

CREATIVE LOAFING

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RESTAURANT REVIEW ATLAS 22

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FISH FOOD: Miso-glazed, peanut-crusted trout with mushrooms, pac choi, and sweet peas

THE
future



OF
fine

Atlas' chef Christopher Grossman breathes new life into Atlanta fine dining

BY JENNIFER ZYMAN

Just when Atlanta fine dining seemed gone for good, Atlas opened and hope was restored. The restaurant has done something remarkable: created an elegant restaurant with relaxed service and excellent food. It also manages to feel like it's been around for ages. Atlas is reintroducing Atlanta to an exciting new style of fine dining built upon the ashes of its former self.

Taking over the space formerly occupied by Paces 88 in the St. Regis Hotel in Buckhead, Atlas is grand and comfortable. A towering wooden door with an oversized brass handle leads diners into the stunning space, which the Johnson Studio reinvented drawing inspiration from around the world. There's China in the trellises that frame the open kitchen set against shiny emerald tiles and a touch of Great Britain in the mix of rich green fabrics. Illuminated glass shelves lined with a menagerie of twinkling liquor bottles and glassware separate the bar from the main dining room. A pricey art collection featuring works from Picasso to Léger hangs amid the tables. The art belongs to Joe Lewis, a self-made British billionaire and the main investor in Tavistock Group, the company that owns the St. Regis Atlanta and Atlas among many other entities.

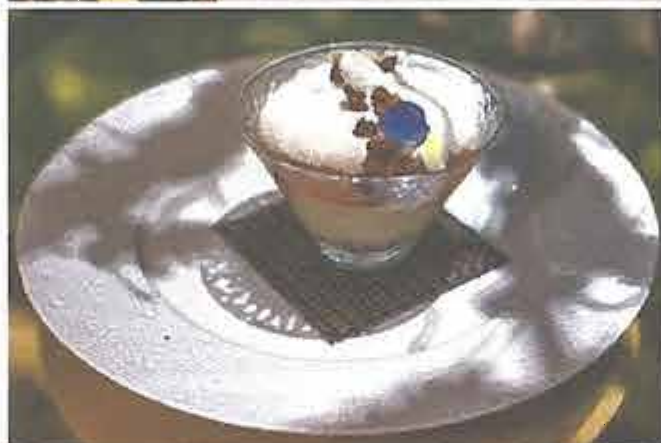
Atlas has an impressive variety of seating to choose from. There are tall tables in front of the kitchen, upholstered, high-back love seats in the dining room, and stools at the bar where food is also served. One night before dinner, we settled into a pair of red velvet lounge chairs to unwind with cocktails and chilled oysters. We tried the Southern Buck cocktail, a gingery, whisky-based riff on the Moscow Mule, and the Titaness, an enormous, ice-filled wine glass brimming with a ruby-red mix of Lillet Rouge, Crème de Cassis, sparkling wine, and lime juice. It's easy to imagine a well-heeled woman sipping the latter on a yacht in Mallorca, Spain.

The wine list has a good mix of prestigious bottles, but some are on the higher end of the mark-up spectrum. One could argue this is to be expected at a hotel restaurant where a burger and fries fetches \$29. Generally speaking, the goal of many wine programs is to have a bottle on every table. But with most ringing up at more than \$60 each — not to mention the handful of \$1,000 Bordeaux — it's better to go for the wines by the glass or half bottles.

Tavistock tapped fine dining veteran chef Gerry Klaskala of Aria and Canoe to consult on Atlas. Klaskala recruited chef de cuisine Christopher Grossman, who was working at the French Laundry and had previously



Hungry for more?
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from Atlas at clati.com.



DINING FINE: Atlas' truffle potato pierogi dumplings (clockwise from top left) with braised beef and crisped Parmesan; illuminated shelves separate Atlas' bar area from the main dining room; executive chef Christopher Grossman working in the open kitchen; sunflower sprout salad; caramel custard with chocolate pretzel and cream

Grossman coaxes the best out of French white asparagus by cooking it with milk until the vegetable's inherent fibrousness is softened. The delicacy is heightened with black truffles that lend decadent earthiness to the hollandaise. Morel mushrooms are showcased in a fist-sized tangle of homemade pappardelle noodles cooked with Parmesan stock and served with English pea purée, pine nuts, and zippy lemon oil.

A tall heap of sunflower sprouts, pea shoots, and radish sprouts mixed with braised and toasted sunflower seeds is smartly set atop a house-made buttermilk ricotta and dill aioli. I found immense pleasure in scooping up a forkful of sprouts, swiping it through the aioli, and crunching into each bite. I expected the truffle potato pierogi dumplings to be something like the half-moons I'd find in my Polish grandmother's kitchen, but what arrived was a refined and light take on the usually heavy dish. The truffled, gnocchi-like orbs arranged with pieces of unctuous beef cheek looked like a miniature landscape of rolling hills on the plate.

Game meats like the venison or the veal medallions served with earthy morel sauce and crisp sweetbreads round out the menu with refreshing depth. Grossman's fish dishes, such as sole crisped

in canola oil, best showcase the produce of the moment. Layered like playing cards, the pieces of fish were set atop spring hummus made with ramps, garbanzo beans and green garlic, and a succotash of fava beans, English peas, bacon, and piquillo peppers.

One of the best dishes I have eaten all year is sadly no longer on the menu: butter poached king crab set atop Carolina gold rice, red and English peas, scallions, and marigold blossoms. It was light, substantial, and decadent all at once; the kind of dish whose last bite I dreaded. A similar combination of accoutrements is now the stage for cobia crisped in oil.

Execution of technique and consistency are paramount to a restaurant's success. Grossman's kitchen has both. Every dish is crafted with such care and purpose that no ingredient feels frivolous or excessive. The chef says he tries to strike a balance between tiny artistic plates that

try too hard and a hefty steak and baked potato. "You've got a complete dinner," Grossman says. "But at the same time, when you are eating your entrée, you are [experiencing it in] as many ways as you can. I'm fighting that law of diminishing returns so you still enjoy the last bite."

The à la carte menu is seasonal and dishes change daily. Although there is no tasting menu listed, it is an option, and the chef says possibilities are endless. If a diner is in the mood for carrots, the kitchen will build a dish around carrots, given that they're in season.

After being swept up in Grossman's cooking, I hoped pastry chef Judy Roman's desserts would

strike with the same force as the savory courses. But the brownie in the deconstructed sundae lacked that fudgy, chocolate richness, and the huckleberry doughnuts were so oil-logged my palate was overwhelmed before a speck of the bright huckleberry filling touched my tongue.

ATLAS

★★★★☆

88 W. Paces Ferry Road N.W.
404-600-6471.
www.atlasrestaurant.com.

Hours:

Sun.-Thurs., 5:30-10 p.m.;
Fri.-Sat., 5:30-10:30 p.m.

Entrées: \$29-\$45.

Full bar. Valet parking.