

SPRING DINING GUIDE

Key to bliss eating out: Theatrics

[Go To Rathbun's](#)

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Published on: 03/16/2006

EACH SPRING, the Dining Guide rolls out its list of the top 10 restaurants in the city. And each year, my editors ask me to explain the unexplainable: Why I choose the restaurants I choose. Why these 10? Is it the food? The chef? The excellent service? The interesting wine list? The ambiance?

Un hunh. You betcha.



Elissa Eubanks/Staff

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

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

But it is something else, too. Something a little more intangible than golden roasted beets or a boutique wine list with reasonably priced bottles. It is all of the above combined with the theater that happens at the table when I'm dining. Whether it's a Pinter play or a Broadway musical, there is drama (and sometimes comedy) to dining, and these 10 restaurants know how to bring the house down. They are listed here in alphabetical order.

There are two new additions to the list this year: Aria's contemporary finesse has been an Atlanta favorite since it opened six years ago. Quinones at Bacchanalia's Southern charm has made it one of the city's few five-star experiences.

On February 28, we lost one of our best restaurants, Soto, a constant in the AJC's top 10 best restaurants list. Sushi master Sotohiro Kosugi's masterful presentation and devotion to perfection will be sorely missed. Infamous service issues aside, Soto was a world-class marvel, and we are none the better for losing it.

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 accepted.

ARIA

Buckhead ★★★★★

490 E. Paces Ferry Road N.E.

404-233-7673.

A perennial favorite among Atlanta foodies and food neophytes alike, Aria consistently strikes a synchronistic chord between hip and comfortable. Under the neon light of a giant mosquito-shaped chandelier, chef-owner Gerry Klaskala has always had the ability to throw finesse into even the simplest of dishes — the "creamless" celery root soup laced with the earthy flavor of black truffles has become a signature, and heirloom Bulls Blood beets can almost always be found tossed around beautifully with goat cheese. Fresh Georgia mountain trout is always interesting, though the able, seasoned staff will steer you toward the slow-roasted pork. Kathryn King is a formidable pastry presence and her desserts are some of the best in the city. 6-10 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

BACCHANALIA

West Intown ★★★★★

1198 Howell Mill Road N.W. 404-350-0677.

Ahhh, Bacchanalia. It exudes the modern, warm tones and warehouse chic Atlantans love. And perhaps more than any other Atlanta restaurant, Bacchanalia represents what great dining means to us: Chef-owners Clifford Harrison and Anne Quatrano cook with easygoing personality and use the freshest ingredients possible. Their sense of flair and flavor coaxes, then lulls you into submission. Daily menu changes make it hard to play favorites, but expect full-flavored freshness from everything from Kumamoto oysters with cucumber and peri peri peppers to the precious royal gala apple puree that accompanies your foie gras. Ingredients such as cavolo nero, hakurei turnips, lady apples and tarbais beans aren't just words thrown around on the menu; with one of the finest local provenders fronting the restaurant, if it's possible, they'll have it. The warm Valrhona chocolate cake with mint ice cream can always be counted on for fireworks at dessert. Dinner: 6-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. \$\$\$\$

THE DINING ROOM AT THE RITZ-CARLTON BUCKHEAD

Buckhead ★★★★★

3434 Peachtree Road N.E. 404-240-7035.

Never has the Dining Room been more dramatic than with new chef Amaud Berthelie, and never has it felt this buoyant. Servers who have been a part of the front of the house brigade for years seem renewed in attitude. Claude Guillaume, Dining Room maitre d'hotel, sweeps through the staid room, still rich with Oriental silks and doggie portraits, like a contented cat who has found a very cozy spot in the sun. Lovely young Chantelle Grilhot, the Dining Room's amazing sommelier, seems to have found a new depth to pairing wines with Berthelie. It is sophisticated, yes, but like the choicest of ingenue roles, there is a girlish playfulness to her performance that lightens the evening's mood. And Berthelie? He is director, script writer, actor. The menu changes nightly, but expect bold flavors with African, Asian, Mediterranean and Indian accents. It is Berthelie's playful mood that permeates the attitude of the staff, his script of dish after incredible dish that provides the spine of the performance and his presence in the Dining Room as the meal closes that proves he considers himself just another member of the ensemble. 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays; 6-9:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$\$\$

JOËL

Buckhead ★★★★★

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

Every time I visit this gorgeous restaurant I fall in love with it all over again. Joël reminds us why we eat food in the first place: each bite is a mouthful of freshness, and elegantly presented with savvy, modern style. Antunes magically creates subtle portions beautifully manicured — yet so approachable. I'm as happy digging into a pretty-as-a-picture brandade with mushrooms as a bee-yoo-tee-ful pavlova filled with the most velvety creme patisserie this side of the Atlantic. It's an oasis of delightfully unpredictable French cuisine, with lots of Mediterranean undercurrents, all arriving at the table happily unrecognizable. Service on my last visit was less plodding, but still not up to the caliber of what comes from the kitchen. During lulls between courses the towering ceilings, orange tiled wall, groovy leather banquettes and expansive windows will give you something to ponder. Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

KYMA

Buckhead ★★★★★

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

Big, beautiful fish. Crisply seasoned potatoes, sprinkled with a dusting of tangy kefalotiri cheese. Sweet, thick imported honey over creamy yogurt. Baby calamari so sweet and delicate it almost melts in your mouth. These, plus the royal atmosphere of this lavish Greek restaurant, make it one of the best dining experiences in the area, period. Kyma seamlessly brings the authentic flavors of Greece to the table, setting the gold standard for the Buckhead Life Restaurant Group, and chef Pano Karatassos, son of the Buckhead Life founder, strikes the right notes of homey authenticity and gourmet finesse. The service staff makes you feel as pampered as a kitty cat. And save room for dessert, perhaps the best course of all. 5-11 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

NAM

Midtown ★★★★★

931 Monroe Drive, Suite A-101. 404-541-9997

Owner Alex Kinjo of MF Sushi creates a hip, elegant respite in his menu of nouvelle Vietnamese cuisine. The restaurant's shaking beef and rice flour tamales that are among the coolest, and tastiest, offerings this city has to offer. Flavors here are fresh. Clean. And thoughtful — they allow for Vietnamese traditions while embracing an unmistakable modernity. Bask in flowing, organza-like sheer panels between tables and a muted, modern atmosphere while noshing on the buttery texture of shaking beef seasoned with garlic and onions. Its exquisite flavor is made bright with a lime-and-pepper slurry for dipping. The banh nam (rice flour tamales) are a lesson in understated elegance, wrapped in a banana leaf and filled with pork, shrimp and

mushrooms. Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays. Dinner: 5:30-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 5:30-10:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$\$

QUINONES AT BACCHANALIA

West Intown ★★★★★

1198 Howell Mill Road. 404-365-0410.

This restaurant, the newest from award-winning Bacchanalia chef-owners Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison, has a soulfulness that is at once sensuous and ladylike. The mood is warming and refined, from the graciousness of maitre d' Robert Payne's easygoing, Southern style to chef de cuisine Drew Belline's fresh, young approach to a prix fixe menu that could have drowned in its own soberness. It doesn't. Instead, Belline's creations, a constant collaboration with Quatrano and Harrison, come alive with a fresh-faced accessibility. They may be pretty, but they aren't fussy. And flavor is the driving force behind them. Earlier courses, such as the egg custard or buttery hamachi with a trio of heirloom watermelon diced into Barbie-sized cubes, are just a bit more than a biteful and loaded with full-on flavor. As courses move forward, each arrives a little larger and sometimes heavier than the next, until the crest of dessert brings the meal back to pianissimo. With or without wine pairings, Quinones offers a meal to remember. Dinner reservations 6-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. \$\$\$\$

RATHBUN'S

Inman Park ★★★★★

112 Krog St. 404-524-8280.

Kevin Rathbun's menu exemplifies what's fun and comfortable about modern American cuisine. His take is sophisticated, but never fussy, and loaded with influences from the Southeast, Southwest and his native heartland. Most restaurants take lots of time garnering a reputation for a signature dish, but in less than a year the kitchen's sea scallop Benedict over country ham grits — unapologetically salty, sexily smoky — is so popular Rathbun couldn't take it off the menu if he wanted to. Ditto the always-fun eggplant steak fries, cut thick, crisp edged and covered in confectioner's sugar, served with hot sauce. Rathbun isn't afraid to play with his food, having as much fun globe-trotting through classic Greek dishes like pan-fried kefalotiri cheese (saganaki style) as he does sprucing up tiny tostadas with habanero sauce and smoky salmon. Save room for pastry chef Kirk Parks' creamy, dreamy peanut butter-banana cream pie. It has already become a city legend. Dinner: 5:30-10:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 5:30-11:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$\$

SEEGER'S

Buckhead ★★★★★

111 W. Paces Ferry Road N.W. 404-846-9779.

Seeger closed his restaurant last September to let Johnson Studio remodel the interior, restructure his tasting menu (which now includes a grand chef's tasting of 12 courses for \$175 per person) and revamp the staff. Most of the interior changes — bold blue-and-gold carpeting, a salon in the bar area now secluded by plush drapes, far fewer tables and all new service ware — are hardly dramatic. But the staff is no longer as brittle as it once was, catering to whims and clamoring over the food. Fine lines, clean flavors and pristine presentation are the calling cards on every plate that leaves this spotless kitchen. A tasting menu might include Santa Barbara sashimi-style sardine, making a bold statement with contrasting textures of American paddlefish caviar and a frothy lemongrass foam. Seeger is always at his best with fish, and proves it with a fleshy, snowy white halibut poached in court bouillon and crowned with locally grown yellow oyster mushrooms that taste preternaturally good.

Everything — from the texture and temperature of savory egg custard to the perfect mouth feel of a mushroom — is as technically accurate as food can get. It's hard to picture this tiny renovated Buckhead house as the home of one of the Southeast's greatest restaurants. But Guenter Seeger is one of the country's great chefs, and a meal at his restaurant is the benchmark for fine dining in the Southeast. Dinner reservations available 5:30-10 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Lunch: noon-1:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. \$\$\$\$

WATERSHED

Decatur ★★★★★

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

A converted gas station in Decatur is an unassuming spot for a nationally recognized restaurant. Chef Scott Peacock and owner Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls have created a comfortable space with muted tones of teal bathing the walls and lots of serene bamboo out front. And it's an ideal setting for Peacock's genteel Southern dishes — a blessed reminder of how important cooking used to be to all of us. Savory shrimp grits with hearty slices of Pullman bread to dip or smear have become, like the fried chicken, staples on a menu that is half signature, half seasonal. Amid offerings of Greek-style fish served whole with lemon and capers are hardy short ribs with a corn bread so good it defies the laws of nature. 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. Brunch: 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sundays. \$\$-\$\$\$