

SPRING DINING GUIDE

League leaders in (sugar) rushes

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Beyond sweet, beyond sticky — beyond velvety textures and dreamy, creamy goo— are the elements that make a great dessert: devotion to fresh, seasonal ingredients and a pastry chef talented enough to know how to put them together in a way that makes mouth and eyes go "Wow."

Great pastry chefs are like great ice skaters — they make what they do look soooooo easy. It's not. How did that tuile curl up like that? Is that sugar wrapped around my spoon? Did she poach this fig? Who knew chocolate could do that?



Elissa Eubanks/Staff

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)




Rathburn's legendary banana-peanut butter-cream pie looks as good as it tastes.



Elissa Eubanks/Staff

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Cap off a savory meal with a lemon zest cake raspberries at Rathburn's in Inman Park.

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KEY TO RATINGS

- ★★★★★ Outstanding: Sets the standard for fine dining in the region.
- ★★★★ Excellent: One of the best in the Atlanta area.
- ★★★ Very good: Merits a drive if you're looking for this kind of dining.
- ★★ Good: A worthy addition to its neighborhood, but food may be hit or miss.
- ★ Fair: The food is more miss than hit. Restaurants that do not meet these criteria are rated Poor.

Pricing code: \$\$\$\$ means above \$35; \$\$\$ means \$20-\$35; \$\$ means \$10-\$20; \$ means \$10 or less. @ means reservations

A fine dessert menu is what sets a restaurant apart from its peers, even when restaurants don't always profit from them; dessert is often the least ordered course in a meal.

So grab hold of that adage that we should all eat dessert first. This spring, the AJC Dine Guide celebrates dessert and the chefs who make life a little sweeter.

No. 1

ARIA ★★★★★

490 E. Paces Ferry Road N.E., Atlanta, 404-233-7673.

We all know the scene: the ecru columns, the mythic bejeweled dogs, the giant chandelier that looks like a neon mosquito. Aria has been successfully dishing up chef-owner Gerry Klaskala's vision for six years. One of Klaskala's greatest achievements, though, was in recognizing early on the myriad talents of pastry chef Kathryn King. She complements the modern touches exuded on Klaskala's menu, but never strays too far from the classics; what looks pretty will also taste good, guaranteed. Don't miss anything she does with chocolate, whether it's her warmed chocolate cheesecake with its characteristic spiral swirl and walnut crust, or Valrhona chocolate cream pie. The sorbets are fresh; lemon pound cake with lemon cream, Valencia oranges and vanilla ice cream is the perfect diversion from cacao ; ditto tangerine panna cotta with a bright tangerine sorbet and mellow pecan shortbread. And if she makes anything resembling bread pudding, order it: the light-yet-eggy texture defies physics. 6-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursday; 5:30-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

No. 2

JOËL ★★★★★

3290 Northside Parkway N.E., Atlanta, 404-233-3500.

Joël makes it so easy to ascribe to the "eat dessert first" mantra. If it were any more socially acceptable, I'd order the lighter-than-air pavlova filled with even lighter crème patisserie and mango before I started perusing the rest of the menu. Joël Antune, last year's winner of the James Beard award for best chef of the Southeast, combines warmth and charm with modern austerity in his eponymous restaurant, making it an oasis of delightfully unpredictable French cuisine, with lots of Mediterranean undercurrents. But what may be a hidden secret is that his kitchen creates some of the best desserts in the city. Antune delights in sweets, and consequently devotes a lot of effort to his dessert menu, along with new pastry chef Christophe Sapy . The aforementioned pavlova is almost always on the menu, if not sporting mango then some other exotic fruit. A recent visit had me slurping to the last fluff the mousse-like whiskey filling inside a flaky mille feuille. And crème brûlée can always be counted on — whether it's flavored with fresh seasonal fruit, coffee or praline. Service remains a shadow of the perfection that comes from the kitchen, but things keep improving. And the \$5 million digs are tres gorgeous. Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday.-Friday. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 5:30-10:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

No. 3

TABLE 1280 ★★☆☆

1280 Peachtree St. N.E., Atlanta, 404-897-1280.

This tony restaurant inside the High Museum just keeps getting better. With clientele that runs the gamut from Atlanta's social elite to the symphony's season-ticket-holding crowd, executive chef Shaun Doty, formerly of MidCity Cuisine, has his talented fingers full. But he strikes all the right notes with a smart, fast-paced dining room and tapas menu, using high-quality ingredients and the smart presentation we loved him for at MidCity. And one of the most enjoyable things about eating here is dessert. Pastry chef Edouard Fenouil gets downright playful with chocolate fondue, the deep layers of flavor in orange-laced Valrhona Manjari chocolate melting together with house-made marshmallows, fresh pineapple, crunchy meringue kisses and gingersnap triangles. His creamy, deeply tart Meyer lemon bar is well matched with tiny rosettes of meringue and wild blueberry sorbet. Warm house-made doughnuts (a Doty signature) are good enough to make you want to lick your fingers. Fruit is Fenouil's forte, though, with sophisticated showings of a velvety honey-flavored semifreddo sitting pretty over a perfect poached pear with a flaky cheddar biscuit and a not-too-sweet apple galette with caramel crème fraiche ice cream. Lunch: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 5-8 p.m. Sundays. Brunch: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Sundays. Tapas lounge: 5-10 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

No. 4

KYMA ★★☆☆

3085 Piedmont Road N.E., Atlanta, 404-262-0702.

Chef Pano Karatassos, son of the Buckhead Life founder, strikes the right notes of homey authenticity and gourmet finesse with traditional dishes such as crispy-edged saganaki, olive-oil poached dorado and succulent fried baby calamari. And dessert ... who knew? Yes, Kyma bakes up some of the best in the city, whether it's loukoumades, a heap of a dozen or more flash-fried fritters drizzled with honey, or galaktoboureko, the most sublime vanilla custard made with semolina and wrapped delicately in phyllo, crowned with a crunchy sesame cookie. The Greek yogurt is high test, served in a custard ramekin covered with a mantle of dewy Greek honey and a handful of hefty walnuts. Order sweet treats like candied kumquats and quince to smear around the plate just for the heck of it. 5-11 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

No. 5

RATHBUN'S ★★☆☆

112 Krog St., Atlanta,

404-524-8280.

Rathbun's is quite possibly the most popular restaurant in Atlanta. Chef-owner Kevin Rathbun's new American menu exemplifies the fun, comfortable feel of modern American cuisine that makes it sophisticated, but never fussy. Influences arrive on the plate from the Southeast, the Southwest and his native heartland. Pastry chef Kirk Parks matches Rathbun's enthusiasm and style with ease, baking up easy-on-the-eyes creations like his creamy, dreamy banana-peanut butter-cream pie, which has already become a city legend. Ice creams are a must — Parks' latest fling is a molasses cream over an ooey-goey toffee bread-pudding-cake hybrid. Yum. The best part is his tasting of four for \$10, an offer you can't beat with a stick. 5:30-10:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 5:30-11:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$-\$\$\$

No. 6

FIVE AND TEN ★★☆☆

1653 S. Lumpkin St., Athens, 706-546-7300.

Chef-owner Hugh Acheson cooks with energy and invention to be sure, but it's his appreciation of good ingredients that have kept Five and Ten in the national spotlight since its opening. His desserts epitomize

what's right about flavor as a first ingredient, and he cooks with the seasons: late summer might bring a perfectly poached peach with toasted polenta cake (think corn pone and peaches); late winter brings pear and pecan upside-down cake drenched in blackstrap ice cream and caramel sauce. Chocolate shows up as an elegant marquis, rich and textured with caramelized banana and smooth banana ice cream that's a reminder of a Sunday afternoon family supper. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays; 5:30-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Brunch:

10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sundays. \$\$\$

No. 7

WATERSHED ★★★★★

406 W. Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur, 404-378-4900.

Scott Peacock's Southern-accented cooking is a blessed reminder of how important cooking used to be to all of us. A James Beard Foundation award nominee, cookbook author and protégé of late culinary legend Edna Lewis, Peacock, along with owner Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls, has crafted a straight-shooting restaurant with a menu that boasts a strong, yet gentile, Southern accent. Amid a menu that epitomizes old-fashioned are desserts that are exactly that: straightforward with flavor, no fuss on presentation. The Very Good Chocolate Cake has become city legend, but caramel-glazed apple cake is just as fine, and every bit as gooey. Always order banana pudding if it's offered and don't miss the pecan tart — underneath a mantle of rich pecan-and-syrup filling is a buttery shortdough crust that defies physics with its buttery flakiness. Lunch: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. Brunch: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sundays. \$\$-\$\$\$

No. 8

CANOE ★★★★★

4199 Paces Ferry Road N.W., Atlanta, 770-432-2663.

Look up "staying power" and you'll find a description of Canoe. Classy Carvel Grant Gould has taken over the kitchen at this Atlanta classic and is paired with a dynamic pastry chef, Robyn Mayo. She combines a homey, back-to-basics style with fresh, seasonal ingredients. The result, while a little rough around the edges, puts Canoe's dessert menu among the best. Look for creamy, vanilla-honey cheesecake under a delicate ginger tuile with a perky apple and quince compote, or the perfect chocolate molten cake, hedonistically gooey-centered and warm, with melting vanilla ice cream to top it off. There are few places better to indulge in Mayo's perfectly executed crème brûlée than outside on Canoe's patio, with its panoramic view of the Chattahoochee River and drop-your-jaw gorgeous gardens. Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 5:30-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays; 5:30-

9:30 p.m. Sundays. Brunch: 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sundays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

No. 9

THE GLOBE ★★★★★

75 5th St. N.W., Atlanta, 404-541-1487.

A place to gather, eat and commune with friends, the Globe will have you whispering to friends, "Isn't this just so Copenhagen?" Created by Govantez Lowndes, who brought Atlanta the beautiful but ill-fated Commune, the Globe embodies an attitude that is part Soho, part San Francisco — and all Atlanta. Joshua Perkins is light on his feet in the kitchen, acting as chef, pastry chef and everything in between. His retro desserts such as the pineapple upside-down cake — a dense, buttery dome of cake drenched in caramelized pineapple — are reason enough for a visit. Recent musings: orange-laced crème caramel that's the perfect mix of egg and milk and a gooey roasted pear cobbler that redefines sticky. Lunch: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Mondays-Wednesdays; 5-11 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays. \$\$-\$

No. 10

LOBBY AT TWELVE ★★★

361 17th St. (inside Twelve Hotel at Atlantic Station) Atlanta, 404-961-7370.

While Lobby has all the slick devices that make it a hip place to hang — plasma TVs as a backdrop, a sweeping bar area that spans the lobby of the hotel, low globe lighting balanced with the embers of a wood-burning pizza oven — it is by far the most sophisticated of businessman and restaurateur Bob Amick's adventures, including One Midtown Kitchen, Two Urban Licks and Piebar. The nonchalant approach to classic American bistro food is what gives Lobby the extra push it needs, and the desserts, created by super talented Jonathan St. Hilaire, marry perfectly with the rest of the menu. His list of offerings is short but, ahem, sweet. The best of the lot is a mascarpone cheesecake highlighted with lemon cream and an old-fashioned blueberry compote, but it gets strong competition from the sticky-gooey camp: toffee-drenched bread pudding offset with a lovely poached seckel pear and omigod-good dulce de leche ice cream. And the butterscotch pot de crème redefines the flavor of this classic. Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30

p.m. Mondays-Fridays and

10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. Dinner: 5:30-11 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays,

5:30-midnight Fridays-Saturdays and 5:30-10 p.m. Sundays. \$\$-\$\$\$