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TRAVEL

Restaurant Report: The Grey in Savannah, Georgia

Rare is the bus station that compels customers to linger willingly. But the building that housed Savannah's old Greyhound Bus Depot, built in 1938, is no ordinary way station. In December, the space reopened as the Grey, an elegant restaurant that evokes an era in which bus travel entailed a degree of glamour and sophistication.

A careful restoration preserved historical elements: a curved Art Moderne facade; the worn floor — evidence of waiting, shuffling feet — in front of the old ticket window; and most impressively, the 60-seat dining room with soaring ceilings, Art Deco paneling, snaking banquettes and a central horseshoe-shaped bar.

The executive chef responsible for ensuring that the food matches the high standards set by the gorgeous aesthetics is Mashama Bailey, a Queens, N.Y., native who was previously the sous-chef at Prune in downtown Manhattan. Ms. Bailey spent a few childhood years in Savannah, but it was a recent road trip through the South that provided inspiration for her concise menu of pared-down dishes that let local products shine.

On a recent evening, that included grilled oysters luxuriating in sorrel butter, and a meltingly tender pork shank — prepared with “a little bit of cane sugar to keep it more Southern” — with a mess of greens and cornbread.

The restaurant was still ironing out kinks; a whole oven-roasted sea bass was brutally overcooked and sloppily filleted. But the meal rebounded with two outstanding desserts: a deconstructed apple cobbler and a chocolate parfait with peanut butter cream and spicy peanuts.

By the end of the night, Run-DMC was on the soundtrack, an apt signal of a new chapter for a location that once had segregated waiting areas.

“I take it as an honor to be in that space, to be in a Jim Crow building, and to be able to serve people who remember that,” Ms. Bailey said. “To be a black woman in the South, in a city like Savannah, and to have such a stage to cook and perform on, it's mind-blowing.”

That stage now has an even brighter spotlight shining on it: Just two months after opening, the Grey was nominated for a James Beard Best New Restaurant Award.

Upon hearing the news, Ms. Bailey said, “My initial thought was, ‘I have to work harder.’”

The Grey, 109 Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard; 912-662-5999; thegreyrestaurant.com. Dinner for two, without drinks or tip, is about \$100.

