

WHAT'S NEW IN ATLANTA?

by John Mariani and Suzanne Wright

Hugging Kevin Rathbun is like snuggling into a mountain; I like it. In addition to giving great hugs, Rathbun gives great food. **Krog Bar** (112 Krog Street; 404-524-1618; www.krogbar.com), opened in late September with his partners Cliff Bramble and Kirk Parks, the g-m and pastry chef, respectively, only makes me like him more.

Adjacent to his smash-hit Rathbun's (one of *Esquire's* top new restaurants for 2004), the snug Krog Bar features a menu of Mediterranean-style cold small plates and communal dining. Tapas, sadly, is a term that has been bastardized in the U.S., wrongly applied to almost anything served on a saucer. I brought along a friend, who just returned from three weeks in Northern Spain and who lived in Madrid for seven years, to vet the legitimacy of the concept. Rathbun gets it right, in both look and cuisine. Seating is on soft cabernet leather bar stools or you can stand at the bar rails. On the gray and white marble bar, which stretches the length of the room, are plates of fig bread, bowls of olives and a jar of Marcona almonds. Amber globe pendants warmly illuminate the space, as does the beautifully seamed cypress paneling and chocolate brown walls. Custom-made iron wine racks line the walls and a glass garage door opens onto a bricked patio.



The compact menu (which Rathbun plans to expand by 10 or so items over the next month or two) features *antipasti*, *crudi*, *carne*, *tramezzini* (crustless finger sandwiches) and cheeses; the *vino* is from Italy, Spain and France. Staffers like knowledgeable Erin will happily

provide sips, recommend pairings (with such descriptions as “barnyard funk” for an Italian Chardonnay) and pop a bottle for those willing to spring for two glasses. Best of all, nearly all the dishes hover around \$8 or less, so an evening out is within reach of everyone in Inman Park, from established professionals to students.

Rathbun took time—and a recent tour of the three-state region he is paying homage to—sourcing and buying top-notch ingredients he respects, teasing out their authenticity with minimum tinkering. A fat Serrano ham perched on the bar (my pal calls it the “ham clamp”) is the restaurant’s perky pink mascot, waiting to yield satiny slices. A new discovery for me is *lomo*, paprika-cured pork loin, in gossamer thin rounds dribbled with good olive oil to amp up the pronounced seasoning. The couple at the end of the table (both in the food business) offered us translucent slices of *mojama*, sea salt cured tuna.

What follows is a parade of excellent dishes, with not a false note in the bunch: silky chicken liver-truffle pâté served with springy bread (Conde de Valdemar, a rioja reserve stands up to the rich flavor); bright basil *pesto* and *tetilla* sandwiches cut into dainty quarters; *idiazabal* cheese, a lightly smoked, semi-hard sheep’s milk cheese and *cabrales* blue; meaty yellow tail *crudo* with piquillo peppers; fennel with sun-dried tomato; and perfect *boquerones*, white anchovy filets kissed with lemon. *Gelati* are created daily, but we opted for the dark chocolate bruschetta with its sprinkle of sea salt and a leathery Bellum Monastrell Dulce “stickie” for dessert.

It was a blissfully simple, satisfying meal—and I left with the phone number of new friends, which is exactly the environment Rathbun wanted to create with this intimate neighborhood eatery. With food this true and this affordable, I see myself as a regular.