



KROG BAR 112 Krog St., Atlanta — **NOT RATED**

Intimate portrait

SMALL PLATES AT WINE BAR ARE NO BIG DEAL, BUT THEY CAN BE COZY

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THEY'RE SO NOT using the "T" word at Krog Bar.

Sure, this tiny Inman Park watering hole serves mostly Spanish bar food on small plates. And not just any small plates, mind you, but cazuelas — those iconic ashtray-sized vessels used to serve Spain's iconic bites. But "tapas" — ick. It's one of those words we now hate, like metrosexual and gravitas. Tapas are just so ... so shopping malls, boom-boom music, ahi tuna and nasty pink martinis these days. A thousand times ick. Who wants them?

So the owners of Krog Bar (Kevin and Melissa Rathbun, Kirk Parks and Cliff Bramble — the same folks behind Rathbun's, right across the parking lot) have chosen to position their new venture as a wine bar. They pour more than 50 wines by the glass and offer "Mediterranean small plates," most of which are cold. The food is well sourced and decidedly artless. It's meat on a plate. Hard cheese with bread. A tangle of white anchovies in a cazuela.

All told, this is nice stuff but no big deal. Yet, as such, it gets closer to the spirit of a Spanish tapas bar than any other smallplateseteria in town. Perfect if you want some ballast in your stomach with a glass or two of wine, but a bit on the dull side if you're thinking of turning these snacks into dinner.

Rathbun got the idea for Krog Bar after visiting Bar Jamon, a downtown New York shoebox built to handle the overflow from its sister restaurant, Casa Mono. He had his own overflow problem at Rathbun's as well as a burgeoning infill neighborhood in need of casual drinking/dining options. When the front office space at the Stove Works complex opened up, his team leapt on it.



Rathbun et al. deserve major props for thinking small. Where else in this city do you find a *750-square-foot* restaurant space? It's like an IKEA project — or perhaps a funky packing crate — with its pecky cypress panelling, amber lights and squeeze-tight counter seating for 35. Look up to the storage loft over the restroom, and you'll see the source of the music: an iPod.

Downtown and intimate, this is a space that says, "Buck off, Buckhead." On these supra-Indian-summer nights of November, Krog Bar opens to a bricked-in patio with seating for 25. Go early to catch the late-afternoon rays and let manager Erin Stone, a wine goddess in training, discuss libation. She seems to have the entire wine list committed to sense memory, and she always offers you a sample.

The wine list is Spanish, Italian and French — filled with unusual labels that beg a taste before you buy. The easy sell is the steel-edged Mont Marçal rosé cava. A glass of this sparkling wine with a plate of hand-carved serrano ham is good for whatever ails you.

But I'm happier to find floral Spanish whites such as the jasmine-scented Gramona Gessami and the Morgadio Albariño — a great example of that varietal. Among the reds, the Castell del Remei Gotim Bru and the Clavador Tinta Fina both have the fruit, structure and suggestion of tobacco that mark today's best value-priced Tempranillo-based Spanish wines. Anything missing? A couple more dry sherries would be welcome.



Start with the wine, then see what you want to eat.

The Spanish/Italian menu offers simple cold cuts and cheeses, a few antipasti and crustless finger sandwiches on white bread called tramezzini. The latter seem a little different from the tea sandwiches I used to eat with my mother in the Bird Cage at Lord & Taylor, except they now contain full-throttle chorizo rather than watery cucumbers. They're a little silly if you think about them, easy to pop-pop-pop in your mouth if you don't.

I love the little tub of chicken liver pâté (really a loose, creamy mousse) topped with cava gelée. It's livery in

all the good ways right down to the bitter finish that plays so well against the sweet, clear gel on top. Add a hunk of warm baguette, and you're in organ-meat heaven. I'm also partial to the baby artichokes, which are grilled and marinated in a lime-mint vinaigrette. But mostly, I find the more this place tries to cook, the less interest I have in the food. There's a fancy tuna salad made with imported Bonita tuna and colorful, pickly bits. It's pretty to look at but sharp with vinegar and drying on the tongue. Yellowtail "crudo" with piquillo peppers and sherry vinaigrette seemed like it might have been happier with soy sauce and wasabi.

I don't want food that invites me to look at it appraisingly in this kind of tap-.... er, wine bar. It's much better to focus on drinks and conversation and pick at Krog Bar's lomo (delicious paprika-cured pork loin) and mojama (intense, papery curls of salt-cured tuna) with my fingers.

Even though I'm not looking for a meal here, I can't resist Parks' desserts — especially the mini cones topped with creamy, true-flavored pistachio and passion fruit gelatos. Catch this: They're 75 cents apiece.

You, on the other hand, may come to dine. You'll read this article, drive into the fortress-like Stove Works complex, give your car to the valet, wedge into a seat and eat half the menu. You'll try some good food but end up waddling out with a belly full of meat and bread, wishing for more — another hot item, perhaps a salad or just some pizzazz.



I'll tell you this: The best time I had at Krog Bar was on the day I happened to be biking by with a friend. We parked our sweaty selves on the patio, pulled some crumpled dollars out of our bike jerseys and discovered we had just enough for two beers apiece and a plate of serrano ham.

The weather was great, the beers icy, and when we stopped to notice it, the ham excellent.