

EMORY WHEEL

Restaurant Review - Reach the pinnacle of culinary pleasure

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Every once in a blue moon, that ultimate dining experience appears. The stars align. Pleasure of the palate reigns. And if you happen to share this cosmic event with your family? Even better. Especially seeing as we're poor college students otherwise unable to afford great feasts.

But then the parents come down to pick you up at the end of the year, and it's time for the wonderful group meal to commence.

A feast doesn't mean huge quantities of food. It means leaving the table content and satiated. Rathbun's provides the perfect feast, complete with the good vibes for camaraderie, high-quality food that leaves you purring and enchanting ambiance.

You make a reservation, and the hostess calls to confirm. You arrive, and the complimentary valet parks your car. You open the door. The hostess smiles genuinely before helping you find the ideal table away from the glaring, early-evening sunlight. You look about the room at the somewhat elderly early diners. They all look so happy and comfortable! The evening has barely begun, but things are already looking far above average.

A glass should always be half full, and at Rathbun's, the attentive waitstaff ensures that your glass never falls to the perilous "half-empty" level. Knowledgeable waiters extol the virtues of the cuisine, steering the party toward the pinnacle of gastronomic enjoyment. Plus, they wait to clear the table until everyone in your party has finished eating.

You know those meals that are so phenomenal that they make all skills with the English language seem to fade away? Rathbun's creates that experience.

The bright Sambal Tossed Crispy Calamari with Pea Shoots (\$6.95) makes a beautiful appetizer - without being too heavy, too filling or too chewy. Choose one of myriad well-priced wines as an accompaniment, and the night begins with pleasure that will last the whole meal.

The unique Crispy Duck Breast with Thai Risotto (\$19.75) blends Eastern and Western cultures. Be advised: If you jump on the chef's bandwagon and order it "however he thinks it is best," the duck will be very pink.

And if you thought that was good, have a bite of the chef's signature Maine Lobster and Roasted Green Chili Soft Taco (\$31.95). With yummy Cascabel Cream and a fresh tortilla, this plump lobster taco is worth the price tag. Take delight in every nibble of this heavenly dish.

Digestion time is crucial. But, thankfully, the waitstaff never makes you feel hurried. Luxuriate in the glory of the night; dawdle over dessert. With the option of choosing a plate of four small treats (\$11), you have no choice but to linger over the non-wimpy coffee while deciding which desserts to order.

The pastry chef, Kirk Parks, is a hero. His desserts seem to fall into two categories - heavy and "masculine," and refreshing and "feminine."

The Banana Peanut Butter Cream Pie and the Butterfinger Bread Pudding are both robust. These babies will fill you up with hefty consistencies and bold flavors. The Peanut Butter Cream Pie may look just teeny and adorable, but the dangerous combination of peanut butter and banana forms a thick base underneath a huge layer of slippery meringue. The hearty Butterfinger Bread Pudding, laced with Godiva cream, warms the stomach.

The silky Sabayon (the French name for Italian zabaglione) tends toward feminine delicacy. A soothing blend of egg, wine, strawberries and almonds creates a calming breath at the end of the meal.

But my personal favorite is the Goopy Toffee Cake with Dark Molasses Ice Cream.

An hour after receiving dessert, my party found itself capable of leaving. Words cannot adequately describe the pleasures afforded by Rathbun's. Do you think the staff would notice if I started sleeping in the kitchen?

Maybe I could hide in the restroom a la the children in From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. They lived at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for weeks; why can't I live in a restaurant?

When your family visits, insist they take you to Rathbun's. Let your stomach jump for joy. You will never look at food the same way again.