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MURDER CASE REDUX ]

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# DINING OUT

EDITED BY JENNIFER M. GREEN



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RATHBUN'S

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LUSH  
FIRST CHINA  
ZOCALO II  
MAD ABOUT MISO

Mini chocolate cube with Mexican  
chocolate mousse at Rathbun's

U N D E R R E V I E W

# ON HIS OWN

CHEF KEVIN RATHBUN'S INMAN  
PARK RESTAURANT HAS TAKEN THE  
NEIGHBORHOOD BY STORM.

BY CHRISTIANE LAUTERBACH



CROSSING PONCE DE LEON Avenue may not be as momentous an event as fording the Potomac River or fleeing the Upper East Side of Manhattan for the nether regions below Delancey, but when a chef of Kevin Rathbun's stature decides to leave Buckhead behind, proponents of scruffier intown environs

know they have scored a big victory.

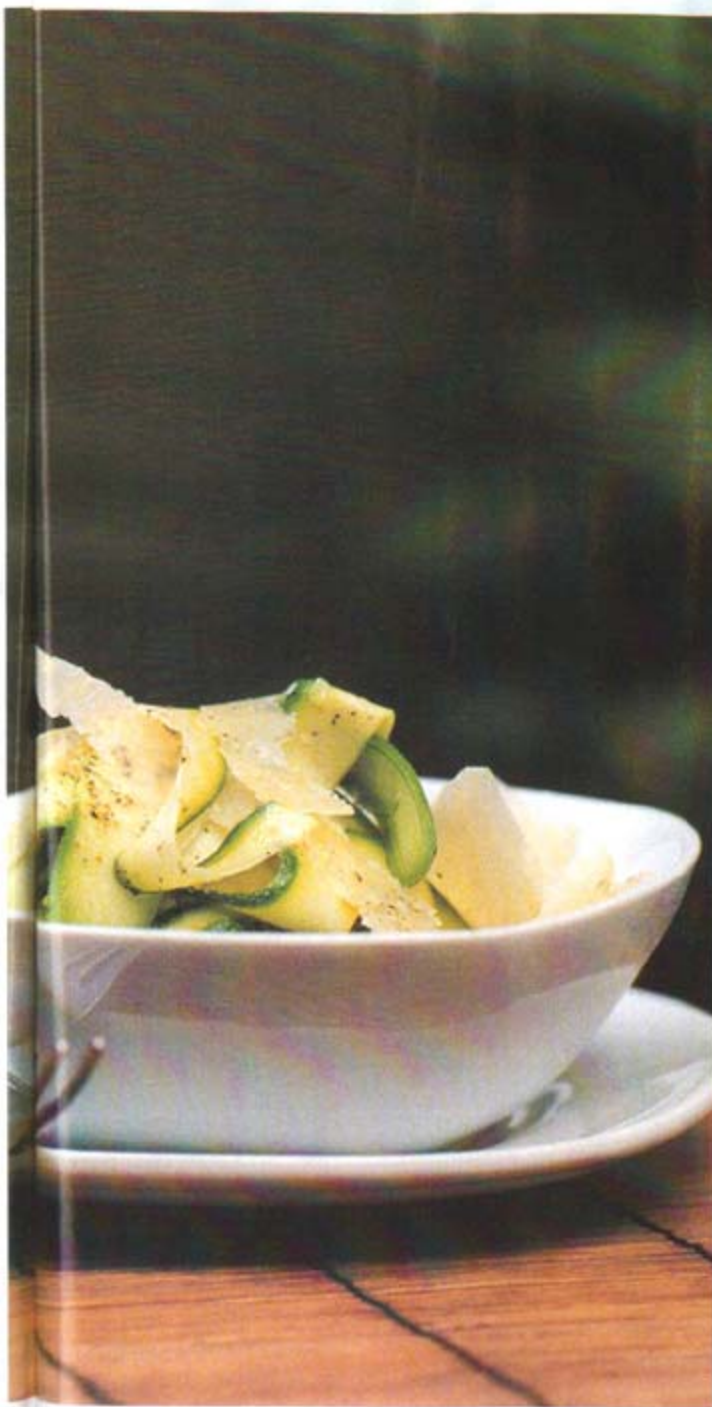
Rathbun's fans, colleagues, suppliers and new neighbors flocked to his new eponymous restaurant at the edge of Inman Park. Within days, the word went out that the place was "real together." The elements for success are all there: a chef who loves to experiment, a huge list of interesting dishes, an exciting wine list with plenty of boutique options, a manager and a pastry chef who have worked with him before, waiters with seniority, a devoted wife who keeps the books and works the door, eye-catching decor, a fun location the uptowners can find without too much trouble, plenty of parking and, amazingly

## LOCAL STAR

Chef Kevin Rathbun, below left, often uses Georgia-grown produce, such as this South Georgia shaved zucchini with Parmesan Reggiano and lemon verbena.







PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZATMON



## CRITIC'S CHOICE

### SMALL PLATE

Prince Edward Island mussels on thick sourdough toast drenched in Vermont sweet butter with golden chives

### RAW PLATE

Italian-style ahi tuna crudo with confetti of citrus and serranos and a gloss of cold-pressed olive oil for fans of sashimi; shaved zucchini with Parmesan Reggiano and lemon verbena for vegetable lovers.

### SOUP

There is no turtle in the mock turtle soup with Dry Sack sherry, but you'll find plenty of other tastes in this classic American soup.

### ENTREE

The Maine lobster and roasted green chile soft taco is what the menu calls a "second mortgage plate." You'll call it a creamy, delicious indulgence.

### DESSERT

Why choose just one when you can have Pastry Chef Kirk Parks make you a sampler for a mere \$10!

Sea scallop Benedict on country ham grits with asparagus and spiced hollandaise



CHEF RATHBUN LOVES SLOW, RICH FOOD SUCH AS A COMFORTING BRAISED BRISKET IN SMOKED TOMATO WITH POBLANO QUESADILLAS AND A SUPERB MOCK TURTLE SOUP WITH DRY SACK SHERRY.



enough considering all of the above, an utter lack of pretension.

Ever since he showed up in Atlanta, fresh from a career that took him from Kansas City to New Orleans to Dallas, he has attracted attention by virtue of being 6 feet, 6 inches tall and 295 pounds, not to mention a chef with real culinary muscles. It took him more than a decade to leave what he calls "the corporate monster"—his Buckhead Life Restaurant Group stints included being head honcho at Nava and Buckhead Diner—and what others may have envied as an especially gilded cage. Being respected as an entrepreneur brings him tons of satisfaction.

A lot of ambitious cooking goes on in the comparatively small kitchen. The chef makes his own fabulously tender mozzarella (called "Krog Street Moz-

zarella" and served with ripe tomatoes and torn basil). He uses his mother-in-law's recipe for eggplant fries dusted with confectioners' sugar. He works with local produce, such as squeaky fresh okra paired with shrimp and spiced tomatoes and rich butter beans bought at the State Farmers' Market in Forest Park meeting chunks of bacon around a special of wolf fish. He loves slow, rich food such as a comforting braised brisket in smoked tomato with poblano quesadillas and a superb mock turtle soup with Dry Sack sherry.

It isn't without reason that he deems his cuisine "modern American with melting pot flavors." Thai rare beef with kaffir lime salad; stem-on grilled artichokes with first press olive oil; sambal-tossed calamari with pea shoots,

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hamachi and tuna crudo (Italian sashimi) with individual garnishes; rosemary-grilled flat-iron steak with heart of palm, arugula and lemon oil and more reflect an eclectic personal taste.

Rathbun's food isn't particularly vegetarian-friendly. On the other hand, the low-carb crowd can follow its diet to the letter in dishes where butter, cream and rich animal protein rule the plate. Instead of using pasta, the chef makes carbonara with white cabbage and pancetta. The pan-roasted cod comes with a shrimp and mirliton squash ragout, the yellowfin tuna is paired with Japanese eggplant and wonderful Japanese-style soy manufactured by a local entrepreneur, and of the five steaks on the menu, four come without a trace of carbohydrate. One of my favorites among the small plates, the lamb scaloppini with pancetta and Sweet Grass Dairy goat cheese, easily doubles as a light entree.

While most of his dishes are a hit, no amount of brown butter was able to redeem the soupy cauliflower mash I had so looked forward to, and I wasn't happy with my blackened-to-death swordfish appetizer with pickled garlic, either. The jumbo lump crab cake feels too much like a big fritter, and the ricotta and Swiss chard tortelloni with Point Reyes cheese fondue is too rich. But overall, I like how the chef power-cooks his way through a huge number of interesting recipes of his choosing, even if he doesn't get a perfect score.

When Rathbun left Dallas, where he was a nominee for Best Rising Chef by the James Beard Foundation, he brought his pastry chef and friend, Kirk Parks, along to Atlanta to work with him at Nava. While Rathbun has reinvented himself and integrated all aspects of his previous career into a modern format in his restaurant, Parks, wonderful as he is, feels slightly behind in his thinking.

Raspberries and sweet cream in an almond cookie basket is an idea whose time has passed. Ditto the sesame cookie lid on the ice cream. There is nothing



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old-fashioned about the sugar-free lemon panna cotta with local blueberries, but there is nothing terribly magical about it either. Parks' mini chocolate cube with Mexican chocolate mousse and his tiny, swirly banana peanut butter cream pie are simply adorable, though, showing that he can do stylish and lighthearted and hit a sweet note.

The design by the Johnson Studio mitigates the industrial feel of the loft space in a former stove factory with dramatic lighting. The kitchen has a huge opening through which chef and staff emerge at regular intervals as if entering an arena. But if you don't like noise, you will be driven mad by the dining room, where banquettes and curtains prove ineffective at softening the acoustics.

The best thing about Rathbun's may be the no-pressure atmosphere. One can dine on small plates, split entrees, sit on the patio and get the essence of a restaurant whose booming chef/proprietor meets the future square on. **O**

### MATTER OF FACTS

<b>CUISINE</b>	Modern American with mulling pot flavor.
<b>CAPACITY</b>	180 seats, patio and bar included.
<b>SETTING</b>	Historic loft meets modern design.
<b>SERVICE</b>	Driven by professionalism.
<b>OWNER</b>	Kevin Rathbun
<b>CHEF</b>	Kevin Rathbun
<b>PRICES</b>	From \$6 small plates to \$30 "second mortgage" entrees.
<b>HANDICAPPED ACCESS</b>	Yes
<b>RESERVATIONS</b>	Strongly recommended.
<b>CREDIT CARDS</b>	All major.
<b>HOURS</b>	Dinner Mon.-Thurs. 5 p.m. - 11 p.m.; Fri. & Sat. 5 p.m. - midnight
<b>DRESS</b>	Nice casual.
<b>NOISE LEVEL</b>	High in the dining room, lower on the patio.
<b>HANDICAPPED ACCESS</b>	Convenient parking, broad ramp, large restrooms.
<b>SMOKING</b>	At the bar and on the "cigar- friendly" patio.
<b>PARKING</b>	Valet service
<b>ADDRESS</b>	112 Krog St., in the Stove Works loft complex
<b>PHONE</b>	404-524-8280