

IN DEPTH: HOSPITALITY QUARTERLY

From the November 11, 2005 print edition

Atlanta blossoms as dining mecca

One-of-a-kind eateries brighten the city's national reputation

[Tom Barry](#)

Contributing Writer

It didn't take Kevin Rathbun long to make a big splash on the Atlanta restaurant scene. Rathbun was corporate executive chef for the Buckhead Life Restaurant Group Inc. (Chops, Atlanta Fish Market, Buckhead Diner) before opening Rathbun's in the warehouse district of Inman Park in 2004.

A few months later, Esquire magazine put the restaurant on its annual list of best new dining places in the nation, a short list that also included Restaurant Eugene on Peachtree Road.

"I'd always wanted to have my own place," said the 42-year-old Rathbun, who started it with \$400,000 in capital, a low number, he says, for a higher-end, white-tablecloth restaurant. "I still have this old beat-up kitchen. All I really need is the firepower, not some ego-driven kitchen."

The Krog Street restaurant -- set in a huge building that once housed a potbelly stove manufacturer -- has prospered, so much so that a few weeks ago Rathbun opened another place (Krog Bar) next door.

"I started off on a song and a prayer, with the hope that people would come and blaze a trail to the restaurant," Rathbun said. "So far, they've made an eight-lane highway."

Atlanta's reputation in the culinary world has risen dramatically in recent years, powered by a new generation of chefs like Rathbun and other factors like the intown movement, the city's relatively high disposable income, a population base that grows more diverse by the day, and ever-more-sophisticated consumers.

"It's really amazing, the change in the quality and diversity of restaurants here over the last decade," said Harold Shumacher, president of The Shumacher Group, an Atlanta-based real estate company that specializes in site selection for regional and national restaurant companies.

"There are far more choices than there used to be," he said. "Thirty years ago, Atlanta was a Southern town, and the dining public primarily had Southern tastes. Now we're a polyglot city with people from all over the world. And there are a lot of young chefs like Rathbun, who work for someone for a while and then go off and open their own places."

David Pavesic is a restaurant specialist at Georgia State University.

"Clearly, Atlanta doesn't have to take a back seat to any city in terms of new upscale, cutting-edge restaurants, and I'm talking about cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco," said Pavesic, a professor in the Cecil B. Day School of Hospitality.

"It used to be that when people were doing their due diligence on a new restaurant concept, they'd go to New York or Los Angeles," Pavesic said. "Today they're probably studying the concepts in Atlanta and trying to duplicate them in other big cities. ... The South is always looked down upon because of our genteel ways and somewhat farm-and-homey image, but we can compete with the best restaurants in Northern and Midwestern cities."

Where once Atlanta made few top-restaurant lists, it's now regularly represented. In late October, for instance, the high-profile Mobil Travel Guide came out with its 2006 listing of the top restaurants in the country. Pulling down five stars -- the highest rank -- were The Dining Room at The Ritz-Carlton in Buckhead and Seeger's. Only 15 restaurants nationally earned the coveted rating. [Bacchanalia](#) and Park 75 at the Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta received four stars, among 140 such designees nationwide.

Ron Wolf, executive director of the Georgia Restaurant Association, said Atlanta wasn't much of a blip on the national radar before the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games, but it's been building momentum ever since, especially in the last few years.

"The Olympics created a greater awareness of the city, and look at how many major sporting events we've hosted in the years since," Wolf said. "We've also seen the influx of prominent chefs. Wolfgang Puck opened a restaurant here, and so did Emeril Lagasse. And we've seen the emergence of great chefs like Guenter Seeger and Kevin Rathbun. The reality is that today Atlanta ranks anywhere from fifth to eighth in the country in almost every measurable restaurant category."

From highbrow to fast food, the restaurant industry is big business. Restaurant and food-service employment comprises about 9 percent of total jobs statewide. Pavesic believes the restaurant sector's contribution to the economy often goes unnoticed.

"It's an industry that's generally talked down," Pavesic said. "But look at the amount of product that's used, and the business that's generated with producers and distributors of raw materials. All this helps drive the economy."

One hot restaurateur about town is Bob Amick, who with his partner, Todd Rushing, has created such hip favorites as One Midtown Kitchen, Two Urban Licks and Piebar. Amick, a one-time partner in the Pleasant Peasant restaurants, plans to open a restaurant (Lobby) in Atlantic Station, and in 1180 Peachtree, both a French eatery (Trois) and "a neighborhood restaurant and bar" (Tap).

"There was a huge void for what I consider to be big-city restaurants, just good restaurants that aren't theme-driven," Amick said. "I'm a big fan of intown Atlanta, and I think the city ought to have the fabric of a big city."

Atlantans, in Amick's view, are considerably more sophisticated about food and wine than they were three decades ago. "Wine was still being served out of gallon jugs back then," he said, laughing.

One sign of the city's diversifying palate is Au Pied de Cochon (translation: pig's trotter or foot), a 24-hour French brasserie in the year-old InterContinental Buckhead Atlanta hotel.

"We wanted to provide something that was missing from the restaurant scene in Atlanta," said hotel General Manager Ronen Nissenbaum.

The white-tablecloth restaurant serves more than 50 dishes available around the clock, and a seafood bar. A sophisticated eatery open 24 hours a day is a rarity, unless you believe Waffle House belongs in that category.

Nissenbaum said the restaurant is the most successful of the 30-odd InterContinental restaurants in the United States, and that Atlantans are even ordering pig's feet, a delicacy in France but probably still an uphill battle around these parts.

"The British say pig's trotter, which is a nicer way of saying it," drolled Nissenbaum. For those not wanting to go whole hog on the pied du cochon, the restaurant offers an option: pig's foot -- er, trotter -- with the bones removed and goose liver substituted.

Rathbun once worked under Lagasse, then became chef of Baby Routh in Dallas and served a stint as executive chef of NAVA in Atlanta. In 1999, he donned the chef's hat at Bluepointe in Buckhead, part of Pano Karatassos' Buckhead Life Restaurant Group.

Much of the rise of high-end dining in Atlanta is due to Karatassos, who launched such well-known names as Pano & Paul's (1979), 103 West (1982), Buckhead Diner (1987), Chops (1989) and Veni Vidi Vici (1993).

Buckhead Life has far more competition at the upper end than it used to have. Rathbun describes his own offerings as "edgy peasant food," and Esquire praised "the all-American goodness of his cooking, like braised brisket in a smoked-tomato jus with poblano quesadillas on the side and crispy hand-cut french fries with a blue cheese fondue." The Varsity, it ain't.

The typical bill averages about \$50, "but you can spend anywhere from \$25 per person to \$100, if you buy what we call a second-mortgage plate," Rathbun said.

Rathbun's location reflects another Atlanta phenomenon of recent vintage: top-notch restaurants are sprouting up all over.

"Fine-dining restaurants are coming to the suburbs," said Pavesic, noting that many suburbanites still don't like to venture downtown. "They all used to be in Buckhead. The thinking was that people in the suburbs wouldn't spend money on white tablecloth restaurants. But now you see them in Alpharetta, Roswell and other places, restaurants like Aspens (Marietta), dick and harry's (Roswell) and Van Gogh's (Roswell)."

What does the Atlanta restaurant scene lack? More ethnic food, in Rathbun's view. "Buford Highway [with its Asian and Hispanic populations] is great," he said. "But it would also be great to have Italian, German and Greek areas, like Chicago."

Shumacher, who believes Atlanta as a restaurant town ranks in the second tier behind such "bell-cow cities" as New York and the Windy City, makes a similar point.

"What's lacking is the equivalent of the neighborhood bistro or trattoria, where you can have a good-quality dining experience for \$20 a person," said Shumacher, a former restaurant reviewer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "Go somewhere in Italy and there will be dozens of little neighborhood spots like that. But that's a very tough niche to make money in, and it may be unfair to expect Atlanta to have such places."

Still, Shumacher is impressed with the depth of restaurants in Atlanta.

"Some cities have one or two great restaurants, such as St. Louis or Houston," he said. "Here you have the big-name restaurants like The Ritz-Carlton and Buckhead Life restaurants, but also a slew of other places that offer good food."

Or, as Rathbun puts it, "Atlanta's becoming a city to be reckoned with."