

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

# The Atlanta 50

Food. Drinks. Service. Atmosphere.

## The 50 best dining experiences in the metro area

### Discover

Our pick  
for Atlanta's  
#1 restaurant

### Taste

Unique flavors  
that set these  
picks apart

### Experience

The criteria  
for selecting the  
top 10 & beyond

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Save your favorites, see a map of all 50  
restaurants and get behind-the-scenes videos

The Atlanta  
**50**

# The Atlanta 50 is back

It has been more than a decade since The Atlanta Journal-Constitution produced a listing of the 50 best restaurants in metro Atlanta. We're thrilled to revive it.

Atlanta's dining scene has matured to the point that it regularly receives national attention; lists rating local establishments are more common than ever, although fewer publications invest in restaurant criticism.

AJC dining critics Ligaya Figueras and Henri Hollis have spent months eating out, with the goal of determining the restaurants that deliver metro Atlanta's top dining experiences – where food, drink, service and atmosphere combine for highly memorable meals. This list is meant to guide readers to the area's most reliably excellent and satisfying dining experiences, regardless of trendiness, neighborhood, cuisine or price.

Using a systematic evaluation process, our dining critics tabulated scores from nearly 150 anonymous restaurant visits they made. The method resulted in a few surprises; some widely acclaimed restaurants did not make the top 50, while several older or under-the-radar places scored high.

From the resulting list, the critics ranked the metro area's 10 top restaurants, recognizing the businesses that provide Atlanta's most complete dining experiences. The remaining 40 restaurants are listed in alphabetical order.

More details about the selection process are outlined below, but the Atlanta 50 is meant to be the most rigorously researched and transparently compiled restaurant guide in metro Atlanta.

We hope that it will serve as your resource for stellar dining experiences – until the 2026 Atlanta 50 is released next fall.



**Aria** Modern American



**Lazy Betty** Modern American



**Madeira Park** European

## About our selection process

The Atlanta 50 restaurants were selected by Atlanta Journal-Constitution dining critics Ligaya Figueras and Henri Hollis.

Our process for building the Atlanta 50 began with the acknowledgment that no list is perfect. It's not possible for two people to eat at every independently owned restaurant in metro Atlanta within a few months.

That caveat aside, our plan focused on journalistic rigor and transparency. This list is meant to be a tool for readers of the AJC, not an awards program for restaurants.

We first had to define what it means to be one of the "best" restaurants. The term is subjective, and diners find restaurants appealing for many reasons. Some prioritize creativity and a regularly changing menu, while others seek reliability and consistency.

Some seek out restaurants with stylish, engaging interiors, while others favor restaurants that have mastered a predictable, formal service style.

We balanced these differing priorities by measuring restaurants on the totality of the dining experience they provide.

Our evaluations were based on four key areas: food, service, drinks and atmosphere. We gave the most weight to food, followed closely by the quality of service. Drinks and atmosphere together made up a quarter of a restaurant's rating.

This scoring system enabled us to compare



Ligaya Figueras



Henri Hollis

restaurants that differ in cuisine and service style fairly. However, it tended to eliminate restaurants that do not have a beverage program or offer service that has limited interaction with guests.

We also chose not to consider price, because "value" also is subjective. We address value in weekly AJC restaurant reviews, but the Atlanta 50 acknowledges the area's top restaurant experiences, regardless of price.

We considered only local, independently owned restaurants in the five main metro counties: Cobb, Clayton, DeKalb, Fulton and Gwinnett. We also excluded restaurants undergoing renovations during the evaluation period.

Finally, building a list of 50 restaurants required us to visit many more than that. Between the two of us, we conducted nearly 150 individual restaurant visits, the bulk of those between mid-June and the end of August. The majority of the restaurants that made the list received visits from both Ligaya Figueras and Henri Hollis, and our research cost about \$30,000.

We have confidence in the integrity and thoroughness of the Atlanta 50, but we know there are hidden gems that still need to be discovered, as well as old favorites that deserve reevaluation. We hope our readers will help find the gaps and turn over more stones as the AJC builds this annual list into the future.

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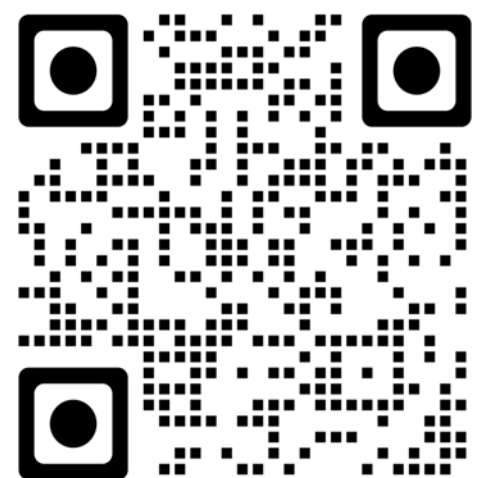
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## Explore the Atlanta 50 online

■ Use your smartphone's camera to scan the QR code below or go to [AJC.com/atlanta50](https://ajc.com/atlanta50) or the **AJC News** app, where you'll find the complete list of 2025 Atlanta 50 restaurants.

■ You'll find a map of all 50 restaurants as well as interactive tools that enable you to mark the restaurants you want to visit then send your customized list to yourself and your friends via email or text message.

■ You'll also find exclusive behind-the-scenes videos of top-ranked restaurants and more photos of all the restaurants featured in this fall's dining guide.



# The Atlanta 50 — Top 10 —

## 1. Mujō

\$\$\$\$\$\$  
Sushi omakase  
691 14th St. NW, Atlanta. 404-400-6832, mujoatl.com

Mujō is the best restaurant experience in Atlanta.

The moment you walk in, you are in a luxury seafood dreamland. The omakase service revolves around chef J. Trent Harris and his talented cooks, yet it's the diner who feels like a star. The service is as wonderful as the food, with an experienced staff that understands the delicate interplay of food, drink and conversation.

Each meal begins with a lineup of creative modern Japanese dishes before moving on to fabulous nigiri. The components change constantly, based on seasonality and availability, but the precision and care with which the chefs prepare each piece of sushi remains consistent.

There's also an excellent beverage program that features thoughtfully curated wine and sake, along with expensive but sophisticated cocktails.

Most important, Mujō is fun. Rap music and party tunes play over the speakers, servers are game for some light banter, the furniture is comfortable, and the mood is celebratory. It feels like everyone there is having a good time.

When I reviewed Mujō in 2023 and awarded it four stars – making it the first restaurant in about a decade to receive The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's maximum rating – it felt like I was going out on a limb. I was confident Mujō was something special, but I didn't have much omakase experience to provide comparison.

In the two years since then, I've visited well over 100 restaurants, including omakase spots around the metro area and elsewhere. Nothing has shaken my opinion that Mujō is the best restaurant in Atlanta.

Ligaya Figueras, senior editor of food and dining for the AJC, visited the restaurant in July and agreed: Mujō is No. 1.

— HENRI HOLLIS



Kinmedai, also known as golden eye snapper, nigiri is light and tender at Mujō. The precision and care with which the chefs prepare each piece of sushi remains consistent. COURTESY OF HEIDI HARRIS



The black-walled, windowless dining room at Mujō offers ambience to rival its food. COURTESY OF MUJŌ

## 2. Georgia Boy

\$\$\$\$\$\$  
Modern American  
1043 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-698-3961, georgiaboyatl.com



**Above:** Georgia Boy dishes from left to right: Georgia Ice - Honeysuckle, Foie Gras Tart with red currant gelee, Rosemary Tomato Focaccia.

**Left:** Hot Dog Caviar Ice Cream. Every course of the tasting menu references the local culinary culture.

PHOTOS BY  
BAILEY GARROT FOR THE AJC;  
STYLING BY  
CHEF/OWNER JOEY WARD

Chef Joey Ward's Southern Belle and Georgia Boy opened in late 2019, and the ambitious restaurant-within-a-restaurant almost immediately was curtailed by the pandemic.

After Georgia Boy reopened in 2021, the chef's-table restaurant – in a private dining room accessed through Southern Belle – never gained the recognition due for being one of Atlanta's most spectacular restaurant experiences.

Dinner at Georgia Boy is full of surprises and offers a love letter to the local food scene. Ward is an Atlanta native, and every course of the tasting menu references the local culinary culture, from the Varsity to his favorite Buford Highway haunts.

The talented staff uses sophisticated cooking techniques to produce dishes that often reference and honor workaday foods.

The menu, which changes frequently, elicits oohs and aahs. Many dishes require coordination and showmanship from the serving staff. The servers play their parts with aplomb and never seem stiff or snooty. Instead, they sometimes seem as excited as the diners.

Georgia Boy is similar to an omakase restaurant in terms of service and price, but the Poncey-Highland establishment is much more inclusive.

A group that dined alongside me had one member who was pescatarian and one who ate no seafood, a situation the staff handled without issue. And for those who think the surprise-filled journey will lose its magic after one visit, note that nearly everyone at our table was a repeat customer.

No restaurant can offer out-of-towners a more delicious education about Atlanta's food than Georgia Boy. At the same time, those of us who grew up here (and love the city as much as Ward) leave the restaurant filled not just with exceptional food but also a unique sense of hometown pride.

— HENRI HOLLIS

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— Top 10 —

**3.** Lazy Betty

\$\$\$\$\$  
Modern American  
999 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 470-851-1199, lazybettyatl.com

Lazy Betty is one of those places that's as great for first-date drinks as it is for a midmeal marriage proposal.

The magic of Lazy Betty, which expanded and upped the luxury quotient when it moved from DeKalb Avenue to Midtown in early 2024, is that owner-chefs Ron Hsu and Aaron Phillips have created a well-balanced fine dining restaurant with no weak link among the food, service, beverage and atmosphere components.

The restaurant's pleasant bar and lounge area is totally reasonable for happy hour, and if you start to feel peckish, you have the option to order a lighter, four-course tasting menu through the bar.

When it comes to dinner, there are two options: the Lazy Betty menu, which starts at \$250, and the chef's tasting offering, which starts at \$295, with plenty of add-ons available.

Those prices set high expectations for the food, but the kitchen delivers. The cooking is imaginative – at times, even whimsical – yet technically precise. Many dishes feature luxurious, hard-to-find ingredients, although the best of local meat and produce also are highlighted.

The experienced service staff seems equally at home catering to veteran diners with unlimited budgets and first-timers looking for guidance. They understand the experience is meant to be special and rare, but also comfortable and fun. Servers are confident and easygoing, and the bar staffers are excited about what they're pouring.

The team is not resting on its laurels, either. Hsu and Phillips came from Le Bernardin, long considered one of the world's best restaurants, so they've been to the mountaintop. They constantly work to improve Lazy Betty, creating their own leviathan in Atlanta.

— HENRI HOLLIS



A rich chicken and madeira nage is poured over a light, springy dish of tortellini, mushrooms and asparagus at Lazy Betty. COURTESY OF GRAFTABLE



Lazy Betty's Truffle Hunt, which includes black truffle, pommes puree and potato "dirt." PHOTO BY MATT WONG OF GRAFTABLE / COURTESY OF LAZY BETTY



The thinly pounded tuna on the bluefin tuna roll at Lazy Betty harkens back to the days chefs Ron Hsu and Aaron Phillips worked at Le Bernardin. COURTESY OF GRAFTABLE

**4.** Bones

\$\$\$\$  
Steakhouse  
3130 Piedmont Road NE, Atlanta. 404-237-2663, bonesrestaurant.com



**Above:** Bones opened in Buckhead in 1979 and remains Atlanta's premier steakhouse and an enduring destination for special occasions and well-heeled regulars. BECKY STEIN FOR THE AJC

**Right:** Not everything at Bones is red meat. Check out this crab cocktail available at the restaurant. HENRI HOLLIS/AJC



Sizzling cuts of superior quality meat arrive cooked to order at plenty of restaurants, but Bones remains Atlanta's premier steakhouse and an enduring destination for special occasions and well-heeled regulars.

The 34-ounce bone-in rib-eye and 24-ounce porterhouse are as succulent as they are sizable. The drinks are stiff and the wine list is long. Signature dishes are reliably consistent – from rich lobster bisque and cold seafood salads to the seven-layer ice cream cake known as the Mountain High Pie. And polished, personalized service is a point of pride for owners Susan DeRose and Richard Lewis and their staff.

Exceptional hospitality begins the moment you hand your car keys to the valet. It continues with a predinner drink in the bar and lounge, and in the main dining room or perhaps downstairs in the brick-lined wine cellar or surrounded by framed caricatures on the wall.

Once tucked in, you're in the hands of career servers whose names are embroidered on their uniforms, along with red stars that denote their tenure, each star representing five years of employment. The floor staff are masters of detail because that is what a Bones experience is all about. The pace is neither rushed nor sluggish and is so perfectly cadenced that time is forgotten as a meal unfolds. Water glasses are filled and refilled unobtrusively. Each guest's space is crumbed after every course.

It also isn't stodgy or uncomfortably formal. A server might pat their own belly to explain just how much they enjoy the tower of oversized onion rings, wagy carpaccio or the carb-charged hash brown casserole you're contemplating as an order. Is a side dish of sautéed spinach creamed? "It can be," is the reply. Indeed, at Bones, accommodations know no bounds.

Family gatherings here make it clear that a third generation of guests is being introduced to one of Atlanta's fine-dining traditions.

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

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Clockwise from left to right: Tuna Crudo, Caviar & Mussels, Blistered Shishitos and oysters. PHOTOS BY BAILEY GARROT FOR THE AJC; STYLING BY MILES MACQUARRIE

## 5. Kimball House

\$\$\$  
Farm-to-table restaurant; cocktail and oyster bar  
303 E. Howard Ave., Decatur. 404-378-3502, kimball-house.com

Known for refined cocktails and the best oyster selection in the metro area, Kimball House also is where you can find inventive plates that spotlight responsibly sourced fish, seafood and meat, as well as regional produce – some even grown in the restaurant’s own garden.

And Kimball House is ideal for a date night, solo drink or a couples get-together.

Open since 2013, Kimball House sits in a restored late 19th-century depot. Its Victorian-era decor and old-fashioned ceiling fans transport guests to an era of grand hotel bars and opulent train station restaurants.

It’s an appropriate setting for beverage director Miles Macquarrie and his team to create classic and modern concoctions. The Kimball House martini might be the best you will ever try.

The cocktails are perfect for pairing with raw oysters. Here, you’ll find 18 varieties from both coasts, as well as the Gulf. Don’t miss the shiny dimes, harvested from a Florida Panhandle oyster farm that Kim-

ball House owns. Crushed ice ensures every bivalve stays cold.

Other memorable fish and seafood bites include crispy poppers of salt-and-pepper rock fish with green garlic ranch dip, clam tartine (a deliciously messy, open-faced seafood sandwich), and delicate grouper nestled over pink-eyed peas, tomato, corn, kohlrabi and cipollini onions.

While executive chef Arturo Justo’s menu adjusts with the seasons, caviar and mussels is a mainstay that elegantly pairs the delicacy with Lowcountry rice grits, confit egg yolk, crunchy potato crumbles and preserved lemon.

Chicken, duck, pork and beef all have a place on the menu, with prime steak dinners starting at \$70. There is a vegetarian entree and plenty of meatless salads and sides.

The relaxed yet professional servers excel with food-drink pairing suggestions, creating an experience to match each diner’s taste.

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Miles Macquarrie’s Puget Sound cocktail.

## 6. Omakase Table

\$\$\$\$\$\$  
Omakase  
3330 Piedmont Road NE, Atlanta. 470-404-5245,  
omakasetableatl.com



Chef Leonard Yu of Omakase Table in West Midtown.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRANDON AMATO/OMAKASE TABLE



A selection of nigiri from Chef Leonard Yu of Omakase Table.



It was clear at the original Omakase Table that Leonard Yu’s sushi was excellent, but the experience felt a little sterile.

In contrast, its new Buckhead home is a sumptuous stage where the sushi gleams under a spotlight and the restaurant has a fully realized beverage program.

Although it’s in a strip mall, entering Omakase Table feels like leaving the real world. Guests are greeted by a host, then led into a darkened, central area, where much of the amber light is provided by the long, glowing bar top. A stream of rounded river rocks set into the floor adds a Zen garden element. The atmosphere is calm and intimate.

In Omakase Table’s new space, the service also has taken a step up. The new surroundings and a year’s worth of accolades appear to have given the staff a sense of security. The service is a little more confident, conversation with the staff flows more easily and there are more smiles and laughter; the slight stiffness I once sensed seems to have been left behind.

The food remains unchanged – it’s still exceptional. The dining experience is filled with exploration and discovery.

You won’t just eat uni, you’ll try three examples next to one another. You won’t just try unfamiliar fish, you’ll taste sharkskin sole nigiri seconds after its fat was rendered under a red-hot piece of binchotan charcoal. You won’t think twice about popping a whole sawagani, the small Japanese freshwater crab, in your mouth like a piece of popcorn; the delicacy pays off, slightly sweet and fried to an incredible crunch.

The changes at Omakase Table are more than a surface-level glow-up; they represent intentional maturation and improvement. Growth takes incredible effort, and Omakase Table has earned its place in Atlanta’s upper echelon.

— HENRI HOLLIS

# The Atlanta 50

— Top 10 —

## 7. Aria

\$\$\$\$  
Modern American  
490 E. Paces Ferry Road NE, Atlanta. 404-233-7673, aria-atl.com

It's easy to overlook this 1930s bungalow shadowed by high-rise buildings in Buckhead.

But chef-restaurateur Gerry Klaskala said in a 2018 interview that when he first saw the property more than 25 years ago, he found it "darling," imagining its promise as a white-tablecloth restaurant.

Today, Aria remains a destination for exquisite dining. Modern American dishes are prepared exactly with fresh local ingredients. A dependable bar shakes and stirs stiff, classic-minded cocktails. Its wine program deservedly is recognized for excellence. And it's all delivered with a high degree of hospitality, one that is gracious, genuine and personable without pretense.

Still, restaurants that stand the test of time must evolve. Aria is in that moment right now.

Earlier this year, its partners passed the ownership torch to longtime general manager Andres Loaiza.

Klaskala retired in June and turned the kitchen over to Joseph Harrison, formerly co-executive chef at Savannah's Common Thread.

Longtime favorites such as ruby red and golden beets, herb-crusted lemon sole and slow-braised Berkshire pork are reminders of Aria's past, but Harrison brings fresh artistry, albeit with the same intense focus as his predecessor.

There are many other aspects of Aria to admire. Bread service by pastry chef Kathryn King brings

tender focaccia rolls dotted with caraway seeds and Maldon flakes with sorghum butter.

Wine suggestions, tastings and pours by sommelier Remy Loet are delivered with enthusiastic descriptions of flavor profiles and provenance.

And Loaiza is on his feet all night, like the conductor of an orchestra, escorting guests to tables and shaking hands with regulars and special-occasion diners alike.

Yet, it is the spirit of Aria's entire ensemble — one that gravitates toward fun, rather than stuffy formality — that will leave you feeling at home here.

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Longtime general manager Andres Loaiza is the new owner of Atlanta restaurant Aria.



New executive chef Joseph Harrison has a sixth sense for unique flavor combinations.



Aria slowly is transitioning to its new chef's food, keeping a few signature dishes and the general philosophy of sophisticated — if not boundary-pushing — cuisine. PHOTOS BY ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC

## 8. Little Bear

\$\$\$  
Modern American  
71 Georgia Ave. SE, Atlanta. 404-500-5396, littlebearatl.com



Left: Chef-owner Jarred Stieber.

PHOTOS BY BAILEY GARROT FOR THE AJC;  
STYLING BY CHEF/OWNER JARRED STIEBER AND BAILEY GARROT



Above: Blondies & whiskey milk.

No place in Georgia offers a more creative, delicious menu built almost exclusively from local meat and produce than Jarrett Stieber's Little Bear.

The menu frequently references Americanized Chinese cuisine, with condiments made from local ingredients, including the likes of peach duck sauce or chanterelle plum golden curry. It also usually features takes on classic Jewish deli items, including chicken liver "custard," Little Bear's version of chicken liver mousse.

The fun restaurant also doesn't take itself too seriously, finding an amazing number of ways to make guests smile, from the action figures on the windowsills to the engravings on each table of Fernando,

the dog who inspired the restaurant's name.

Despite Little Bear's more casual dining style, the service is tight and professional. Although the shorter, less-involved meals provide few opportunities for the service staff to impress diners, they deliver on the basics with near perfection. Water glasses never seem to go empty, and beverages are delivered with alacrity, food and questions about the menu and cocktail and wine lists are answered with authority.

Little Bear's entire selection of cocktails, beer and wine by the glass or bottle fits on one page, yet the range of choices feels complete. International wines are stocked with an eye on value rather than

pedigree, providing an interesting counterpoint to the highly localized ingredients on the menu.

And for a cocktail that gets so much attention for its food, the drinks are nearly as good. The drinks are inventive and complex, and the bartenders can whip up an excellent version of any classic you might order.

Little Bear was the first restaurant I ever reviewed for the AJC, and I marveled then at the way Stieber elevated humble ingredients through sheer force of creativity. Three years later, it's the consistency and sustained excellence that amaze me at Little Bear.

— HENRI HOLLIS

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**9.** Madeira Park

\$\$\$  
European  
640 N. Highland Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-228-2058, madeiraparkatl.com

As a wine bar with half its menu dedicated to charcuterie, Madeira Park likely could succeed even without great cooking. Maybe that's why the fabulous food it serves stands out so much and has transformed a neighborhood haunt into a destination worthy restaurant.

Of course, wine takes center stage here, with a list developed by sommelier Tim Willard, a co-owner. The selection leans European, but it offers many options from lesser-known producers. A rotating roster of special reserve wines can be ordered by the half-glass, giving guests the opportunity to try one without dropping a small fortune.

Madreia Park's service staff is enthusiastic, professional and able to answer most questions guests have about a wine. Willard and the other sommeliers are more than happy to chat on a deeper level.

The wine program's thoughtfulness and appreciation of old-world artisanship is mirrored in the food. Chef Steven Satterfield, also one of the owners, and executive chef Ollie Honderd execute a short but wonderful menu. Such simple classics as pommes frites, crispy panisse and chicken liver tartine are made with a depth of flavor that elevates them.

The food has an air of sophistication; plates aren't fussy or overcomplicated, but it's clear that each component has been arranged thoughtfully. Charcuterie boards are built with an artist's eye for balance, and each tartine is cut into pieces that ensure a bite will contain every ingredient. Dishes such as bistro steak and poulet rouge appear simple, but their flavors can be created only through serious dedication in the kitchen.

The cocktails, vermouth and fortified wines at Madeira Park also are wonderful. And the atmosphere is warm, welcoming and vivacious.

— HENRI HOLLIS



One side of Madeira Park's menu is dedicated to charcuterie, with interesting meats and cheeses you won't find at the grocery store. The charcuterie boards at Madeira Park are assembled with an artist's eye for balance and order.



Jade Palmer (from left), Neal McCarthy, Tim Willard, Steven Satterfield, Ollie Honderd and Philip Weltner make up the Madeira Park team. PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDREW THOMAS LEE/MADEIRA PARK

**10.** Avize

\$\$\$\$\$  
Alpine  
956 Brady Ave. NW, Atlanta. 404-879-1713, avizeatlanta.com



Avize serves caviar with yeasted berliners — essentially doughnut holes. HENRI HOLLIS/AJC



Sommelier Taurean Philpott pairs Gruner Veltliner with lemon pepper wet frog legs at Avize. COURTESY OF AVIZE

The arrival of Avize felt like it came out of left field. Who was asking for an Alpine restaurant in west Midtown? The question now is, why did it take so long for a restaurant like Avize to arrive?

Chef Karl Gorline took over an already beautiful space and in the center of the room, amid the marble and gold accents, added a hulking white mountain goat, a conversation starter. As a pricey, Eurocentric restaurant, it would be easy for Avize to feel stuffy, but the mountain goat lightens the atmosphere.

The cooking at Avize feels fresh, vital and modern, with a few vegan options, references to Atlanta culture and playful takes on old-school luxuries. The beverage program keeps pace thanks to some delicious, well-conceived cocktails and a wine list unafraid of straying from the biggest European producers.

Wine pairing recommendations sit directly across from each dish on the menu, with a large by-the-glass selection, including many available by the half-glass.

Avize's cocktail program might be exemplified best by the Alpine swizzle, basically a rum-based tiki cocktail served in a large, ceramic beer stein. Also offered are a few beers from Alpine countries and a selection of nonalcoholic cocktails.

Gorline has reimaged some luxury dishes, such as caviar served with creme fraiche-stuffed Berliners. Avize's beet carpaccio uses pastrami spices to add incredible depth of flavor to the root vegetable. And frog legs are served lemon-pepper wet, in the style of hot wings.

No tasting menu was available, but the service still included many luxury dining hallmarks, including an amuse-bouche to start our meal and mignardises to finish.

Atlanta's dining public might not have been clamoring for Alpine dining, but we're glad Avize is here. Welcome to the mountaintop.

— HENRI HOLLIS



Chef Karl Gorline's dishes from Avize in Atlanta pair with an eclectic wine list that highlights lesser-known European growers. COURTESY OF AVIZE



A life-sized taxidermy mountain goat overlooks the dining room. COURTESY OF AVIZE

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —



In the mood for an amuse bouche? The Atlas in the St. Regis Buckhead offers a whimsical selection. PHOTOS COURTESY OF ATLAS

## Atlas

This opulent restaurant in the St. Regis Atlanta hotel puts the culinary arts on a stage the way a great concert hall showcases an orchestra.

Shift your eyes toward the rear of the dimly lit formal dining room and under the glow of lights you'll see some of the "cast and crew" listed on the tasting menu, led by Culinary Director Freddy Money.

"Chef!" responds the chorus in unison each time Money calls out an order. Beyond the food, Atlas provides many other reasons to visit. The room is beautiful, luxurious and filled with valuable art. The wine selection is epic.

The servers are elegant and experienced, and the style tends to feature tableside displays. Diners who order dishes such as beef, lamb or duck are asked to select their own sharp knife from a case. Those who order cheese have the entire selection brought on a cart. Sauces are poured and truffles are shaved before your eyes.

Yes, Atlas is pricey, and it's not always perfect, but the restaurant's commitment to delighting its customers couldn't be more obvious.

\$\$\$\$\$\$

New American, fine dining  
88 W. Paces Ferry Road NW, Atlanta. 404-600-6471, atlasrestaurant.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



The wagyu at Atlas is dressed with "assorted condiments."



Bistro Niko's dish mussels "Le Coze" comes with bread. Order fries for a full moules frites experience. COURTESY OF BISTRO NIKO

## Bistro Niko

Bistro Niko remains a commanding presence on Peachtree Road, with the towering ceilings and sumptuous decor of a chateau. And thanks to its timeless theme, the food hasn't gone out of style.

For more than 15 years, Bistro Niko has remained committed to its old-school French roots. Guests still can order escargots, gougères and coq au vin. It's one of the few restaurants in metro Atlanta where you can enjoy a real slice of foie gras, rather than one of the more cost-efficient forms such as a mousse or terrine. Such delicate classics as a skate wing show the kitchen still is dedicated to cooking with precision.

Like any really good French restaurant, Bistro Niko has a strong wine program. The primary list features some smaller French producers peppered among the familiar names. And there's a wide range of prices.

Service at Bistro Niko is top-notch: personable, professional and anticipatory.

Excellent service, a beautiful space and timeless food and drink: Bistro Niko follows a formula that's simple in theory but difficult to execute.

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French  
3344 Peachtree Road NE, Atlanta. 404-261-6456, bistroniko.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

## BoccaLupo

Buttery 20-yolk tagliatelle with wild mushrooms and Tuscan kale kimchi; squid ink spaghetti with spicy Calabrese sausage and rock shrimp; pappardelle Bolognese with American Parm ... 12 years since opening, BoccaLupo continues to serve soul-satisfying pasta creations.

Chef-owner Bruce Logue and his team make magic out of flour, eggs, oil and salt: Wide ribbons, long thin strands and delicately stuffed pillows are canvases for artful sauces. The brightness of a simple summertime pesto coating al dente linguine stays with you.

The creative bites go beyond noodles – from globally inspired crudos and ceviches to creamy burrata stracciatella decorated with hyper-seasonal produce. This is new-school, scratch Italian American cooking that excites with unexpected flavor combinations and textures.

The bar takes a similar approach, concocting savory drinks with the likes of salted watermelon, lacto-fermented peaches and Greek yogurt. A succinct wine list offers diversity, superb food pairing options and value – with a glass of the house red, white or sparkling priced at a modest \$9.

A smiling, knowledgeable staff rounds out the reasons why this cozy house in Inman Park is more than a neighborhood haunt.

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Italian American  
753 Edgewood Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-577-2332,  
boccalupoatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Chef Bruce Logue and his team continue to serve handmade pasta creations at 12-year-old BoccaLupo.

BAILEY GARROT FOR THE AJC

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —



**Above:** The French-inspired menu at Brasserie Margot at Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta features Swordfish Milanese. COURTESY OF KATHRYN MCCRARY

**Below:** Brasserie Margot's stylish, art deco-inspired interiors were shaped by Atlanta design firm Smith Hanes Studio. COURTESY OF TOMAS ESPINOZA

## Brasserie Margot

A swanky 2024 art deco makeover and the arrival of chef Jon Novak make Brasserie Margot a go-to among metro area hotel restaurants.

Hollowed out puffed pastry (vol-au-vent) filled with mussels coated in rich Pernod cream has given way to a version with white asparagus seasoned with tarragon. There's chicken paillard on a bed of braised red cabbage, as well as boeuf bourguignon with tender short rib.

And butter makes everything better, including pastry chef Eric Snow's pain d'epi bread service, pan-seared gnocchi and the silky mashed potatoes that accompany Novak's signature swordfish au poivre.

Tablesides ta-da moments include rolling carts prepared for setting fire to banana Foster crepes; a smoking gun used for the 7514 triangle cocktail; and pouring a smooth-drinking, aged mezcal Negroni from a clay pot. Also, there's an image of the "Mona Lisa" printed on the rice paper that covers the frothy cap of the Louvre sour.

Enjoying such food and drink on plush seats while in the hands of polished servers and surrounded by the finery of brass tones and globe pendant lights provides a fine Parisian escape.

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French brasserie

75 14th St. NE, Atlanta. 404-881-9898, brasseriemargot.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



## Brush Sushi

Brush Sushi took a huge leap forward when it moved to its new location in Buckhead Village. This beautiful, sophisticated temple of sushi offers a wide range of experiences, from elaborate omakase dinners to take-out-friendly lunch specials.

Chef Jason Liang is a local pioneer of dry-aging fish, a Japanese tradition that enhances the flavor and texture. Brush is a wonderful place to learn about the technique without feeling like you're in a classroom; the menu offers tastings of fresh and dry-aged sushi, so diners can compare for themselves.

The many options at Brush can be almost overwhelming, but the dedicated, well-trained servers do a beautiful job of guiding diners to the type of meal they'll most enjoy.

The interior of the restaurant is so tranquil that diners might be surprised by how much fun they can have at Brush. The menu offers delightful tablesides experiences, including a cart that involves a chef assembling hand-rolls, and liquid nitrogen-fueled desserts wreathed in billowing vapor clouds. And the beverage program offers a list of classy, interesting cocktails and one of the city's most thoughtful sake selections.

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Sushi

3009 Peachtree Road NE, Atlanta. 404-500-1888, brushatatl.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



"For the table" options at Brush include a variety of sushi. COURTESY OF BRUSH SUSHI



The guacamole at Casa Balam in Decatur is made with pipicha, epazote, mint, radish, avocados, onions and lime. COURTESY OF CASA BALAM

## Casa Balam

Chef Luis Damian has created an upscale Mexican dining experience that buzzes with clublike energy while a well-staffed bar shakes tequila drinks and servers speed around the room with starters of guac and queso, empanadas and crudos.

But there is serious cooking going on here, including bone-in fillets and wagyu flat irons served with ramekins of butter infused with chimichurri or Mexican herbs. The dish is accompanied by a pastelito of queso fresco sandwiched between poached cactus strips, tidily wrapped with steamed green onions and garnished with avocado mousse.

Family-style options include whole roasted branzino, roasted chicken and birria de res that comes with housemade tortillas for self-assembly tacos. Desserts include corn tres leches cake and spicy Mexicano chocolate Basque cheesecake by Damian's wife, pastry chef Faye Jonah.

Casa Balam also is one of the few restaurants in metro Atlanta that offers a curated selection of Mexican wines.

Sunday brunch comes with thoughtful dishes, including corn pancakes, French toast with tequila-infused syrup and hearty huevos rancheros and omelets that spotlight Mexican flavors in familiar American favorites.

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Modern Mexican

201 W. Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur. 404-549-8271, casabalamatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## Delbar

The original location of Delbar in Inman Park, which opened in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020, is a large restaurant in its own right, but it looks modest compared with newer outposts in Alpharetta and Buckhead.

The sublime interiors of the restaurants are Instagram-able, and all three have the same menu, which includes an impressive array of traditional Persian dishes, most labeled with their proper names rather than Americanized descriptors. The kitchen is not shy about using its Middle Eastern herbs and spices, and the flavors often are forceful and intense, penetrating beautifully grilled meats and enlivening large portions of rice.

All three locations of Delbar seem to be perpetually busy, so servers keep the experience businesslike; they have a lot to do. But there is an excellent system that ensures water glasses never go empty and a utensil dropped on the floor is replaced quickly.

Delbar's rise has been meteoric, but it has been fueled by real restaurant-industry bona fides — excellent cooking, efficiency and good taste.

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Persian

870 Inman Village Parkway, Atlanta. 404-500-1444; 4120 Old Milton Parkway, Alpharetta. 404-777-6037; 3060 Peachtree Road, Atlanta. 404-738-9302, delbaratl.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



A sharp garlic note contrasts with the silky smoothness of Delbar's hummus. ANDREW THOMAS LEE/DELBAR



Excellent osetra caviar at Fawn Wine & Amaro is paired with root vegetables such as salsify and a radish puree. HENRI HOLLIS/AJC

## Fawn Wine & Amaro

This downtown Decatur spot has a laser focus on seafood, volcanic wines and amari, and the food and drink are matched by a distinctive atmosphere. Walking into Fawn on a busy night feels like arriving at a party.

It's a tight space, but the efficient, enthusiastic servers manage to clear tables and reset them on a dime.

Most patrons who are dining a la carte are likely to order several courses as they explore chef Terry Koval's inventive menu, filled with such offerings as crunchy urchin chips and tuna cured for three months. Koval also highlights less common cuts of fish, including snapper collars, which tend to be more flavorful than standard filets.

And the tasting-menu experience provides wonderfully candid interactions with the kitchen staff.

Beverage director Matt Watkins is upfront about his penchant for amari and volcanic wines, yet he keeps the cocktails approachable. The wines tend to have high minerality and acidity, traits that pair well with seafood.

Fawn doesn't try to please everyone, which is exactly what makes the restaurant exciting and seductive.

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European, seafood

119 E. Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur. 404-748-4937, fawnwineamaro.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

## Fogón and Lions

"This is the first time I am doing something that is me," Julio Delgado said a few months after opening this Spanish-Latin restaurant in 2022.

Three years later, the Puerto Rico native and 30-year career chef is operating one of the most pleasurable restaurants outside the Perimeter.

It's easy to make an evening of tapas here, with ham croquetas, beef empanadas, warm(!) olives, hot meatballs and cooling ceviche.

A 14-foot hearth is the workhorse for wood-

fired proteins and produce alike: Spanish octopus, padron peppers, whole roasted suckling pig, so many paellas and a churrasco-style grilled skirt steak with chimichurri that would make Delgado's butcher granddad proud.

Drinks are as easygoing as the food, with pitchers of red, white or sparkling sangria, G&Ts, margs and mojitos, plenty of local and international beers and Spanish wines.

A covered patio — with bar and island counter seating, along with fire tables and heat lamps

during chilly months — makes Fogón and Lions a lively, all-seasons gathering spot with personable guest interaction from a capable staff and hospitable proprietor, Delgado.

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Spanish-Latin

10 Roswell St., Alpharetta. 770-676-9133, fognandlions.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

**Below:** After nearly 30 years working as a chef for hotels and other restaurants, Puerto Rico native Julio Delgado impresses with his Alpharetta eatery Fogón and Lions.



**Right:** Fogón and Lions specializes in wood-fired cooking, such as this Iberian pork skewer with cilantro rice and Filipino barbecue sauce.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOGÓN AND LIONS



# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## Gene's

A year after Avery Cottrell's pop-up debuted as a brick-and-mortar in East Lake, Gene's has established itself as a destination for eclectic barbecue and goofy vibes.

A hot-pink smoker on the covered back patio turns out brisket, pork, chicken and ribs. Some of that meat gets amped up with Viet-Cajun flavors, including sticky pork ribs glossy with fish caramel sauce and enlivened by cilantro and peanuts, egg roll-wrapped brisket beignets and smoked pork banh mi.

Creative, flavorful takes on traditional barbecue fare include snacks (waffle fries), sandwiches (brisket cheesesteak) and sides (potato salad). The ultimate Gene's experience would be a feed-the-table order of the Full Send — all the meats, all the sides, the pickles, flour tortillas, co-owner Matt Christensen's now famous Biscoff Banana Pud-Pud and the restaurant's signature Jell-O shots.

Frozen drinks, including hurricanes and the kid-friendly Genesicle, are as fun as the food. And classic cocktails, craft beers and a surprising variety of wines won't break the bank.

Gene's streamlined service and kitchen operations translate to fast-moving lines, efficient counter ordering and speedy delivery.

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Eclectic barbecue  
2371 Hosea L. Williams Drive SE, Atlanta. 470-763-4021, genesgenesgenes.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Gene's in Atlanta's East Lake neighborhood serves a variety of smoked meats, sides and appetizers. COURTESY OF GENE'S



Chef-owner Atsushi Hayakawa takes the stage a few nights a week to regale diners with tales of his training in Japan and stuff them with some of the best seafood in the area. The opportunity to interact with one of the Atlanta dining scene's most forceful personalities makes Hayakawa a one-of-a-kind experience. COURTESY OF HAYAKAWA

## Hayakawa

Having moved his restaurant from a humble Buford Highway space to west Midtown, chef-owner Atsushi Hayakawa, Atlanta's pioneer of the omakase service style, takes the stage here a few nights a week to regale diners with tales of his training in Japan and stuff them with some of the best seafood in the metro area.

Anyone who has visited other omakase joints will be amazed not just at the quality of Hayakawa's fish, but also by the quantity used. In his

unique, freewheeling style, Hayakawa tops his nigiri with thick slices of such delicacies as fatty bluefin tuna and piles of Hokkaido uni.

The service at Hayakawa is highly choreographed and controlled, with the chef at its center, like an orchestra conductor. Servers clear each of the 15 or so courses with a whisper; if asked, they confidently will provide guidance on the short but thoughtful beverage list.

Although the sushi is undeniably fabulous, it's

the opportunity to interact with one of the Atlanta dining scene's most forceful personalities that makes Hayakawa a truly one-of-a-kind experience.

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Omakase  
1055 Howell Mill Road, Atlanta. 770-986-0010,  
sushihayakawa.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



**Above:** Consider eating at Gunshow on a "Hired Guns" night, featuring guest chefs from around the country for one-night-only culinary performances at this Glenwood Park venue.

**Right:** Beverages are prepared tableside at Gunshow.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF  
BLAKE STUDWELL



## Gunshow

Twelve years ago, Kevin Gillespie's idea of serving modern Southern bites and sips dim sum-style seemed wild and crazy. Now, Gunshow is the dining equivalent of such Atlanta attractions as the Georgia Aquarium, World of Coca-Cola and Centennial Olympic Park.

The chefs make a playground out of the open kitchen as they turn local and regional products into small-plate Southern vittles, then zoom around the communal dining tables offering their creations to each guest. Care for an oyster garnished with chicken fat hollandaise? How about a reverse turducken stuffed chicken wing? Don't think too hard, because the next dish is on its way.

The rolling bar cart brings entertaining table-side drink preparations. The making of the toasted old-fashioned, complete with bruleed cinnamon stick and flaming orange peel, is a close-up fire act that doesn't get old. And rotating cocktails are clever, seasonal and tasty.

The restaurant's permanent staff succeeds in making each Gunshow experience feel unique, while the "Hired Guns" series, featuring guest chefs from around the country, provides reason to purchase a seat for one-night-only culinary performances at this Glenwood Park venue.

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Modern Southern  
924 Garrett St., Atlanta. 404-380-1886,  
gunshowatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —



Italian steakhouse Il Premio inside Forth Hotel in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood features a menu of pastas, steaks and seafood, and an extensive wine list. COURTESY OF EMILY DORIO

## Il Premio

Stepping into this popular dining spot at the Forth Hotel is like entering a gilded-age banquet hall with a few modern updates.

At the gently curving bar, friendly bartenders shake up excellent martinis and engage with guests. The large barroom also has plenty of plush, lounge-like seating.

Il Premio takes its Italian theme seriously, offering pasta dishes and a nice selection of wines, but this still is a steakhouse. And the steaks are excellent, with pricey cuts of high-quality beef expertly grilled over a wood fire.

The impeccable service is fluid, attentive and professional. The white-jacketed lead servers guide you, but many staff members will come to your table in the course of a meal. Although there's a clear hierarchy in the uniformed waitstaff, all seem comfortable chatting with guests and answering questions.

Il Premio has a clear point of view and plenty of flash, but it remains popular because it does the fundamentals well. It's a beautiful restaurant that thrives on its energy and atmosphere, but the vibe is fueled by the great steaks and service.

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Italian, steakhouse  
800 Rankin St. NE, Atlanta. 470-470-8020,  
ilpremioatlanta.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



Il Premio takes its Italian theme seriously, offering pasta dishes and a nice selection of wines, but this is still a steakhouse. PHOTOS BY ANGELA HANSBERGER FOR THE AJC



Little Alley Steak offers a menu of classics as well as dishes inspired by global cuisine.

## Little Alley Steak

Little Alley is one of a handful of metro Atlanta restaurants that first opened in the suburbs and found enough popularity to open a second location in town.

The menu is a mix of classics, including beef tartare, oysters Rockefeller and Caesar salad, along with some dishes that take cues from other global cuisines. Such fusion items as duck confit spring rolls and Korean-style filet mignon add a little variety to the options, and there's even a Sichuan-spiced tofu steak for vegetarians.

The service is crisp and professional; the servers appear to get plenty of support from the other waitstaff and have the latitude to show a little personality.

Little Alley isn't trying to reinvent the wheel; its website references such famous, highly traditional steakhouses as Peter Luger's in New York City and Bern's in Tampa. When a restaurant, by its own admission, doesn't have a unique hook, it needs to execute its culinary and service programs with near perfection to keep customers interested.

Little Alley delivers a rock-solid experience, front to back.

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Steakhouse  
3500 Lenox Road NE, Atlanta. 404-254-1899; 955 Canton St., Roswell. 770-998-0440,  
littlealleysteak.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



Little Alley isn't trying to reinvent the wheel; its website references highly traditional steakhouses such as Peter Luger's in New York City and Bern's in Tampa. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LITTLE ALLEY STEAK

## La Semilla

A former pop-up, La Semilla is the go-to restaurant for plant-based Latin American fare.

Addictive warm queso blanco, made with potatoes and cashews, and croquetas de jamón with the same texture and flavor as real ham are just the start of dishes that will leave diners in awe of the possibilities of vegan cooking.

This restaurant treats lion's mane mushrooms as if they were a fine cut of steak — complete with the knife. Corn is an expected vessel for meat-free, dairy-free tacos and enmoladas, but it's also used in composed plates such as chochoyotes that feature corn dumplings resting in a coconut-corn broth.

Guava flan glistening with caramel sauce that wobbles like the original dessert will leave you wondering, "How



With its bistec de palomilla, plant-based Latin restaurant La Semilla gives lion's mane mushroom the same care as a hearty steak. COURTESY OF ASHLEY WILSON

do they do that?"

La Semilla also offers an upscale, full-service, sit-down experience.

The bar is well-stocked with Iberian and South American wines curated for sustainability, and the staff capably shakes and stirs cocktails befitting the concept.

Calming natural tones, green foliage, rattan lighting and a straw hut booth combine to make this Reynoldstown restaurant feel like a spa resort in the Yucatan Peninsula.

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Plant-based Latin American  
780 Memorial Drive SE, Atlanta.  
404-228-3090,  
lasemilla.kitchen

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## Lucian Books & Wine

With its tony Buckhead address and beautiful space featuring triple-height ceilings, it's easy to forget that this really is a small, indie restaurant.

The European-influenced cooking at Lucian frequently is delicate and always is elegant. Tuna carpaccio was pounded to the thinness of tissue paper, bunching up on the fork for a perfect bite.

Oysters on the half shell were dressed with a seasonal mignonette that included white peaches and ginger.

The French omelet, which some consider a litmus test for quality cooking, is consistently excellent at Lucian.

As lovely as the food is, Lucian could serve microwaved popcorn and still be a destination for wine lovers. The restaurant has one of the best by-the-glass lists in town, thanks to sommelier Jordan Smelt, who consistently refreshes the booklike menu with uncommon options, mostly from small, old-world producers.

There's also an interesting cocktail list and a brigade of smart, experienced servers.

Lucian is a little different, but its sophistication and self-assuredness make it one of Atlanta's most interesting dining destinations.

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European bistro  
3005 Peachtree Road, Atlanta.  
404-549-2655,  
lucianbooksandwine.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



An AJC dining critic described the oysters at Lucian Books and Wine as “so subtly dressed they almost appear naked.” The fries, he wrote, “are exemplars of the form, and mighty hard to resist, whether dipped in the horseradish mayonnaise of winter or dabbed in the tarragon mayo of spring.” CHRIS HUNT FOR THE AJC



Lucky Star launched a cocktail omakase with the theme of “dinner.” COURTESY OF CHINGYAO WANG

## Lucky Star

Chef Jason Liang, known for upscale Japanese dining at Brush Sushi, has transformed a windowless space in west Midtown's Star Metals building into the Taiwanese version of a stylish, all-day cafe and bistro.

In some ways, the space might work to Lucky Star's advantage; I was pleasantly surprised by the exceptional cooking, deep flavors and complex cocktail program at a location that easily could have been a Starbucks.

Lucky Star is an ambitious restaurant that manages to do a lot of things well, from a coffee and tea program early in the day to caviar and a cocktail “omakase” service in the evening.

The restaurant's beef noodle soup — the national dish of Taiwan — might be one of the best single-bowl meals to be found in the metro area, while the scallion pancake (also available at Brush) packs a ridiculous level of umami flavor into a thin, unassuming package.

Lucky Star might feel like a hidden gem, but it has the quality needed to become a shining beacon for Taiwanese cuisine in Atlanta.

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Taiwanese  
1055 Howell Mill Road, Atlanta. 678-994-6016, luckystaratl.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

## Little Sparrow

Dieting stops at the door of this polished brasserie, and indulgence begins with the complementary bread service: a warm, crusty baguette and a saucer of soft butter and olive oil.

At Little Sparrow, clams swim in white wine sauce, and shrimp bathe in a sauce holding the rounded, lingering heat of nduja sausage and Aleppo pepper. A golden cap of gooey Gruyere begs to be pulled so you can dive into the onion soup beneath.

This little sister to neighboring steakhouse Marcel goes even bigger on the pleasures of French bistro fare, with an entire section of the menu dedicated to frites.

La Vie en Rose and the Dover sole are entree highlights. The former features a thick, juicy square of minced rib eye with a terrifically seared crust. The latter brings the delicate, flaky fish in a pool of silky, lemony cream sauce flecked with tarragon.

The swanky setting matches the sumptuous food, and after a genepy highball and a glass of Cyril & Jean-Mi VdF rouge, you might not know whether you want to finish the night with Basque cheesecake or le petit martini.

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French brasserie  
1198 Howell Mill Road, Atlanta. 404-355-2252,  
littlesparrowatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



La Vie en Rose is an entree highlight at Little Sparrow, with steak haché — ground rib eye shaped into a square patty and cooked like a steak — served with pomme frites and aioli. COURTESY OF LITTLE SPARROW

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —



Marcus' menu offers oysters on the half shell, steaks, barbecue and signature items like brown sugar wings, fried chicken and cornbread waffles, and Old Bay crab cakes. COURTESY OF ANDREW THOMAS LEE

## Marcus Bar & Grille

Celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson's restaurant in Old Fourth Ward is pure fun, although its staff is serious about providing excellent service.

Marcus Bar & Grille is a large, open, airy restaurant full of energy. Some of the vibe comes from the kitchen, where a majority of dishes are cooked on wood-fired grills. At brunch and some dinners, a DJ adds to the liveliness.

The welcoming, experienced staff are invested in making sure diners enjoy themselves.

Like a space decorated with roller skates and vinyl, menu items often reference Atlanta cul-

ture. But the food also showcases global flavors; the Bankhead jambalaya is a deeply savory dish that swaps rice for cavatelli pasta, while the Big Boi pot features steamed mussels with lemon and fennel.

A short cocktail list mostly features classic drinks with a twist, like the Ole Unc, Marcus' take on an Old Fashioned made with the house rye. The wine list is short but creative, with a variety of options that provide good value from across the globe, including several interesting French choices (like the sparkling Prince de Richemont)

and a chenin blanc from South Africa.

Marcus Bar & Grille is a smart and thoughtful restaurant, but most important, it's a fun place to have a meal — a celebration that feels contagious and makes its way into every bite of food.

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American  
525 Edgewood Ave. SE, Atlanta. 470-890-1700,  
marcusbarandgrille.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

## Mothers Best

You'll find the best fried chicken in metro Atlanta at this tiny place on Decatur Square. Founders Ean Camperlengo and Ross Winecoff began the venture as a pop-up in 2021. By the time Mothers Best made its brick-and-mortar debut late last year, the pair had perfected their recipe.

The method includes a brown sugar brine, sous vide holding, dredging in a buttermilk-hot sauce mix, and a secret 14-ingredient spice blend incorporated into the breading and applied again after deep frying. The result is super-crispy, tender, juicy and flavor-charged. Even better, it's affordable.

A short list of sides is as well executed as the bird, including crinkle-cut fries, mashed potatoes with a ladle of silky gravy and coleslaw featuring brined collard greens chipped with cabbage.

Occupying just 1,200 square feet, Mothers Best could call it good as a takeout-only space. But what fun would that be? Instead, they've created seriously unserious surroundings, including an old Huddle House booth, checkerboard tabletops and fun images on the walls. There's even a full bar that serves cocktails in plastic souvenir cups.

\$

Fried chicken  
406 Church St., Decatur. mothersbestchicken.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Mothers Best in Decatur offers old-school fried chicken and sides prepared in modern ways. COURTESY OF MOTHERS BEST



Miller Union's farm egg baked in celery cream with grilled bread can be a shared starter — but it doesn't have to be. COURTESY OF MILLER UNION

## Miller Union

Miller Union, chef-owner Steven Satterfield's original restaurant, still benefits from the same touch that helped sister restaurant Madeira Park into the Top 10 of the Atlanta 50.

The farm-to-table menu at Miller Union might feel a bit dated until you remember that the restaurant was an early adopter of hyperlocal produce and vegetable-forward Southern cooking.

The cooking shows maturity and restraint. The wonderful bread service — country sourdough with cultured butter — is an example of how time and technique can build beautifully complex flavors into simple, straightforward food.

In July, such summer produce as corn, zucchini, yellow squash and watermelon was allowed to shine in its natural form. It felt like just enough had been done by Miller Union to draw out each fruit and vegetable's most delicious flavor notes.

Over the past decade and a half, Miller Union also has compiled a well-rounded wine list and perfected its service style. With warmth and competence, the servers embody the idea of Southern hospitality.

Much of Miller Union's philosophy has been adopted widely by other Atlanta restaurants, but few have done farm-to-table so well.

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Southern  
999 Brady Ave. NW, Atlanta. 678-733-8550, millerunion.com

— Henri Hollis

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## Pata Negra

This dark, clubby eatery serves a modern Mexican menu that's thoughtful, creative and deeply rooted in regional tradition. It also happens to have excellent service and one of the best tequila lists in the city.

The menu includes guacamole and enchiladas elevated with a deep black mole sauce, aguachile de sandia (marinated watermelon) and the mejillones a la maximiliana (mussels in a deeply flavorful red pipian sauce).

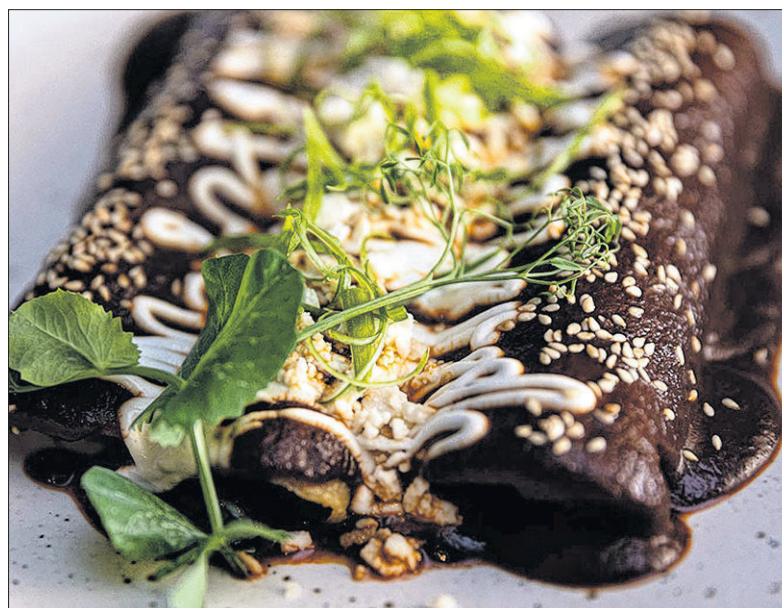
Pata Negra calls itself a mezcaleria — a bar specializing in agave spirits. The theatrical cocktails show off the breadth and adaptability of tequila, mezcal and lesser-known spirits such as sotol. The rest of the beverage menu is no less committed to Mexican artisanship, serving craft beer and wine from south of the border.

The service at Pata Negra is professional and polished; I commend the patience of my most recent server, who didn't interrupt me once as I labored to pronounce the names of different dishes and cocktails.

You'll leave Pata Negra with a deep respect for Mexican culinary artisanship.

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Modern Mexican  
1777 Peachtree Road NE, Atlanta. 404-343-6212, patanegraatl.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



Enmoladas at Pata Negra are simple enchiladas enveloped in the anything-but-simple mole negro sauce. COURTESY OF PATA NEGRA 2024



A vegetarian interpretation of haggis from Nàdair results in a whimsical, deeply delicious and savory vegetable pie.

HENRI HOLLIS/AJC

## Nàdair

Kevin Gillespie is one of the few chefs who could pull off a Scotland-meets-the-South restaurant in Atlanta.

A subdued spot compared with the boisterous scene at his Gunshow, Gillespie's deeply personal homage to his Scottish roots is tucked away in Woodland Hills, overlooking a quiet preserve. It's an apt space for a restaurant whose Gaelic name translates to "the way of nature" and whose kitchen is rooted in wood-fired cooking.

A prime example is rainbow trout encrusted with fried peanut crumbs over brown butter jus with grilled lemon and greens. But everything from mushrooms and beets to beef, pork and duck feels the heat while turning into exquisite, composed dishes for a \$95 three-course prix-fixe menu.

The kitchen takes a contemporary approach to renowned Scottish dishes, including a savory vegetarian haggis pie made with marmite and brewer's malt. But the 70-seat dining room embraces Old World tradition with carpeting that replicates the tartan pattern worn by Gillespie's great-granddad.

Behind it all are a talented kitchen and attentive service team that serve customers Gillespie's vision — and his stash of rare whiskies.

\$\$\$\$\$  
Scottish-inspired Southern  
1123 Zonolite Road NE, Atlanta. 404-941-7254, nadairatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



The Scotch egg made by chef Kevin Gillespie at his relatively subdued restaurant Nàdair. AALIYAH MAN FOR THE AJC

## Rumi's Kitchen

The original Sandy Springs location of Rumi's Kitchen will reopen later this year after a massive renovation, so for this dining guide, I visited the Colony Square location for the first time.

Those who know Persian cuisine will find the menu familiar; it's the execution of such Middle Eastern classics as hummus and mirza ghasemi, or smoked eggplant dip, that truly impresses. Also, kebabs of lamb and koobideh (spiced ground beef) are imbued with an incredibly rich flavor that most other restaurants don't quite achieve.

The beverage menu is filled with bold, distinctive flavors and some light Middle Eastern influences. The refreshing sabzi tonica cocktail, for example, features a spirit called "dragoncello," which is like limoncello made with dragon fruit.

Members of the waitstaff are efficient, professional and quick with a personalized recommendation. It's no accident that Rumi's Kitchen has been able to expand in Atlanta and beyond since it first opened nearly 20 years ago; excellent food, consistent service and a gorgeous space are a winning recipe.

\$\$\$  
Persian  
1175 Peachtree St. NE, Atlanta. 404-777-9807; 7105 Avalon Blvd., Alpharetta.  
678-534-8855; rumiskitchen.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



Rumi's Kitchen impresses with its execution of Persian and other Middle Eastern classics such as hummus and mirza ghasemi (pictured), a smoked eggplant dip. COURTESY OF RUMI'S KITCHEN

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## Ryokou

Ryokou is run by executive chef Paul Gutting under the tutelage of chef Leonard Yu of Omakase Table. Ryokou has omakase-style service, with a limited number of seats, but the menu isn't exclusively sushi. Instead, diners are served a variety of courses, more like a traditional tasting menu.

Most restaurants that use the omakase service style with nigiri can't adjust for many common allergens. But at Ryokou, only one course features nigiri — a spectacular comparison of three cuts from the same blue-fin tuna — and much of the food is cooked, so the restaurant can accommodate more diners.

A meal at Ryokou journeys through Japanese cuisine's different regional specialties. Gutting has a calm, implacable presence behind the chef's counter. His reserved personality is complemented by an enthusiastic service staff, and Omakase Table fans will be excited to see a few dishes that reference some of Yu's most popular creations.

Ryokou is proof positive that the appeal of omakase-style dining lies in something more than raw fish; dinner there involves a story, interaction and education that enhances the already wonderful food.

\$\$\$\$\$

Japanese

565 Northside Drive SW, Atlanta. 470-403-9018, ryokouatl.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



A traditional Japanese egg custard, called chawanmushi, is topped with caviar and crab at Ryokou. COURTESY OF BRANDON AMATO/RYOKOU



Seed's deviled eggs incorporate salmon smoked in-house and a roasted jalapeno cream sauce. COURTESY OF SEED KITCHEN & BAR

## Seed Kitchen & Bar

Seed Kitchen & Bar's menu is filled with dishes you might find at a church picnic, including deviled eggs, cornbread and pimento cheese crostini. But there also are such global dishes as shrimp sambal, chicken schnitzel and za'atar-spiced lamb loin. The lamb, in particular, is fabulous — as tender as filet mignon and twice as flavorful.

And once you start ordering the Southern fare, you find the preparation isn't as straightforward as expected. Pimento cheese crostini are topped with a slice of fine Benton's ham. The deviled eggs incorporate salmon smoked in-house and a delicious roasted jalapeno cream sauce.

Seed's bar program is even more creative, with recent cocktails including tea-infused gin and tropical matcha syrup. The Boston Tea Party cocktail was especially lovely, with a long, complex finish. Seed also has an impressive wine list, bolstered by its connected sister restaurant, Stem Wine Bar.

Seed is well into its second decade, and there's a reason: Instead of chasing dining trends, it delivers a consistently pleasant dining experience night after night, year after year.

\$\$\$

Southern

1311 Johnson Ferry Road, Marietta. 678-214-6888, eatatseed.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



The Southern Belle menu changes often to reflect what's in season. COURTESY OF SOUTHERN BELLE

## Southern Belle

Southern Belle is the throughway to Georgia Boy, the intimate tasting experience that ranks No. 2 on the Atlanta 50. It's also a standout dining destination in its own right.

Like its little brother in back, Southern Belle is a tribute to the South served up with Atlanta-style wit, including a neon blue "Bless Your Heart" sign above the service bar. The walls also tout such Atlanta brands as Coca-Cola and Delta.

Shareable plates at Southern Belle feature hyperseasonal ingredients from local and regional farms. Peaches were championed in a summertime caprese with creamy house burrata, basil three ways and candied country ham. A small head of grilled romaine wrapped in Georgia-grown wagyu, dressed in bagna cauda foam and garnished with fried white anchovies and Parmesan tuilles, improved on the age-old Caesar. Corn and crab risotto was flecked with feta and shakes of Tajin for a Southern take on Mexican esquites.

The bar pours sips that match the spirit of this place, including the potent house old-fashioned, made with local ASW Fiddler Soloist, the first straight bourbon distilled in the city of Atlanta.

\$\$\$\$

Modern Southern

1043 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-698-3961, southernbelleatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Shareable plates at Southern Belle feature hyperseasonal ingredients from local and regional farms. CHRIS HUNT FOR THE AJC/ STYLING BY JOEY WARD

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## Southern National

“Southern in feel, national in flavor” is chef Duane Nutter’s oft-used description of this upscale restaurant.

This is a fabulous spot for making a meal from dishes that showcase a chef’s evolution, including Nutter’s formative years under Daryl Evans at the Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta starting in the mid-1990s, to when he put One Flew South at the airport on globe-trotters’ dining radar. Mussels and collard greens is OG. Lamb burger helper, coffee-rubbed pork loin, five-spice braised short ribs – every one of these dishes provides tasty, bold bites.

Cocktails are classically minded, minimalist, frequently potent and as reliably consistent as the service delivered by a pro front-of-house team.

Seats in the main dining area, at the sleek U-shaped bar, or along the side wall of leather booths all offer a view that you won’t get at any other Atlanta restaurant: an expansive work of art above the partially open kitchen called “The First Supper,” which depicts a larger than life Nutter dishing out bowls of food for a raucous fete. Meanwhile, the real Nutter stands below, quietly expediting orders.

\$\$\$  
Globally influenced Southern cuisine  
72 Georgia Ave., Atlanta. 404-907-4245, southernational.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



Chef Duane Nutter says dishes at Southern National are inspired by every place he has lived and worked, including kitchens in Louisiana, Kentucky and the Pacific Northwest. COURTESY OF REBECCA CARMEN



Table & Main’s well-trained servers aren’t shy with their recommendations, and the food and cocktails skew toward the traditional, like this grilled shrimp over stone-ground grits with a tomato-bacon sauce. COURTESY OF IAIN BAGWELL

## Table & Main

No matter where you sit at Table & Main, the atmosphere is reminiscent of relaxing on a porch, drinking sweet tea.

The restaurant feels like an oasis of Southern hospitality. Well-trained servers aren’t shy with their recommendations, and the food and cocktails skew toward the traditional.

The restaurant’s fried chicken is its most famous dish for a reason; it’s straightforward, classic and perfectly executed. It’s the kind of fried chicken that can be made only after years of experience and an almost scientific level of attention to detail.

Beyond the headliner, Table & Main applies that same focus to its other dishes, often elevating such humble items as fried okra to a surprising level of sophistication. The menu offers plenty of wonderful Southern produce – including collard greens, field peas and heirloom tomatoes – and treats them with respect.

Located in an old home not far from the action of downtown Roswell, Table & Main serves meals that feel like a garden party where everyone is welcome. It’s a place where Southern cooking traditions are observed and appreciated, but the tradition of hospitality is held above all.

\$\$\$  
Southern  
1028 Canton St., Roswell. 678-869-5178, tableandmain.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

## The Alden

Chef Jared Hucks traveled the world for years, working at such elite restaurants as Noma in Copenhagen, Benelong in Sydney and Arzak in San Sebastian, Spain.

When Hucks opened the Alden in 2018, it was slow to catch on. Technically challenging dishes could be overthought, service didn’t match the caliber of the food, and its location in a mixed-use development hid the sleek, upscale space from passersby.

But just as Atlantans finally found the Alden, the Alden has found itself.

Hucks’ team is implementing his vision in a range of offerings that include three-course prix-fixe and seven-course tasting menus. While internationally inspired dishes still use thoughtfully sourced seasonal ingredients and sport precision plating, there is less rigidity.

Simple smoked popcorn set the tone for a tasting menu that progressed with tender leek custard in a fresh, green parsley and lemon sauce; an oxtail gyoza’s pitch-black wrapper that vividly contrasted with orange carrot sauce; and beef brochetta with bright chimichurri sauce.

The floor staff works assuredly, and the chef’s counter near the open kitchen is one of the most convivial spots in the house.

\$\$\$\$  
Contemporary American  
5070 Peachtree Blvd., Chamblee. 678-395-6982,  
thealdenrestaurant.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



The food at the Alden often arrives sprinkled or flanked with flowers and foams as artfully curated as a painting. COURTESY OF THE ALDEN

## Talat Market

This restaurant turbocharges the already exciting nature of Thai food, which results from its use of heat, diverse spices and tropical ingredients. The menu changes constantly, but one thing remains predictable: The food will be delicious.

Talat Market adds a Thai twist to dishes that tend to be uniform at other restaurants. Instead of beef tartare, the Summerhill restaurant serves a spicy beef laab dish that uses heat to highlight the quality of raw beef. The crispy rice salad, one of the few dishes that can be found consistently on the menu, is a riot of flavors and textures – one of the most exciting salads in town.

The atmosphere matches the excitement and generosity of the food. Enthusiastic servers and the eclectic decor set a welcoming, upbeat mood that seems to whet the appetite.

The wonderful food is supported by a beverage program that features both excellent cocktails and a short but impressively robust wine list.

Talat Market is a complete restaurant that goes a step further, providing a fun, adventuresome experience that changes with every visit.

\$\$\$  
Thai  
112 Ormond St., Atlanta. 404-257-6255, talatmarketatl.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



Talat Market adds a Thai twist to dishes, like this Crispy Rice Salad, that tend to be uniform at other restaurants. BAILEY GARROT FOR THE AJC

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —

## The Chastain

When Christopher Grossman opened the Chastain, the seasoned chef called it his “dream restaurant.”

The five-year-old bistro overlooking Chastain Park also is a dream restaurant for diners who care about seasonality, sourcing and sustainability.

Pea and sunflower shoots from a Decatur vendor named Vonnie are treated as the stars of a salad. During the height of summer, delicate squash blossoms get stuffed with lobster, battered, fried and placed atop sweet corn pudding. And pristine figs are paired with airy stracchino di capra mousse, kissed with the same honey from nearby hives that finds its way into the restaurant’s rendition of a martini.

Plenty of produce comes from partner farms, but the culinary garden out back is one of the Chastain’s points of pride.

Provenance is important among proteins, too, be it a smoked Iberico pork chop from a hog raised in Colorado, or beef from Chatel Farms in Reidsville shaped into the restaurant’s staple cheeseburger.

And the service staff deftly operates with a quiet presence that matches the serenity of a space filled with natural light and surrounded by nature.

\$\$\$\$

New American bistro

4320 Powers Ferry Road NW, Atlanta. 404-257-6416, thechastainatl.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



The Chastain is executive chef Christopher Grossman’s vision of a new American menu that invites mixing, matching and sharing. COURTESY OF HEIDI HARRIS



The Deer and the Dove in Decatur shines with an honest spirit, from the purity of ingredients, to the straightforward manner of preparation, like this Coffee-dusted Venison. CHRIS HUNT FOR THE AJC

## The Deer and the Dove

Chef Terry Koval has received national media attention the past couple of years, but he and his staff remain focused on offering some of the area’s best farm-to-table, nose-to-tail dining experiences. Honest, humble, lovingly treated, rustic – all are appropriate descriptors for fare that ranges from cheese, meat and vegetable grazing boards to heavier comfort food, including dry-aged duck, stuffed pheasant, smoked trout and not-to-be-overlooked offcuts of beef tongue or sweetbreads.

The salted yeast rolls with herb butter and plates of raw, poached and roasted seasonal vegetables are staples worth ordering every time.

It’s all highly pairable with a glass of sparkling, white, rosé or red from the thoughtful house wine selection, priced at an also thoughtful \$12.

For Decaturites, the Deer and the Dove is one of many quality neighborhood haunts where we can sidle up to the bar and spend as little as \$50 on a filling nosh and a properly made cocktail. For everyone else, this Decatur Square restaurant is as much worth the drive – and a full-on harvest splurge – now as when it opened in 2019.

\$\$\$\$

Rustic new American

155 Sycamore Ave., Decatur. 404-748-4617, deerdove.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

## The Porter Beer Bar

After a change in ownership and serious renovation, the Porter Beer Bar has managed to keep its humble atmosphere while serving really good food.

Customers enjoying a meal at the Porter should take the time to appreciate what an excellent job chef-partner E.J. Hodgkinson has done here. The food is more than just upcycled pub fare; such snacks as the salt and vinegar popcorn and goat cheese balls carried over from the original menu, but the terrific beef tartare and sophisticated shrimp toast served now could be found in a fine-dining restaurant.

The Porter also serves one of the best sandwiches in Atlanta, a Philly-style roast pork number so spicy and irresistible that it could have put the restaurant in the Atlanta 50 on its own.

As if the food and atmosphere weren’t enough, the Porter has one of the most comprehensive beer programs in the Southeast. It offers solid cocktails and a nice wine selection, too.

Have a meal at the Porter and you’ll find yourself wondering whether there is anything they don’t do well.

\$\$

American

1156 Euclid Ave., Atlanta. 404-549-7132, theporterbeerbar.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



The front bar of Porter Beer Bar got a minor facelift before the restaurant reopened last year. BAILEY GARROT FOR THE AJC



The Optimist brings a sustainable, seafood-focused menu in an early 1900s building in west Midtown. COURTESY OF ANDREW THOMAS LEE

## The Optimist

Like many of Atlanta’s longest-running restaurants, the Optimist is a model of consistency. While other restaurants come and go in west Midtown, diners know they can count on Ford Fry’s upscale seafood destination for great food, drinks and service.

Some aspects of the Optimist experience change with regularity, including the oyster selection, and the menu never is stagnant. But the reliability of the restaurant is what keeps the airy, semi-industrial dining room filled with customers.

The Optimist is known for some classic dishes that can’t come off the menu, including the excellent swordfish poached in duck fat, one of the more decadent seafood dishes you’ll find in Atlanta. But typical of the restaurant’s success is that the butter burger also is legendary.

Yes, it’s the type of place where a diner could spend hundreds of dollars on oysters, bluefin tuna, steak and Champagne, but it’s also a place with interesting cocktails and a variety of snacks that cost less than \$15.

Somehow, the Optimist remains both luxurious and approachable, which is a recipe that never goes out of style.

\$\$\$\$

American, seafood

914 Howell Mill Road, Atlanta. 404-477-6260, theoptimistrestaurant.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best —



Ticonderoga Club's moody, intimate and faintly nautical interior makes it feel like a retreat from Krog Street Market's busy surroundings. COURTESY OF BRIAN MANLEY

## Ticonderoga Club

This spot is well-known for its cocktails, which manage to feel simultaneously classic and creative. You'll also find a selection of sherry options, interesting wines by the glass and a wide-ranging bottle list.

And there are low- and no-alcohol cocktail choices and special "reserve cups" made with rarer spirits. In short, Ticonderoga Club is a fabulous place to get a drink. But the food nearly matches the beverage selection. Dishes that regulars won't allow to come off the menu include the fabulous Thai-inspired Poh's eggplant, a truly addictive combination of sweet, savory and spicy flavors.

The kitchen also works magic on the grill, from chicken skewers to a lovely lamb burger. And there are shareable options, including a classic seafood paella and the chuck wagon, a 3-pound serving of grilled chuck roast meant to feed four to five diners.

The restaurant provides a distinctive atmosphere and excellent service, too.

Crossing Ticonderoga Club's threshold feels a bit like stepping into a different world from the bustle of the rest of Krog Street Market. After a few drinks, it's a world you won't want to leave.

\$\$\$

American

99 Krog St. NE, Atlanta. 404-458-4534, ticonderogaclub.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



It takes three days for the pollo a la brasa at Tio Lucho's to get such deep flavor, subtle smokiness and golden, crispy skin. ANGELA HANSBERGER FOR HE AJC

## Tio Lucho's

Atlanta's Poncey-Highland neighborhood impresses with restaurants that punch above their weight. Tio Lucho's is one of them.

Chef-partner Arnaldo Castillo has created a contemporary coastal Peruvian paradise to please all comers. Bold, bright flavors leap off each artfully presented plate. There's the snapper ceviche with citrusy leche de tigre garnished with choclo (toasted Peruvian corn kernels); the colorful, texture-filled Tio's salad in a snappy aji rocoto vinaigrette; and cooling causas holding layers of whipped mashed potatoes, avocado and tuna salad.

Meats here are heady with flavor. Lomo saltado brings uber-tender slices of stir-fried beef in a rich sauce with onions and tomatoes, served over French fries. It takes three days for the pollo a la brasa to get its deep flavor, subtle smokiness and golden, crispy skin.

The greenery-filled dining room and covered patio are as inviting as the food and smiling staff, and as spirited as one of the restaurant's pisco sours. Lunch, happy hour, dinner or Sunday brunch – it's always a good time to come to Tio Lucho's.

\$\$\$

Peruvian

675 N. Highland Ave. NE, Atlanta, 404-343-0278, tioluchos.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS



The food at Yuji has a wide range of prices, from the \$10 carrot ginger salad (which is big enough to be an entree if you add a protein) to the 10-ounce umami wagyu steak at \$300. COURTESY OF XZAVIER NANTHAVONGSA/YUJI MODERN JAPANESE

## Yuji

Sitting alongside one of the busiest sections of the Atlanta Beltline's Eastside Trail, Yuji could succeed based on location alone. Instead, restaurateur Alex Kinjo's latest creation is a deeply considered, experience-focused sushi destination.

The attractive, modern restaurant is a great place to stop for snacks and drinks while walking the Beltline, but you also can get a serious, multi-course dinner.

The service staff is well-trained and provides the same level of care to folks just stopping in for an appetizer as it does for those dropping hundreds of dollars on a meal. Every detail of the experience has been considered, from the design of the menu covers to the restroom decor.

The cocktail menu is relatively short and filled with riffs on familiar classics, accompanied by a nicely curated selection of beer and wine. The impressive sake list helps Yuji stand out for the thirsty crowds on the Beltline.

Hospitality is all about meeting people where they are and providing what they want, with a bit of surprise and delight thrown into the mix. Thanks to a well-balanced, customer-first vision, Yuji manages this with aplomb.

\$\$\$\$

Japanese, sushi

667 Auburn Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-228-2257, yujiatlanta.com

— HENRI HOLLIS

## Umi

While many other sushi restaurants cultivate an atmosphere of calm focus, Umi leans into its chaotic but stylish party vibe. Some might find the restaurant too noisy or crowded, but plenty are seduced by the electricity that crackles through the dining room.

Besides the atmosphere, the place is known for its food and drink. The extensive menu has been known to convert new sushi lovers with such modern classics as the otoro caviar nigiri, which features fatty tuna topped with a tiny dollop of truffle aioli, a slice of serrano pepper and a few black pearls of caviar. And non-Japanese dishes, including caviar toast and duck leg confit, are well-executed here.

For beverages, Umi's cocktail menu is filled with classics, the sake selection is more than respectable and the wine list is one of the more extensive to be found among Atlanta's top sushi restaurants.

The service is friendly but efficient, as necessitated by a restaurant that seems perpetually packed.

Umi certainly has a vibe, but it has stuck around for so long because it offers more than that; it's a really good restaurant.

\$\$\$\$

Sushi

3050 Peachtree Road, Atlanta. 404-841-0040, umiatlanta.com

— HENRI HOLLIS



The extensive menu at Umi has been known to convert new sushi lovers. COURTESY OF LARA KASTNER/UMI

# The Atlanta 50

— Rest of the best + Honorable mentions —



A selection of small dishes, known as mezze, is available at Zakia Modern Lebanese Restaurant in Buckhead. COURTESY OF ERIK MEADOWS/ZAKIA

## Zakia

Perhaps gold chandeliers and a bar with a marble counter are to be expected at a spot that overlooks Buckhead's intersection of Lenox and Piedmont roads.

But the backlit photo of the woman who inspired this modern Lebanese restaurant — the grandmother of owners Jonathan and Ryan Akly — is the first clue that Zakia is more than good looks. As a late 2022 AJC review said, Zakia has a soul.

Executive chef Michael Schorn and culinary director-partner Ian Winslade treat Akly family

recipes and other traditional Lebanese dishes with respect while elevating them for upscale dining.

Cold mezze offer such dipping delights for puffy house-made pita as smoky baba ghanoush, labneh and a variety of hummus, including the minimalist Lebanese-style that sticks to simple tahini and lemon juice.

The open kitchen teases with the aroma and sight of flames licking all manner of meats, seafood and even vegetables. And servers adept at meal pacing run plate after plate of juicy kafta

and chicken kabobs, grilled lobster tail, charred yet still tender octopus, spice-roasted cauliflower and lamb shank on a bed of freekeh to your table.

\$\$\$  
Lebanese  
3699 Lenox Road NE, Atlanta. 404-205-5762,  
zakiarestaurant.com

— LIGAYA FIGUERAS

## Honorable mentions

The research to determine the Atlanta 50 took months and involved nearly 150 individual restaurant visits by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's dining critics. The Atlanta 50 are the cream of the crop, but there are plenty more high-quality dining experiences to be found in the metro area. With such a surplus of strong restaurants, we're giving honorable mention to an additional 25 establishments, listed here in alphabetical order:

**Bacchanalia**  
\$\$\$\$\$  
American  
1460 Ellsworth Industrial Blvd.  
NW, Atlanta. 404-365-0410,  
starprovisions.com/bacchanalia

**Banshee**  
\$\$\$  
American  
1271 Glenwood Ave. SE, Atlanta.  
470-428-2034, banshee-atl.com

**Belén Bistro & Market**  
\$\$\$  
Argentine  
115 Sycamore St., Decatur.  
470-990-7052, belenbistro.com

**Bread & Butterfly**  
\$\$\$  
French, African diaspora  
290 Elizabeth St. NE, Atlanta. 678-  
515-4536, bread-and-butterfly.com

**Commune**  
\$\$  
American  
6 Olive St., Avondale Estates.  
914-471-5526, communeatl.com

**Ecco**  
\$\$\$  
Italian American  
40 7th St. NE, Atlanta.  
404-347-9555  
3586 Peachtree Road NE, Atlanta.  
404-347-9558, ecco-atlanta.com

**Ela**  
\$\$  
Mediterranean  
1186 N. Highland Ave. NE, Atlanta.  
404-873-4656, ela-atlanta.com

**Gigi's Italian Kitchen**  
\$\$\$  
Italian  
1660 McLendon Ave. NE,  
Atlanta. 404-371-0889,  
gigisitaliankitchenatl.com

**Hal's, the Steakhouse**  
\$\$\$\$\$  
Steakhouse  
30 Old Ivy Road NE, Atlanta.  
404-261-0025, hals.net



Steak frites at Tiny Lou's. HENRI HOLLIS/AJC



Blood Orange Chocolate Tart from Banshee. CHRIS HUNT FOR THE AJC 2023



One of Staplehouse's work-of-art desserts. CONTRIBUTED BY KRIS MARTINS

**Kevin Rathbun Steak**  
\$\$\$\$\$  
Steakhouse  
154 Krog St. NE, Atlanta.  
404-524-5600,  
kevinrathbunsteak.com

**La Grotta**  
\$\$\$\$\$  
Italian  
2637 Peachtree Road NE, Atlanta.  
404-231-1368, lagrottaatlanta.com

**Madre Selva**  
\$\$  
Latin American  
570 Main St. NE, Atlanta.  
470-516-1389, madreSelva.restaurant

**Marcel**  
\$\$\$\$\$  
Steakhouse  
1170 Howell Mill Road, Atlanta.  
404-665-4555, marcelatl.com

**Masterpiece**  
\$\$  
Sichuan Chinese  
3940 Buford Highway, Duluth.  
770-622-1191,  
masterpiecerestaurant.com

**Nan Thai Buckhead**  
\$\$\$  
Thai  
3050 Peachtree Road, Atlanta.  
404-464-7980, nanthai.com

**Palo Santo**  
\$\$\$  
Modern Mexican  
955 W. Marietta St. NW, Atlanta.  
678-944-8783,  
palosanto.restaurant

**Poor Hendrix**  
\$\$  
New American, bar  
2371 Hosea L. Williams Drive,  
Atlanta. 404-549-8756,  
poorhendrix.com

**Side Saddle Wine Saloon**  
\$\$  
American, wine bar  
680 Hamilton Ave. SE, Atlanta.  
770-790-7886, instagram.com/  
sidesaddlewine

**Snackboxe Bistro**  
\$\$  
Malaysian  
1960 Day Drive NW, Duluth. 770-558-  
1105, snackboxebistroga.com

**Staplehouse**  
\$\$\$  
American  
541 Edgewood Ave. SE, Atlanta.  
404-524-5005, staplehouse.com

**The Colonnade**  
\$\$  
Southern  
1879 Cheshire Bridge Road  
NE, Atlanta. 404-874-5642,  
thecolonnadeatl.com

**The Sparrow**  
\$\$\$\$  
Sichuan Chinese  
950 W. Peachtree St. NW, Atlanta.  
404-748-9061,  
thesparrowatl.com

**Tiny Lou's**  
\$\$\$  
American, French  
789 Ponce De Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta.  
470-485-0085, tinylous.com

**Whoopsie's**  
\$\$  
American  
1 Moreland Ave. SE, Atlanta.  
instagram.com/whoopsies\_place

**Yebo Beach Haus**  
\$\$\$  
South African  
56 E. Andrews Drive NW, Atlanta.  
404-228-8024,  
yebobeachhaus.com