

2005 Silver Spoon Awards

Georgia Trend's Dining Critic selects the state's top 10 restaurants, pays tribute to some well-regarded old favorites and recommends some exciting new finds.

By Krista Reese

For the last several years, the state's dining scene has been as serene and imperturbable as a dowager aunt. While this year's Top 10 list reflects few big changes, at press time, however, there were signs of an oncoming adolescent growth spurt: Yesterday's themes (low-carb diets, bubble teas) were discarded as so last year; some Quixotic and well-loved efforts (Oscar's in College Park) ended with a pang of lost innocence. Bruno Menard, who brought Franco-Asian flavors to the Ritz, departed the Dining Room.

Hot young chefs embarked on a round-robin, with a gaggle of new restaurants poised to open at (and after) our deadline: Shaun Doty leaves Mid-City Cuisine, his venture at the apex of Pershing Point, to open 1280, the much-anticipated new restaurant in the Woodruff Arts Center; the wildly inventive chef Richard Blais takes over One Midtown Kitchen.

Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison bookend the city's best restaurant, Bacchanalia, with the even more high-end Quinones, which in a preview had the feel of a kid in church clothes. Just as Atlanta's innovative Kinjo brothers (Nam, MF Sushibar) plan their "Vietnamese street food" venture, Red Bowl, the upstart Com beats them to it - winning a Food & Wine "Best New Asian" nod within four months of opening on Buford Highway. Finally, the prodigal Gottlieb brothers return their family bakery to Savannah - along with one of the most intriguing new restaurants in the state.

Another trend from years past picked up: All over Georgia, ambitious restaurants sprouted on small-town squares, lending maturity and sophistication where you might least expect to find them. In the meantime, old-school barbecue joints and meat-and-threes were attended devotedly, like doting mentors.

Along with the Top 10 Dining Destinations in the state, I've awarded Silver Teaspoons to some recent discoveries - even if they're new only to me. (And if I've missed your favorites, let me know at gtcritic@mindspring.com.)

1. Bacchanalia, Atlanta. 1198 Howell Mill Road (between 14th St. & Huff Road). 404-365-0410, Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison continue doing the impossible, by staying at the top of their game - all the time. Now they add a more formal (and expensive) downstairs spot called Quinones, with a single seating and more inventive menu. Comfortable but cutting-edge, Bacchanalia seems to exist to serve the palate; Quinones aims for the brain.

2. Seeger's, Atlanta. Chilly, cerebral and thrilling, a dining peak for adventurous explorers. 111 W. Paces Ferry Road at E. Andrews Drive, 404-846-9779.

3. The Dining Room, Ritz-Carlton (Buckhead), Atlanta. At press time, the Ritz was announcing Chef Arnaud Berthelier as the Dining Room's successor to Bruno Menard, who made the food as important as the Ritz's stellar service. 3434 Peachtree Road N.E., Buckhead, 404-240-7035.

4. Gottlieb's, Savannah. The brothers Gottlieb return to Savannah, where the bakery their family founded in 1884 lasted more than 100 years. In their exciting new restaurant downtown, all things

containing flour are wonderments, from the T-tiny biscuits with fried chicken and gravy to the trademark chocolate chewies. The Gottliebs also provide Southern-tinged entrees, such as pan-roasted Maine lobster on corn cakes with lobster "gravy." 1 W. Broughton St., 912-234-7447.

5. Cargo Portside Grill, Brunswick. If this restaurant were a boat, Alix Kenagy's classic standby would be a sleek, stylish wooden runabout, cutting a profile that puts most contemporary rivals to shame. It's also the engine to this sleepy port village's downtown revival - who knew that expertly fried catfish, grilled meats and a well-mixed cocktail could bestow such powers? 1423 Newcastle St., 912-267-7330.

6. Soto, Atlanta. Chef Soto works silently, issuing only an occasional command to the harried wait staff, and issues perfect sushi, as well as unique, mind-expanding creations of lotus root, yellowtail, edamame foam. Be prepared to wait with Zen-like patience, but all good things will come to you. 3330 Peachtree Road (in the "disco Kroger" shopping center), 404-523-6678.

7. Rathbun's, Atlanta. One of the hottest restaurants in the country, with raves from Esquire, Bon Appetit, Travel & Leisure and many others. With solid, head-on flavors from the trio of soups to the dessert samplers, chef Kevin Rathbun clearly articulates regionally influenced cuisine from all over. I'd crawl back for the sea scallops Benedict on country ham grits with asparagus, but I prefer the quiet patio to the frenetic (but beautiful) dining room. (Another plus: No reservations are taken for patio seating, so you can almost always get in if you go early.) This spring, Rathbun opened the adjacent Krog Bar, featuring Mediterranean small plates. 112 Krog St. (in the Stove Works), 404-524-8280.

8. Glen-Ella Springs Inn, Clarkesville. Lacking only a liquor license (but you may bring your own beer or wine to this dry part of the county), Glen-Ella is an otherwise perfect mountain oasis. Swim, walk, read, contemplate the landscape, and then repair to the dining room for herb-encrusted rack of lamb. 1789 Bear Gap Road, 706-754-7295.

9. Watershed, Decatur. The front-porch environment, and down-home food, may fool you at first, but this is a serious, and seriously good, restaurant. Chef Scott Peacock created the menu, with mentor and legend Edna Lewis; Tuesday night's legendary fried chicken specials pack them in. But everynight dishes like beautiful, fresh vegetable plates, pimento-cheese-stuffed celery and pita chips with lima bean hummus have the faithful endurance of a good marriage partner. 406 W. Ponce de Leon Ave., 404-378-4900.

10. Greyfield Inn, Cumberland Island. If Greyfield Inn existed somewhere else, these dishes might taste completely different. But you can't remove this food (diver scallops on spinach and handmade pasta; lamb chops with pesto and a tangle of fried onions) from its awe-inspiring environment, just as you can't extract the mystic charm from Cumberland Island. Meals are served to guests only, but call for information on day trips with lunch, or dinner packages, including hors d'oeuvres, three courses and ferry transportation for \$95 per person. 904-261-6408.

The Best All Around

Tamarind, Atlanta. The countdown begins: With the scheduled destruction of the interstate overpass, Tamarind will have to move "in a year or two," according to its owners, joining sister restaurant Nan in another nearby location. Let's hope it can move intact, bringing its complex Thai flavors and the executive-management style of the traditionally dressed waitresses. 80 14th St. N.W., Midtown, 404-873-4888.

Crystal Beer Parlor, Savannah. It's been too long since I revisited the Parlor, which closed briefly a few years back. Thankfully, a new owner hasn't spoiled this old-school saloon vibe, which draws cops and punks, kids and grandpas in equal numbers. Not everything on the menu is great - and I was

shocked to learn of a new, ambitious dinner menu - but it's always worth the trip for the killer onion rings, as well as the loaf corn bread and thick crab stew, made for 30 years by "Ms. Shirley" Carter. 301 W. Jones St., 912-232-1153.

Bone's, Atlanta. The state's best steakhouse has the masculine sheen of polished mahogany - and the jovial service includes such details as shoe shines on request. Although the dress code has fallen off a bit, the marbled steaks and grits fritters are as good as ever. 3130 Piedmont Road N.E., 404-237-2663.

Elizabeth's on 37th, Savannah. By now, Elizabeth's can be retired to some kind of hall of fame. Years after Elizabeth Terry left, her former staff carries on as managing partners; her dishes seem as fresh as the seasons that inspire them. 105 E. 37th St. (at Drayton St.), 912-236-5547.

Sterling's Southern Cafe, St. Mary's. Despite the tiny size, whitewashed antiques and lurching ladies, Sterling's ladles out plenty of flavor in its crab bisque and crab cake Caesar salad. The homemade coconut pie, baked by a local octogenarian, is guaranteed made with natural ingredients and "100 percent love." 219 Osborne St., 912-882-3430.

Poole's Bar-B-Q, East Ellijay. The "Pig Hall of Fame" is a lot of fun (a herd of wooden cutouts bearing locals' names covers the hillside; smaller ones paper the porch ceiling and floor) and the 'cue and stew are good. But all the photos of Republicans might make Dems a little queasy. Highway 515 North, 706-635-4100.

MF Sushibar, Atlanta. Brothers Alex and Chris Kinjo, who also own and operate the excellent Vietnamese restaurant Nam, are poised to open Red Bowl, featuring Vietnamese street food, next year. Meanwhile, MF (for "magic fingers") Sushibar remains my choice for best casual sushi spot in town. 265 Ponce De Leon Ave., 404-815-8844.

Five and Ten, Athens. Hugh Acheson, a Food & Wine "Best New Chef" in 2002, drives this quirkily excellent, personality-laden restaurant, one of Athens' few serious fine dining efforts. 1653 Lumpkin St., in Five Points, 706-546 7300.

Joel, Atlanta. Sleek, beautiful and piloted by an ingeniously creative chef, Jo?l Antunes' brainchild is the place to fill your eye, mind and stomach - but service slips occasionally, and the singles bar scene feels a bit soulless. 3290 Northside Parkway N.E., 404-233-3500.

Barbara Jean's, St. Simons. Another longtime local favorite, justified for the simple, fresh lump crabcakes - so popular you can order them for delivery across the country. 214 Mallory St., 912-634-6500.

Taqueria los Hermanos, Tucker. My favorite for soft tacos and inventive Mexican-style desserts, this family venture (five brothers and their mother) also serves, hands down, the best tamales in town. Served only on Saturdays, and handmade by Mama Ballesteros, they're light as souffles - but a whole lot cheaper. 4418 Hugh Howell Road, 678-937-0660.

Com Vietnamese Grill, Atlanta. Relaxed, fun, fluent and most of all, delicious, Com offers inexpensive, fabulous Vietnamese food in a new kind of Buford Highway eatery. The wait staff seems to be having a blast, and the managers are unfailingly polite despite big lines tumbling out the door. If you don't know what to order, just ask - or let the wait staff choose from the list of char-grilled meats, bun (rice noodle) dishes, savory spring rolls. Food & Wine awarded it a "Best New Asian" restaurant in the country within four months of opening. 4005 Buford Highway, 404-320-0405.

Kyma, Atlanta. Pano Karatossos' tribute to his homeland, Greece, is a shining pantheon built around fresh fish, flown in from around the world, and cooked on a wood-fired grill. But I also love the vegetables, including bitter wild greens, and gigandes plaki (velvety white beans the size of espresso saucers, stewed with onions and tomatoes). 3085 Piedmont Road, 404-262-0702.

Crab Trap, St. Simons. Like Bennie's Red Barn, at the other end of the island, The Crab Trap is Old St. Simons, the place you have to pay tribute to. Service isn't always stellar (a recent request for a martini "straight up" brought a glass of warm gin), but the crab soup and fresh oysters are always worth the visit. 1209 Ocean Blvd., 912-638-3552.

Shining Surprises Around the State

1. D. Morgan's, Cartersville. Kudos to chef Derek Morgan, who, with a contractor father, gutted a downtown furniture store and installed this beautifully simple - but contrarian - restaurant. While everyone else is layering flavors, or fluffing them into foam, Morgan limits each dish to a few ingredients. The combinations (lobster bisque with porcini essence; seared ahi tuna with scallion hummus) are unusual, entertaining - and delicious. 28 West Main St., 770-383-3535.

2. Cobblestone Conch House, Savannah. New along River Street, this cool spot with lazily revolving ceiling fans turns out Caribbean specialties like cracked conch, as well as salads with blackened shrimp, orange segments and avocado. 225 West River St., 912-232-5552.

3. Grits Cafe, Forsyth. Unlike its humble namesake, the Grits Cafe is upscale - who could have predicted lobster, yellowfin tuna and asiago cheese in an attractively renovated downtown Forsyth storefront? Despite occasional lily-gilding with wildly complicated dishes, The Grits Cafe mostly delivers to a joyously grateful corps of local diners. 17 West Johnston St., 478-994-8325.

4. Smith House, Dahlonga. OK, so I'm the last one to know. But the Smith House's classic Southern dishes are still crisp and fresh, while some former rivals have lost their edge. (Are you listening, Dillard House?) 84 South Chestatee St., 706-867-7000.

5. Marco Ristorante Italiano, Macon. Authentically Italian, straightforwardly simple ? and very good. 4581 Forsyth Road, 478-405-5660.

6. 514 West, Savannah. This spot on newly rejuvenated MLK draws a diverse crowd to its jazz concerts on the patio, as well as diners seeking expert, old-school dishes like oysters Rockefeller and very dry martinis. 514 MLK Jr. Blvd., 912-236-7409.

7. Jot 'em Down, Athens. It sounds like Restoration Hardware-style faux nostalgia, but this restored grocery with Formica dinettes serves real - and really good - wood-smoked barbecue from the little building out back. 150 E. Whitehall Road, 706-549-2110.

8. Piebar, Atlanta. Either the Jetsons have landed, or Bob Amick has just opened a fun new pizza palace in the gloriously '60s old Trust Company bank at Monroe and I-85. 2160 Monroe Drive, 404-825-1605.

9. Pink Pig, Cherry Log. Once a grist mill, the Pink Pig serves up traditional, tender smoked pork (as well as signature sides like the "garlic salad") along a side road near Ellijay. 824 Cherry Log St., 706-276-3311.

10. Appalachia Grill, Marble Hill. Another sign that retiring to the mountains might not mean a sentence to the culinary boondocks: Like Rising Fawn's Canyon Grill, the Appalachia Grill brings city flavors to the country, where the small plates include rosemary shrimp and roasted cauliflower. 3909 Steve Tate Highway, 770-893-3389.

