

Spanish lullaby

Krog Bar opens, plus trips to Ricebox and Eclipse di Sol

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I confess to a lifelong and immediate suspicion of anything that garners a lot of praise very quickly. Thus, when chef Kevin Rathbun's eponymous restaurant received almost unprecedentedly rapturous praise from every critic in town in 2004, I felt almost compelled to retract my own compliments.



But, truth be known, I can't find anything bad to say about it. Well, someone did tell me recently that they were scared to drive to the restaurant's Krog Street location in the Atlanta Stove Works complex. "It's all those rundown buildings and all that graffiti all over everything," he whined. I can't share that complaint. The restaurant - between Inman Park and Cabbagetown - is not much more than a mile from my own scary home in Grant Park, and I love the graffiti that decorates the Krog Street tunnel connecting the 'hoods.

Now, Rathbun and partners Kirk Parks and Cliff Bramble have opened Krog Bar (112 Krog St., 404-524-1618) in a tiny building in the parking lot of the Stove Works complex. The building, most recently the home of Liz Lapidus Public Relations, has been remodeled by - who else? - the Johnson Studio. I have the same distrust of that firm, the city's premier restaurant designers, but I likewise can't deny the

genius of the new project.

The "Mediterranean-style bar" features wines from Italy and Spain, along with small plates. I have had a years-long love of Spain and I have to tell you, the Johnson Studio has created the closest thing to a genuine tapas bar's ambiance that I've seen in our city. The interior is tiny and you'll likely be forced, just as you are in my favorite tapas bar in Sevilla, to sit at long tables with strangers. A windowed wall keeps the place from feeling claustrophobic. Instead, amber lighting and the millwork by Georgia Cabinet and Supply, completely lined with bottles of wine, create a cozy, almost fire-lit feeling. The only thing missing is Serrano hams hanging from the ceiling.

Rathbun has definitely done his homework. The website (www.krogbar.com) includes a good description of the general way Serrano ham is classified in Spain, although it does not communicate the fanatical descriptions of true connoisseurs. At my favorite cafe in Sevilla, Casa Salva, the owner used to rush freshly sliced ham to my table and wax poetically about its origins. He would tell me in which province the hogs had been raised, their diet, how much exercise they got, on which side of what mountain their flesh had been cured - endless detail that only terminated when I exploded into laughter.

While Wayne sipped Spanish wines, I concentrated on the food. The menu changes daily. If you're here to make a meal, you'll definitely want to order the assortment of cured Italian and Spanish meats, all freshly sliced. Besides the artisan Serrano ham from Redondo Iglesias (from long-legged, free-range hogs, if you please), there was prosciutto, chorizo, lomo, salami, bresaola, soppressata and mojama - tuna cured in sea salt during our visit.

We also sampled a do-it-yourself version of bruschetta. A daily topping is made to heap on warm slices of baguettes from the Bread Garden. The blend during our visit was tuna, artichokes and sun-dried tomatoes. A chicken liver p+ôté was lightly redolent of truffle oil and

its earthy flavor contrasted well with tart white anchovy filets (boquerones). There's also a menu of Italian and Spanish cheeses, including an excellent Manchego. Also offered are little crustless sandwich nibbles called tramezzini. I preferred the prosciutto with roasted peppers over the one made with creamy Spanish tetilla cheese from Galicia and pesto.

Among the desserts, we were happy to find little slices of toast topped with dark chocolate and sea salt. Gelatos - fig and pistachio - were smooth and intense.

What else? The service is killer. Our server, Jason, Waitron of the Week, was funny and charming. Rathbun himself was present the night of our visit, infectiously ebullient, pouring a sparkling Spanish wine from a glass contraption directly into diners' mouths.

Undoubtedly the place is going to be a hit - it's inexpensive, by the way - but I have no idea how it's going to accommodate people. For the time being, a patio will absorb spillover. But come winter, it's going to be a battle for a seat.

Here and there

If you're in the mood to replay your kiddy years, head to Ricebox (931 Monroe Drive, 404-685-8655) to eat vaguely Chinese-American food you thought had disappeared even from mainstream restaurants. Located in Midtown Promenade, a boot's throw from country-western dance palace Hoedowns, the small cafe features a terra cotta and orange decor heavy on light wood.

I stopped by alone recently for lunch, ordering shrimp with mixed veggies. The \$6.99 lunch plate came with a spring roll and side of my choice. I picked chicken fried rice instead of veggie lo mein or white rice.

The shrimp, at least eight big, fat ones, were wok-cooked until al dente - perfect - and then ruined by being tossed in an oily brown sauce that gave them a gruesomely slick surface. The sauce was less obtrusive with the crisp broccoli and snow peas. The blazing-hot spring roll was typically bland and the rice was the culinary equivalent of sawdust.

Maybe I've been spoiled by Buford Highway, but I didn't know people were still eating this kind of thing. ...

I dined a recent Sunday evening at Eclipse di Sol (640 N. Highland Ave., 404-724-0711) with my friend Jeff Boyle. It was my first visit since the restaurant opened earlier this year. A lamb sandwich with basil-mint vinaigrette, arugula and cucumbers was great with some not-so-spicy potatoes. You might want to skip the spuds and order the mac and cheese, made with a substantially sharp cheese, if you're really after piquancy.

I thought Jeff's chicken salad sandwich, made with a bit of bacon and tomato, was served on bread that was too thick, but he liked it. We both concurred that the pineapple upside down cake was way too sweet and dry, probably from being made long ago.