears, and mustard vinaigrette.

The chef has a light hand with complex flavors, using just a touch of harissa oil to add

intrigue to a wood-grilled Berkshire pork loin with braised chickpeas and pork confit bedded on a delicate salad of shaved fennel, olive, and radicchio. His style pays as much attention to vegetables (soft-cooked lettuce, local greens in smoky broth, Meyer lemon-glazed parsnips, hedgehog mushrooms, roasted cauliflower) as it does to the protein on the plate.

Our second meal (creamy potato and apple soup with cider gastrique and smoked paprika; amazing diver scallops; local lettuce salad; wood-grilled heritage chicken with roasted turnips and duck jus; a nice whisky cocktail and a glass of Borsao) confirmed our first impression of Gillespie's rustic, relaxed style. We didn't taste his groovy Painted Hills natural beef burger with Benton's country ham and Amish cheese, but if it tastes half as good as it looks, we can understand why customers all around made joyful noises in between rapturous bites.

A skillet apple cake with naughty cream (equal parts custard and whipped cream) and wonderful breads made in-house enhance the experience of a restaurant that has found a fresh new groove. The front rooms (a bar, a community table, window seats) are perfect for a spur-of-the-moment gathering with friends around a plate of artisanal cheese or an inspired pizza ■

