

Living & Arts

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Food & more by John Kessler

Our critic's best plates of the year

Back during my first go-round as The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's restaurant critic, I used to publish a roundup of the year's best dishes. Now that I have a full year of reviewing in 2011 behind me, it seems a good time to renew this tradition.

So below are my picks for the 14 best plates of food I ate on the job. Why 14 and not a nice round number? Because best is best:

Burrata at Cakes & Ale: Vermont burrata – that cream-filled bundle of tender mozzarella – comes with a pale green herbed walnut salsa and a chiffonade of curly kale in zippy cranberry vinaigrette. Hot, buttered toasts come on the side, encouraging you to build piles of head-exploding yum. Serious awesomeness here. 155 Sycamore St., Decatur, 404-377-7994, www.cakesandalerestaurant.com

Peking duck at Golden House: What fun to dig into a whole Peking duck, glossy and burnished, that a waiter wheels to the table. He masterfully carves the meat and skin onto a platter, and serves

it with julienned cucumbers and leeks, hoisin sauce and warm, fluffy steamed buns to split and stuff. The skin, while not as shattery crisp as some, sings with flavor. For a surcharge of \$10, you get two more courses from that duck: the legs and final shreds of meat find their way into a peppy stir-fry with bean sprouts and chives, while the ribs and back enrich a steaming tureen of soup outfitted with tofu and bok choy. 1600 Pleasant Hill Road, Duluth, 770-921-2228 (no website)

Meatloaf meatballs at Table & Main: This appetizer doesn't exactly break new ground, but then again it does. Three tender and ex-

ceptionally well-seasoned mounds of ground beef come with a ketchupy, vinegary glaze in a classy cast-iron casserole. It's comfort food elevated, and exactly the kind of dish on which a Southern bistro like Table & Main makes its name. 1028 Canton St., Roswell, 678-869-5178, www.tableandmain.com

Pumpkin crème brûlée at Chicken and the Egg: I suspect we'll be hearing more about pastry chef Karie Brown in coming years. Her desserts are familiar, but

Kessler continued on E4

More dining

► Seven-Day Menu Planner. E4

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14 choices to please the palate

Kessler

continued from E1

her flavors are often dynamic. Case in point: this warmed custard, sweetened with a cautious hand. You taste spice, cream, egg and pumpkin, not sugar. The banana pudding with wafers soaked in Woodford Reserve bourbon is also noteworthy. 800 Whitlock Ave., Marietta, 678-388-8813, www.chickandtheegg.com

Lunch buffet at Inchin's Bamboo Garden: If you are the kind of person who finds ultimate comfort in rich, spicy glop, then I've got just the ticket. One side of this bodacious buffet holds a selection of Indian-Chinese dishes from the menu: great mounds of Hakka noodles (stir-fried vermicelli), tangy cilantro rice, gobi Manchurian (fried cauliflower in glossy ginger sauce). The other side brings a selection of Indian dishes from Tadka next door: mutter paneer (peas and cheese in curry), dal makhani (creamed black lentils), fried pakoras, goat stew. You will go back for fourths. 11105 State Bridge Road, Alpharetta, 770-622-1445, www.bamboo-gardens.com

Duck breast with Thai risotto at Rathbun's: You know those food photographs that show the main ingredient in sharp focus but blur at the edges? That's the way the flavors work at Rathbun's. What a pleasure to saw at this ideally crisped and defatted skin and plump, pink breast with a steak knife. The rice? It provides the right sweet, garlicky tang as a backdrop. 112 Krog St., Atlanta, 404-524-8280, www.rathbunsrestaurant.com

Paloma de Mezcal cocktail at Escorpion: This thrillingly weird mix of smoky pineapple-infused mezcal with citrus and soda needs its salt-crusted rim not to cut the sugar but to ramp up the oddball flavor. Those who knock back this drink will hate it; those who sip tentatively will slowly fall in love. 800 Peachtree St., Atlanta, 678-666-5198, www.urestaurants.com

Spaghetti with Georgia



The Spicy Pork Sandwich on a toasted potato bun with kimchi coleslaw is a must-have at the Heirloom Market BBQ. Becky Stein Special

White Shrimp at No. 1: I literally wanted to inhale this boldly seasoned pasta, tiling with garlic, Pequinies and crunchy bread. It's rich, so consider a portion as the most satisfying around. 129 E. Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur, 678-333-1111, www.no246.com

Rabbit at One Ear: A braised then fried rabbit is as melted as it is crunchy, only its bright parsley and squeeze of lemon make you revel. But when you pierce your fork about the pig's loin. Lagniappe! 1029 Peachtree Ave., Atlanta, 404-525-1111, www.oneearedstag.com

Tasting of Spring Vegetables at Restaurant E: The most brilliant vegetable town varies with the season as you might expect. But come

on a metal casserole brimming with hot items and a wildly inventive salad alongside. When I try it, the highlights include golden beet puree with balsamic sorghum walnuts, creamed kohlrabi, braised Vidalia onion stems and velvety cranberry beans. 2277 Peachtree Road, Atlanta, 404-355-0321, www.restauranteeugene.com

Cheese with pickled anchovy at Bacchanalia: I always love the point in the meal at Bacchanalia when you get to the "cheese and contrast" course – that reflective symphonic movement before the rousing finale of dessert. Earlier this year I was thrilled with a plate that pitted slivers of Zamarano (sharp, dry sheep's milk cheese) with celery, boquerones (pickled white anchovies), greens and minced egg. It was one of those dishes where each bold flavor polished the too-sharp edges from the oth-

Wood-roasted Venison at 4th & Swift: Gorgeous, rosy slices of this lean but melt-ingly tender meat arrive on spiced kabocha squash puree with sweet pomegranate jus lapping against the sides. It's one of those dishes that tastes engineered to make you go "oooooh." You'll want to find a great wine pairing off the fine list to put this over the top. 621 North Ave., Atlanta, 678-904-0160, www.4thandswift.com

fruitwood. It arrives chopped – a heap of crusty, black-pink porkiness on a toasted potato bun with kimchi coleslaw. How do you say "oink" in Korean? 2243 Akers Mill Road, Atlanta, 770-612-2502, www.heirloommarketbbq.com

Profiteroles at La Fourchette: I appreciate the nods to classic French technique at this Buckhead bistro, which extend to the welcome dessert list. These small cream puffs arrive crisp and brittle (as well they should), filled with hazelnut ice cream and moated with salted caramel sauce. Crunchy bursts of toffee hide in the ice cream for a sweet surprise. 3133 Piedmont Road, Atlanta, 404-748-1229, www.lafourchetteatlanta.com

Your favorites? Discuss on John Kessler's blog: www.ajc.com/go/foodandmore. Or email John: jkessler@ajc.com.

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