



## Independents

### High-end restaurateurs' downmarket satellite cafes reflect evolving trend

By Jack Hayes

**ATLANTA (Feb. 13)** - When fine-dining partners Kevin Rathbun and Cliff Bramble opened tiny [Krog Bar](#) here four months ago to complement their highly acclaimed [Rathbun's](#), they didn't foresee that the 700-square-foot, 32-seat neighboring venue would garner its own fast fame and loyal clientele.

But that's exactly what happened when young neighborhood customers began showing up for Krog Bar's more affordable "tapas wine bar" specialties, which differ markedly from the eclectic international cuisine served at Rathbun's, 50 feet across the common parking lot.

"What we're seeing here demographically is a crowd that's 10 years younger than the one at Rathbun's," said Bramble, whose broader-menu, more upscale flagship restaurant attracted widespread attention and critical acclaim following its 2004 launch in Atlanta's Inman Park neighborhood. "We have neighborhood locals coming down to Krog Bar, while Rathbun's is a destination for people with more money and a willingness to travel. We didn't know this was going to happen."

Another thing Bramble and Rathbun are finding is that a growing number of guests want to experience a different setting for drinks and desserts after they dine elsewhere, which helps account for Krog's extremely busy pace.

In other cities, a similar shift in guests' habits is being exploited by fine-dining operators who have opened satellite miniconcepts, in some cases to accommodate guest overflow at their main venues.

Among those operations are Chicago's [Blackbird](#) and its "mini" tapas venue [Avec](#); Boston's [No. 9 Park](#) and its two concepts, [B&G Oysters Ltd.](#) and [The Butcher Shop](#); New York's [Babbo Ristorante e Enoteca](#) and its small-plates restaurant and wine-bar cousins Casa Mono and Bar Jamón; and [Wish](#) and its year-old hotel-rooftop gathering spot, Spire Bar & Lounge, in Miami Beach, Fla.

Casa Mono, with a \$50 per-person check average, and Bar Jamón, averaging \$30 a head, were launched two years ago by the noted Manhattan restaurateur-chef team of Joseph Bastianich and Mario Batali.

"We play lively music and it does draw a younger crowd — some for after-dinner drinks," said Nancy Selzer, managing partner of Casa Mono and Bar Jamón. "But what's also behind the change here is that we were an established restaurant group bringing two totally different concepts into the market."

Selzer calls Casa Mono "fine dining but not fancy [in ambience]," and Bar Jamón "not a dessert house, but a lighter place where the walk-in crowd can get a bottle of wine and a bite to eat."

"New Yorkers are just very open to newness, and that's what we're about," Selzer said.

Blackbird and Avec co-owner Donald Madia, who heads front-of-the-house operations at both restaurants, calls Avec something like the Bar Jamón phenomenon, though it opened six months earlier.

"People with reservations don't like to be disappointed, so if we run into a wait at Blackbird, we send them over to Avec for a drink and come and get them when the table is ready," Madia said.

By the same token, if the six-and-a-half-year-old Blackbird is having "a leaner night," then some of Avec's guests may be open to taking tables at Blackbird, where seating is usually booked tightly.

Like Krog Bar and Bar Jamón, Avec is smaller than its parent restaurant Blackbird, but not by much — 55 seats at Avec compared with 70 at Blackbird. Another similarity is the Mediterranean cuisine and beverage lineup, featuring a large selection of wines from Spain.

"The important thing for us is authenticity," said Madia, whose partners include chef and co-owner Paul Kahan, wine program director and co-owner Eduard Seitan, and chef de cuisine Koren Grievson.

A year ago, South Miami Beach, Fla., hotel operator Goldman Properties planted a mini-venue called Spire Bar & Lounge on the roof at The Hotel, where its highly-rated fine-dining unit Wish had opened in 1997.

According to chief operating officer Jessica Goldman-Srebnick, Spire serves as a casual beverage and tapas destination for younger clientele and an overflow room for guests waiting to dine at Wish, a private party room for small local functions.

"We're very excited about Spire," she said. "It's given guests at Wish and our hotel another dimension to experience, and it helps us to reach new customers."

But the younger dining group frequenting concepts like Avec, The Butcher Shop, Spire and Krog Bar is hardly unsophisticated.

"They're as educated and knowledgeable as anyone," said Bramble of Krog Bar. "They simply want good food in a lighter, less expensive setting, and a Mediterranean wine bar fits that niche."

Meanwhile, Boston chef-operator Barbara Lynch recently extended the reach of her French and Italian fine-dining showcase, No. 9 Park, by launching two miniconcepts outside of the Mediterranean tapas trend. One is B&G Oysters Ltd., and the other, The Butcher Shop, in the city's South End, is what her website calls an "artsy gastronomic enclave."

The Butcher Shop functions as a European-style retail boucherie and wine bar featuring house-made antipasti and charcuterie. B&G Oysters Ltd. is an oyster bar serving New England seafood and "cool white wines."

"They're an extension of Barbara's passion for food and wine," said Justin Morel, general manager of both concepts, explaining that guests waiting for seats at B&G will be recommended to The Butcher Shop and called on their cell phones when seating opens.

While No. 9 Park, with its \$65 per-person check average, has a built-in "cafe" to hold overflow and customers who want a more casual or more moderately priced dinner, such guests will on occasion also be invited to wait at The Butcher Shop, where the check average is \$36 to \$40, according to Morel. B&G's check average is \$40 to \$45, he said.

The late Bern Laxer, founder of the legendary [Bern's Steak House](#) in Tampa, Fla., might have been the first fine-dining operator to test whether guests would enjoy eating dessert in a different venue than the one they had chosen for dinner.

In 1984, Laxer created the "upstairs" Harry Waugh Dessert Room at Bern's — a venue that transports guests to a romantic after-dinner experience with a choice of signature desserts and nearly a thousand dessert wines and

champagnes, more than 200 Armagnac brandies and 75 Cognacs.

What Laxer's peers now realize is that closing out dinner checks and moving guests from the dining room not only releases tables for new dinner customers but also allows those who've finished to open new dessert checks and begin spending again.

"It was a stroke of genius," said Atlanta fine-dining veteran Pano Karatassos, who in 1999 opened a 2,000-square-foot private- dining, drinking and smoking venue called The Club adjacent to his highly successful [Chops and Lobster Bar](#) restaurants.

"The room was opened for our highest- profile members, offering entertainment with a lounge and bar plus a very modest dining area, but now half the floor has become a dining room," explained Karatassos, who heads the [Buckhead Life Restaurant Group](#). "Our members just don't want to compete with the restaurant crowd."

With annual membership dues moving from \$650 to \$700 for its 500 paid members, The Club, in fact, is paying for itself. Members also get priority seating at all 13 Buckhead Life dining properties and have telephone access to a dedicated employee willing to hear their problems 24 hours a day, according to Karatassos.