

# ATLANTA SOCIAL Season

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Spring 2015

# season

## eatings



Reviews and photos by David Danzig



A 1



B 2



B

### A Atlas

The **St. Regis Atlanta**, the undisputed heavyweight luxury hotel champion in town, has been glaringly devoid of a notable restaurant for several years now. Opened at the nadir of the Great Recession, a time when luxury and opulence were passionately vilified, the property took its time zeroing in on a concept with the right combination of panache and approachability both in price and atmosphere. With **Atlas**, they have struck the perfect balance. Luxe, but not stuffy. Lavish but not pretentious. Spendy but not exorbitant. You enter through a massive wooden door into a warm and clubby lounge with roaring fire and books on shelves as if you were having cocktails and snacks in the study of a contemporary grand estate. Move past the attractive bar and more lounge seating and into the open dining room that also instantly expresses high-design warmth and comfort. Seating is on rich, designer fabrics and soft leather with loose pillows in the booths. Romanesque arches crown the ceilings and on the walls, several million dollars of art work peer out at you — original works by Picasso, Chagall, and Van Gogh among others — less a typical restaurant than a splendid private museum which, if only, you could live

in yourself full-time.

Out of the stylish open kitchen with turquoise subway tile backsplash come bold and beautiful comfort food staples — meats, seafood and game artfully presented and mentored by consulting chef Gerry Klaskala of **Aria** fame, one of the few true fine-dining concepts that weathered the recent economic downturn. The food is plated beautifully — truffle-potato pierogi dumplings, nantucket scallops, Colorado lamb loin — all are pleasurable to the palate and aesthetic. I was particularly drawn in (and blown away by) a couple of the wild game offerings: the braised rabbit served with a melt-in-your-mouth pappardelle and the spectacular venison loin served with a savory barley porridge and charred Brussels sprouts. These were two of the finest all-around dishes I've enjoyed in some time. For dessert the goat cheese tart with preserved cherries was both subtle and tantalizing, not so sweet so you could savor the sublime Laura Chenel Chevere goat cheese. Fine dining needed to be redefined after the crash in 2008. It had gotten too full of itself and it was too bloody expensive. After observing cautionary tales of excess and greed, Atlas tweaked the fine dining equalizer, making this space easily worthy of your finest milestone celebration or just a great place to unwind after a long week. As far as I'm concerned the "new normal" is pretty sweet. [atlasrestaurant.com](http://atlasrestaurant.com)

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1. Lamb Kielbasa Lamb Loin (Erica George Dines) 2. The Fuhgeddaboutit pizza at Real Fix Pizzeria 3. Inside Real Fix Pizzeria 4. Cooking in the attractive open kitchen at Atlas 5. The library-like lounge at Atlas

### B Real Fix Pizzeria

The F&H Food Trading Group with **Salt Factory** (with locations in Roswell, Alpharetta and Woodstock), **1920 Tavern** (Roswell) and **Little Alley Steak** (Roswell and soon-to-be-named new location) have jumped into the pizza war with **Real Fix Pizzeria** in downtown Roswell. The chef, Giacomo





A 4



A 5





Lazzano, is from Palermo, Italy. I asked him some questions about his techniques to find that maybe he speaks 10 words of English. In other words, he's the real deal and he's making some gorgeous pies! The main attraction proved the Neapolitan-style pies. It helps when you build your pies with the best ingredients — stuff like 15-year-old “mother dough,” imported double zero flour and Sicilian salt. Then you develop the dough in a climate-controlled dough room using only the purest five-times filtered water. Toss that dough nice and flat and then load it up with amazing ingredients like San Marzano tomato paste, homemade buffalo mozzarella, prosciutto, local spec, fresh oregano — you name it. Then the chefs slide the pie into one of their two massive wood-burning ovens and bake for less than 90 seconds at 900 degrees. The crust comes out with a little char at the edges but stays chewy, salty and savory — perfect for showcasing the ingredients. You can design your own or try one of 16 different Neapolitan styles — eight with red sauce and eight with white sauce. My favorite is the “Fageddaboudit” with San Marzano Tomato, pepperoni, local bacon, ricotta, homemade mozzarella and basil.

Carrying over from Salt and 1920 are a couple of varieties of fried pizzas that are spectacular as well.

Also be on the lookout — Salt Factory just opened a third location, this time in downtown Woodstock...and, I have heard a rumor that there could be another Little Alley Steak coming in 2015, and it could be good news for those of us inside the Perimeter. Keep your radar up for more F&H in 2015. [fixpizzeria.fhfoodtradinggroup.com](http://fixpizzeria.fhfoodtradinggroup.com)

### C Le Bilboquet

You know that little game with a stick that's got a ball tied to a string and you try to fling the ball into a little cup at the other end of the stick? Guess what? That's called bilboquet. **Le Bilboquet** (the restaurant) brings that sort of whimsical and refreshing atmosphere into the **Buckhead Atlanta** development with artful renditions of traditional French bistro fare. It stands alone smack dab in the middle of the cobblestone pavers of the development, natural light pouring in through windows on three sides of the dining room. The interior is cosmopolitan, white tablecloth elegance all the way, but the artwork evokes an almost folk art-esque motif including a Jasper Johns-style American Flag mix-media work that hangs over the main dining area.

The food is pure “ooh la la,” with classics like tuna tartare, salmon tartare, nicoise salad with tuna, croques monsieur and madame and even a magnificent curveball, a Cajun Chicken dish with fries that simply was one of the best chicken dishes I have had in a long time. For dessert the profiteroles were a revelation — the pastry, warm and fluffy, sitting on creamy scoops of vanilla ice cream and then perfectly drizzled in dark chocolate. The restaurant's renditions are elegant, beautiful and would hold up to scrutiny in any arrondissement in Paris. **Le Bilboquet** is a perfect fix for those who used to enjoy **Brasserie La Coze** in Lenox, a legendary spot for

long lunches, flowing bubbly and joie de vivre. Expect to pay Parisian prices, but the quality is worth every Euro. [lebilboquetatlanta.com](http://lebilboquetatlanta.com)

### D Southern Gentlemen

Also in the **Buckhead Atlanta** development, located directly above the Shake Shack and next door to its sister spot, **Gypsy Kitchen**, comes **The Southern Gentleman**. Designed like an antebellum plantation that's raided Restoration Hardware for its modernizations. The Southern Gentleman boasts all of the trappings for genteel Dixieland: plantation-style shutters, oscillating caged fans on the ceiling, antique (looking) tin ceiling tiles, seersucker curtains and a big oil painting of Mark Twain. Even the dangling lights look like high-design bug zappers.

The menu has some fun with the classics including a deconstructed deviled egg where breaded and fried yolks sit on top of square boiled egg whites, held together with a walking-cane style toothpick. Another particularly pretty plate was the pickled gulf shrimp served on pumpnickel toast and garnished with colorful (and edible) flowers, sprouts and herbs. I also really enjoyed the Daily Grind Burger made with Riverview Farms pork and served on an H&F bun. The heartier the dishes, the more the kitchen seems to find its sweet spot. Also do not miss out on the cocktails, a diverse roster of elixirs each served in distinct throw-back vessels — cordials, hi-balls, tumblers, kettles and even tea cups (yes, tea cups). The Grit and Grace, a concoction made with rye, lemon and apricot liquor, comes chilled in an antique-style ornate porcelain tea cup complete with handle and matching saucer. Just like having afternoon tea with a twist! Throw in an extensive list of brown liquors and you are in tall cotton. Another solid showing from the guys who brought us **Milton's Cuisine and Cocktails**, **Big Ketch** and **Smokebelly**. [thesoutherngentlemanatl.com](http://thesoutherngentlemanatl.com)



## E Cooks & Soldiers

In the heart of Basque territory (northeastern Spain/southwestern France), an annual festival takes place each January that inspires the townspeople to dress as cooks and soldiers and parade through the streets, banging on drums deep into the night. Newly opened **Cooks & Soldiers** at 691 14th Street NW in Atlanta demonstrates not just a reverence for such raucous celebration, but for the entire spirit of Basque culture — nonconforming, free-flowing and chock-full of personality. The dining room design by Aiz (who else these days) reflects this attitude in an open yet simplistic design using minimalist materials and organic features. The constellation of teardrop lights dangling above the dining room appear as if a chandelier has been deconstructed and set free to roam. In the front of the house a handsome bar overlooks the White Provisions building on Howell Mill Road and functions simultaneously as cocktail oasis and charcuterie plate launch pad.

Small plates (aka tapas, aka pintxos in Basque language) are the stars of the show. Chef Landon Thompson admits that while he tethers the menu to the traditional Basque ingredients

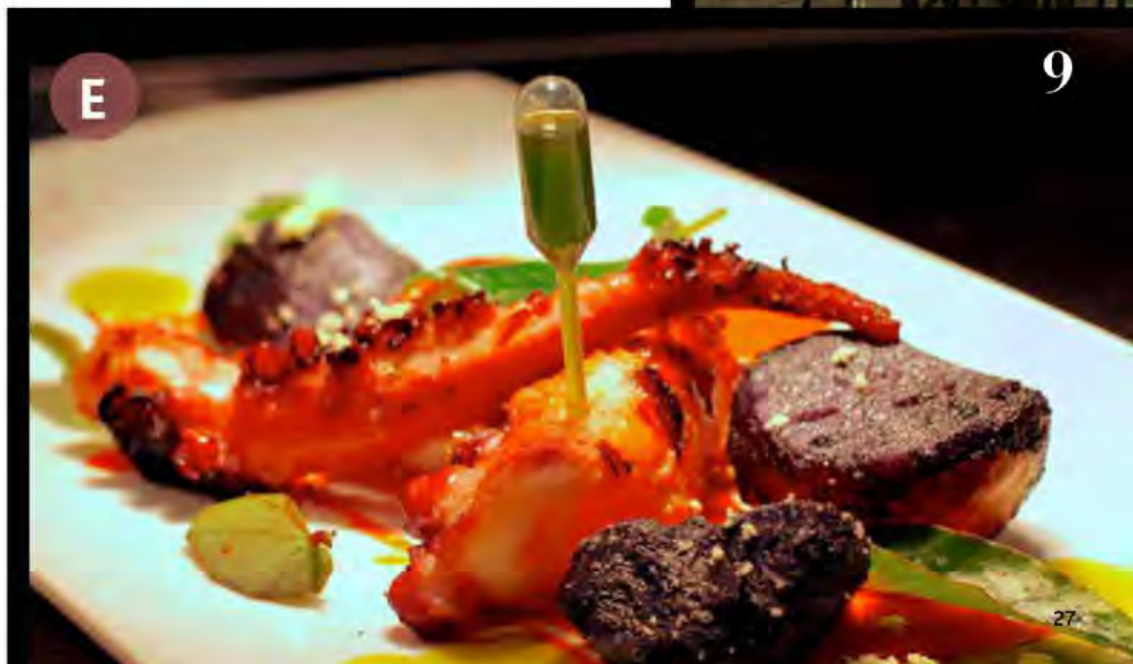
like seafood, meat and pork grilled over charcoal, the true Basque spirit demands improvisation with the best possible ingredients at hand. This approach yields some amazingly creative riffs in the culinary playbook: I loved the polpo (octopus), which was served with a small pappette jammed into the tentacles filled with a piquillo emulsion and covered with edible (and delicious) begonia leaves. Another brilliant twist was the tartare, a dish that looks to be a dead-ringer for steak tartare with raw egg and all, but actually is a vegetarian dish composed of tomatoes and other herbs (carrots somehow simulate the raw egg). In one entree, blood sausage bits are stealthily mixed into butternut squash that accompanies a perfectly charred Berkshire pork tenderloin yielding an enigmatic rich flavor that becomes mysteriously addictive. There are so many pleasant surprises on this menu that it's impossible to spend enough time on each one here; you will just have to make the pilgrimage yourself. Luckily the ambiance and price points qualify this as both a stylish neighborhood haunt as well as a special occasion destination so you won't have to wait for something out of the ordinary — just go! [cooksandsoldiers.com](http://cooksandsoldiers.com)

6. Crab meat and avocado salad at Le Bilboquet

7. Pickled gulf shrimp on pumpnickel at The Southern Gentleman

8. Inside Cooks and Soldiers

9. Grilled spanish octopus with a piquillo emulsion delivered by a pappette







**10.** Seared Beef Tenderloin, Veal Sweetbreads, Rosemary Farro, Brussel Sprouts, Black Pepper & Foie Gras Butter

**11.** The hot tamales with chilli-green pork at The El Felix

**12.** The wood library at Twin Smokers

**13.** Inside Twin Smokers

**14.** Queso fundido with Chorizo at The El Felix



## F Nikolai's Roof and Trader Vic's

Growing up as a kid in Marietta in the '70s, I have vivid recollections of my parents' big date nights when they would gussy up in polyester, hop in the Ford Maverick and shoot down I-75 for a night on the town. Back in those days the hot spots were **Nikolai's Roof** and **Trader Vic's**, two polar opposite concepts, one on the top floor and one on the bottom, both housed in the toniest hotel of its time, the **Hilton Atlanta**. And while time and fashion turned their backs on these treasures for the last decade or so, I am here to report, some 35-plus years since their heyday, that these two concepts are not only alive, they suddenly are back in style. Originally birthed as a very formal Russian concept, Nikolai's held

the crown of Atlanta's fine dining pinnacle for years, residing in the penthouse of the hotel with views that were (at the time) unparalleled. With a recent top-to-bottom makeover, the once Czarist-style dining room with onion dome plate warmers has been replaced by a slick, cozy yet modern rendering. The dimly lit space yields views of the connector that are still worthy and the service, quiet and attentive, remains some of the best in the city. There are still icy flights of vodka for your enjoyment, but the menu has emigrated toward fine French and American cuisine with exquisite versions of duck breast, beef tenderloin and oven-roasted lamb chops. The dishes are beautiful, hearty and, perhaps most enjoyably, you can actually hear yourself think in the refreshingly hushed atmosphere.

A very old-school concept, indeed. [nikolaisroof.com](http://nikolaisroof.com)

Trader Vic's has occupied the Hilton's basement since 1978, a sprawling, cozy den of floor-to-ceiling bamboo, thatched ceilings, mahogany totems and tikis. Hit the elevator button to the lower lobby and step into a Polynesian time-warp where smokey goodness envelops you the moment you come inside, the product of two massive cylindrical Chinese wood-burning ovens burning oak logs that slow-cook and smoke steak, chicken and pork, which are hung by hooks over the coals. The drink menu, anchored by the restaurant's signature Mai Tai, possesses more pages than the actual food menu, an impressive devotion to bartending that has lain dormant until just recently. And the food is eye-poppingly good, with flavors that still hold up more than 35 years later: The pork chop and surf and turf were prepared perfectly and proved to be simply outstanding dishes. Vic's might have spent a few years toiling away as a caricature of Polynesian culture, but the recycling of fashion has thrust this gem back to the future and made its charms worthy of rediscovery. [tradervicsatl.com](http://tradervicsatl.com)

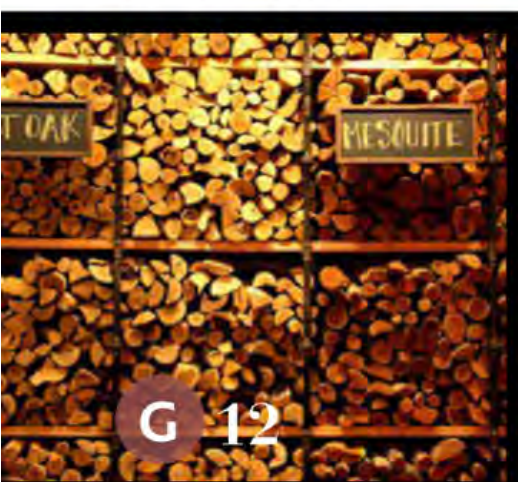
## G Twin Smokers BBQ

BBQ is booming in the ATL and the latest concept reaches deep in the heart of Texas for inspiration. Just a few blocks from the CNN Center comes **Twin Smokers**, an obvious name once you gaze upon Elizabeth and Matthew, the two massive fire truck red, tractor trailer-sized, indoor smoking boxes that sit just off the dining room. It's actually the polar opposite of an open kitchen, but knowing that the smoking is going on just feet away from my table puts a BBQ nerd like me into hog heaven. On the other end of the restaurant sits the "wood library," a 15-foot-tall organized wood pile composed of split logs that fuel the smokers ranging from Texas mesquite and post oak (for the beef) to hickory and white oak (for the chicken and pork). The overall effect is a handsome and homey space with folk



art on the exposed brick walls and a lively bar in the center of all the action. Order at the counter and grab a seat. I worried that such obsessive attention to the woods and the slick design of the space would equate to the food being a little too “cheffed-up.” But fear not, this is straight-down-the-fairway BBQ where the chefs allow the processes of slow cooking with smoke to be the star of the show.

The Creekstone brisket with a nice layer of bark was excellent, as was the Patak sausage — very nice and spicy. I also enjoyed the “Ginormous” beef rib and the pulled Cheshire pork, both lean with outstanding flavor, matching up well with the selections of sauces at the table. Standout sides were the collards, burnt-ends chili and marinated beets. For dessert, of course, banana pudding. As downtown continues its evolution, drawing both more tourists and locals with its offerings, it’s nice to see some good ole authenticity leaving its mark. [twinsmokersbbq.com](http://twinsmokersbbq.com)



**G** 12



**G** 13

## H The El Felix

Mexican and hybrid “Tex-Mex” cooking has always been a frustrating paradox for me. In my experience: the more authentic the flavors and preparation, the more sketchy the ingredients. The better the quality the meats and veggies, the food becomes an Americanized caricature. I ask why can’t you have authenticity, honoring the flavors and south-of-the border spirit, but for heaven’s sake use quality local sources? Ford Fry of **St. Cecilia, JCT. Kitchen** and **King + Duke** fame offers us Mex-Tex salvation in the new **El Felix**. Set in the Avalon development off 400 and Old Milton Parkway, the restaurant is the least opulent of Fry’s concepts — it’s quite spartan in fact. Raw cinderblocks are exposed throughout the space (of course, still in a stylish way); from the ceiling a sophisticated design of simple woven ropes and that’s about it.

Thankfully no clichés make it into the design — no sombreros, bullfight posters or other distractions. All that’s left is the food and its magnificence. Right out of the gate you will notice a

difference in the freshly fried, warm, super-thin chips and a softball-sized mound of fresh guacamole. Then make your way into the sublime queso fundido made with broiled chihuahua and Monterey Jack cheeses. Into this dish you can add fresh chorizo sausage, rajas (poblano peppers), hongos (mushrooms) or camarones (shrimp) and slather upon pillowy fresh flour tortillas (which are little works of art themselves). All the meats are lean, wood-grilled and marinated perfectly. The same quality resonates in the ceviches, enchiladas, carne asadas, fajitas and tacos. This is Mexican food like you have always fantasized about, but never quite had. Finally, there is a Mexican joint where foodies can feel part of the fiesta. [theelfelix.com](http://theelfelix.com)

*Check out my new website at [bitesnsites.net](http://bitesnsites.net) and listen for my “Breaking Chews” radio reports every Saturday on News 95.5 and AM 750 WSB on Belinda Skelton’s Atlanta Living.*

*If you know of any exciting or secret spots, please send tips to [seasoneatings@seasonmagazine.com](mailto:seasoneatings@seasonmagazine.com).*



**H**

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