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## Adult pleasures without the bells and whistles

By: John Kessler

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### Atlas

88 W. Paces Ferry Road, Atlanta

**3 stars**



A meal at Atlas does not kick off with a spiel from the waiter about how each dish will come out of the kitchen when it's ready and is meant to be shared. Nor is there an option of a five-, eight- or 14-course "chef's tasting menu" that begins with an edible doodad served in a Chinese soup spoon.

Instead, you will be greeted with a classic à la carte menu — appetizer, main, dessert — offering no embellishment beyond an irresistible bread service. (Another gougère? Oh, why not?) You may notice grateful diners throughout the dining room quietly murmuring "hallelujah" under their breath.

Not until I visited this new restaurant in Buckhead's St. Regis Hotel did I realize what a huge, Atlas-sized hole had formed on the Atlanta restaurant landscape. Here is a restaurant that invites you to dine well but not worship your food, and to relish your two hours in this cossetting environment (tablecloths! noise control!) where you'll be as comfortable in jeans as in business attire.

Does that make me sound old and conservative? Yeah, maybe. But my soul thrills to the notion of a beautiful, impeccably crafted, locally sourced dinner that does not involve the locution "for your next course, we have something we call ..."

Atlas replaces Paces 88, the first St. Regis restaurant, which arrived on the scene with formal service and a wan, beige-on-beige color scheme that highlighted the dining room's vaulted ceiling. I went once for lunch, ate a \$16 sandwich, and found the whole business kind of dreary. Others must have as well, as it never got any traction.

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The Tavistock Group, a private investment company that runs a dozen or more upscale restaurants throughout the country, was charged with reimagining the space. They made the smart, smart decision to go with local talent attuned to Atlanta tastes. Gerry Klaskala of Aria consulted on the menu and appointed his talented former chef de cuisine, Christopher Grossman, as chef.

Meanwhile, Atlanta's Johnson Studio went to town warming up the gorgeous but chilly dining room, and their work here is brilliant. This is the city's first grand post-recession dining room, and it bottles the distilled essence of Buckhead resurgens: one part the hunt-club attitude of the late, lamented Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton, one part the dark lacquered-wall coziness of the Tavern at Phipps, and a touch of the comfy, dressed-down, easy money attitude of Bone's.

Unlike Bone's, where framed photos of yesteryear's grandees adorn the walls, here we have European masterworks from the private collection of Tavistock founder Joe Lewis. It includes paintings by Lucien Freud, Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Marc Chagall and a Chiam Soutine portrait of a young girl that has been shown at the High Museum of Art.

You walk past this portrait over the hostess stand, past a library where a fire roars at all times, past a sleek little copper bar, and find yourself in a dining room set like the den in your richest friend's home. The open kitchen extends along the entire back wall. To keep things from getting too formal, the servers all wear unisex gingham shirts. I'm guessing they hate them.

But I'd also wager the staff (which includes many veterans of Atlanta's top restaurants under the watchful eye of manager Jason Babb) loves serving this food. Grossman and his team cook with finesse and build complex layers of flavor and visual intrigue on each gorgeous Bernardaud plate.

You may start light with a stunning (if a bit sweet for my taste) assemblage of cured hiramasa kingfish in pineapple consommé, with chili, pomegranate and crisp ringlets of fresh heart of palm. A bowler-sized tuft of

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shoots — pea, sunflower, radish — cap a swipe of tangy buttermilk ricotta on the plate; the sharp and creamy flavors dance along with greenness and crunch. This dish tastes like a plea for spring to get sprung.

But you also can start heavy, and you shouldn't hesitate to indulge. Grossman has a gentle touch even as he sends you truffle potato pierogi dumplings, browned and puffy, in a composition of melty braised wagyu beef, celery root, roasted mushroom and crisped parmesan. His canny use of meat reduction sauces and vegetable purées keeps it real.

Another don't miss: shreds of braised Alabama rabbit leg tangle with hand-cut pappardelle pasta in a sauce that reflects the season — perhaps a saffron squash puree with chestnut confit, or a velouté of the first spring greens.

I love the main dishes here because each brings a composition of interesting vegetables and garnishes that subtly interact with the fish or meat. A meaty hunk of lightly smoked sturgeon cuts like a steak and may come, depending on the week's provender, with chickpeas, white beans and satsuma segments, or picholine olives, artichokes and charred broccolini.



Get the picture? Lots of fun things to chase around the plate and only a bit of sauce to distract.

Venison loin from a few weeks ago has given way to a fat little venison chop, but it gets the same vibrant plum-cherry purée, barley porridge and a whole, if petite, roasted parsnip. Grossman wants you to use your knife, take a bit of this and swipe it in a bit of that. It's the anti-small plate.

Even the chicken merits applause. This natural bird from White Oak Pastures in Bluffton comes two ways, with a crisp-skinned breast and a tasty (if tough) roulade of leg with mushroom stuffing. This is a plate that likes wine.

I like wine, too, which is why I balk a bit at the prices on this appealing list. If you don't hesitate at the \$60 range, you can drink a nice 2012 Daniel Boulard Morgon Delys from Beaujolais. If you don't mind a \$25 corkage fee, bring your own. I've done both.

Pastry chef Judy Roman has a fine touch with lighter desserts, such as a tremulous coconut panna cotta, or an assemblage of crisp meringues with passion fruit curd. The butterscotch chocolate custard gets signature status, but I find it doesn't have quite enough chocolate oomph.

But if I may say so: oomph, schmoomph. A lot of restaurants grab your attention with culinary pyrotechnics, intense flavors and over-the-top formats. Atlas reminds us of that rarest of culinary ideals: subtlety.

## Atlas

**Overall rating:** 3 stars

**Food:** seasonal, beautifully presented American fare served à la carte in three courses.

**Service:** strikes just the right balance of formal and clubby. Some great veterans of the Atlanta dining world on staff.

**Best dishes:** sprout salad with buttermilk ricotta, truffled potato pierogi with braised wagyu beef, smoked sturgeon, venison chop with plum-cherry sauce, Arctic char with quinoa, coconut panna cotta.

**Vegetarian selections:** There are the makings of an excellent off-menu vegetarian entree in this kitchen.

**Price range:** \$\$\$\$

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