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[editorial]



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season eatings



Reviews and photos by David Danzig

somewhere near the top of that list. The ribbon that cuts through Downtown Historic Roswell has become a certified phenomenon of independent restaurant concepts, and it's only a matter of time before the national press starts to take notice. A standout on the block, **Table and Main** was opened a couple of years ago by brothers Ryan and Daniel Pernice and Buckhead Life alum/chef Ted Lahey. Now the team has reassembled for **Osteria Mattone**, a cozy Italian joint focusing on Roman cuisine. Ryan Pernice cut his teeth at legendary New York Italian restaurant, Maialino, so his progression from farm cooking to Italian was a natural one. The restaurant sits in a small, quaint house that was gutted and stylishly renovated, making it feel all the more homey and neighborhood-like. I started with a couple of small dishes beginning with the Polpo (Italian for octopus), a grilled dish made with chickpeas, radicchio and mint-lime vin, which made me feel like I was sitting by the Mediterranean; the octopus fresh, perfectly charred and smoky. The salty oil balanced out with the hint of mint for a refreshing complement to the seafood. Next, the Capasante (Italian for scallop) with fried artichoke and truffle oil that can only be described as rich, but not so overpowering that you couldn't savor the different ingredients. For the pasta course I had the agnolotti (essentially a type of ravioli) stuffed with oxtail and short ribs—the delicate pasta covering the tender meat combining for a soft bite but with thunderous flavor. For dessert: a flourless almond cake with gelato that perfectly wrapped things up quite nicely. This is a flawlessly executed Italian experience that could thrive anywhere from Buckhead to Soho to The Spanish Steps. To the luck of us here in Atlanta, this place just happened to land on Canton Street. osteriamattone.com

3 Varuni Napoli

... years ago Giovanni Di Palma's Antico Pizza awoke a sleeping giant's appetite for the thin-crust, simple-yet-precise



3
Twin, wood-burning brick ovens producing Neapolitan magic at Varuni Napoli



1
The bloody mary at The Smelt Ring



4
Pan-seared duck liver with arugula puree at Ration and Dram

pies made with double zero flour and other native ingredients flown over fresh from the motherland. But, let's face it: as good as the pies are, Antico's dining experience—the waiting, wolfing and then promptly leaving leaves much to be desired. Luca Varuni, a true son of Naples, decided it was time to deliver an experience where food is only a part of the pie, and with **Varuni Napoli** he's knocked it out of the park. Taking over a nondescript commercial space at the intersection of Piedmont and Monroe, the open kitchen dining room greets you with an airy, cheerful smile of a dining room with cured meats and

garlic hanging from the ceiling and two enormous blue-tiled ovens that were brought over brick by Italian brick. Out of these ovens comes Varuni's custom magic including Amore Mio made with Mt. Vesuvius soil-enriched San Marzano tomato sauce, roasted artichokes, soppressata (mild salami), mushrooms and buffalo mozzarella. Or the Partenope made without sauce, roasted smoked peppers and basil. Naturally, classic pies such as Margherita and Marinara are available, but don't even bother asking for a custom pie; it's like requesting Eddie Van Halen to play a variation on a guitar solo. You don't mess with the



4

Cast-iron cooked chicken and waffles at Ration and Dram



5

The cacao coconut donut at Big Sky Buckhead

artist. Other menu highlights include the gorgeous Varuni Salad made with deep purple heirloom tomatoes and perfect prosciutto and for dessert struffoli (hand-rolled fried dough dipped in honey). If you are lucky Varuni's own mama and papa will be working that night, not uttering a word of English but emanating a heaping helpings of amore. And with lots of seating and a cozy outdoor patio, the pleasures of the food are easy to enjoy once you get in. Just don't be shocked if the word spreads quickly prompting waits. It's just that good. varuni.us

4 Ration and Dram

An occupational hazard of opening a pioneering restaurant concept is that eventually your talent will fly the nest and set up their own shop. That being the case the city owes a heap of thanks to the forces that assembled Holeman & Finch, whose alumni have taken to blazing trails of their own around the city. Now former

H & F founding partner Andy Minchow helms **Ration and Dram**, a new Edgewood/Kirkwood joint just across from a kids' soccer field on Arizona Avenue. Hipster parents and neighbors have quickly taken notice, honing in on the creative cuisine and top-shelf craft cocktails. Taking over the former Arizona Pub, Ration

has lightened up the split-level space, changing the palate to a light cream and seating people at maple butcher block tables and stylish, comfy chairs. Giant glass garage doors slide open the downstairs dining room to a long rectangular patio with picnic tables and the two stories can deceptively sit 150 people while still feeling very intimate. The menu sticks to hearty spins on American comfort food with flair: savory iron-skillet pies of chicken or grass-fed beef, fried pork chop sandwiches, duck liver salad, patty melts, and, for Sunday brunch, chicken and waffles served in a skillet. And, of course, fans of what H & F did for the city's mixology culture will relish Minchow's continuing cocktail wizardry. This is a prototype of a place that suits its neighborhood perfectly, but is still worthy of a venture into a small pocket of Intown gentrification. rationanddram.com

5 Big Sky Buckhead

Chef Hector Santiago's previous

concepts, **Pura Vida** and **Superpan**, remind me of a great TV show that's been canceled before its time; a show that likely garnered a bunch of critical praise, drew adoration from a cult-like following, but ultimately was canceled because it didn't fit in with the primetime lineup. Similarly, critics and neighborhood foodies unanimously adored Santiago's interpretations of Latin comfort food favorites, but the concepts just couldn't make it with the masses. But now he's back with a bigger, bolder and, gosh darn it, hopefully more commercially successful venture, **Big Sky Buckhead**. This time Santiago, along with executive chef Pedro Matos, plants a flag in the Cain Hill development in the still-thriving Buckhead bar district. Big Sky looms over the street like a towering Montana lodge on steroids with hulking wooden beams and stacked stone rising up over the strip. Inside is a habitat that is more bar-like than restaurant, but that only ensures that the pub crawlers will feel at home. So yes, I would hesitantly describe this as bar food, but only because of the setting. The food is brilliant, subtle and will please those both sober or *boarcho*. The Far East Guacamole cleverly spices up the avocado fav with wasabi and pickled ginger. The monster salads are available with toppings like pork belly, adobo roasted pork or BBQ slow-cooked beef. And whatever you do, don't miss Hector's Legendary Coconut Buns—slider-like steamed coconut bread stuffed with savory goodness like pork belly, roasted pork, ginger-battered chicken and beef. Or just gorge on the Big Sky Burger with onion chipotle spread. For dessert scarf down some coconut donuts—fried coconut bread rolled in cane sugar. Top to bottom everything was delicious and hopefully with the popularity of the bar offerings, Big Sky will be a long-running program in the ATL's primetime for years to come. bigskybuckhead.com

6 Bar Meatball

Dear readers do not be misled by the name: **Bar Meatball** is not just for boozing carnivores! Taking a page from

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