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By Melanie D.G. Kaplan

Travel

How a Greyhound station in Savannah became a hit new restaurant

Fifteen hundred miles into a road trip this winter, I found myself in Savannah. The port town in Georgia is home to old Southern buildings and gentlemen — and young, tattooed students at SCAD, the burgeoning Savannah College of Art and Design. I'd heard about a new restaurant in an old Greyhound bus terminal, and knowing little more about it, the Grey earned a spot on my itinerary. The blend of historic travel depot and good food was simply too alluring to pass up. Spirits of long-ago bus riders were calling. Plus, I owed myself a nice meal after countless unremarkable ones on the road.

The Grey opened in December and in mid-February was named a semifinalist for the James Beard Award in the best new restaurant category . The building is on a transitioning block of Martin Luther King Boulevard, between an art store and a SCAD building. Between 1938 and 1964, it served as a bus station. Another restaurant then occupied the space for a few years, after which it sat vacant, in disrepair, for more than a decade, until New York entrepreneur John O. Morisano purchased it in 2013.

Known as Johno, Morisano first fell in love with Savannah, then the building; he bought it even before deciding he'd open a restaurant there. He then read "Blood, Bones & Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef," by celebrated chef Gabrielle Hamilton, owner of New York City's Prune. Inspired by her moxie and certain she could help him find a chef, Morisano hounded Hamilton until she met with him. Eventually, she sacrificed her sous chef and protégé — Mashama Bailey, who spent some of her childhood in Savannah. Bailey partnered with Morisano.

I arrived early to grab a drink at the front Diner Bar, a separate, four-booth section that during the Greyhound era was a 24-hour diner called the Union News Cafe. I sat at the L-shaped bar: stainless steel with wood edging, distressed leather stools.

Flipping through the magazines I'd found on an old wooden magazine rack (1930s Life and Time), I ordered a ginger beer. The bartender said he didn't have any bottled, but he offered to make me one with their house-made ginger simple syrup. (I'm happy to now know how to do this at home: Boil fresh ginger and brown sugar, mix in a blender, strain, add soda water.)

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The bar menu offered warm spicy peanuts ($3) and oysters ($2.25). Cocktails ($12) ranged from such vintage selections as a gimlet to house creations called Port Authority and the Passenger, with pecan syrup and cinnamon.

Before I was seated for dinner, I asked the host for a quick tour, and she showed me areas of the once-segregated bus station: the colored waiting room (now server stations, restrooms and a series of black-and-white photographs from Savannah's First African Baptist Church), the white ladies' powder room (now a private dining room) and the bunk area where bus drivers snoozed (now the wine cellar). On the stairwell, I noticed the original mint-ice-cream-colored tiles. The open kitchen sits where the ticket counter once was, and the host pointed to the spot where queuing passengers wore down the original pink terrazzo floor.

For dinner, I sat at a U-shaped bar in the middle of a large dining room. It faced out to a courtyard that originally housed the bus bays and now is a garden growing greens, herbs, and olive and fig trees. I twisted in my swivel bar stool and took in the cathedral ceiling, art deco fixtures and such details as the opaque greyhound on the water carafe. Surrounding me, the curves and stainless steel were so pleasing, I felt as though I were cocooned in a giant Airstream.

The menu is divided into starters, middles, mains and sides, indisputably Southern fare, with hints of slow-cooking and some surprising influences: pickled oysters ($12), seafood boudin ($15), country pasta, with pork belly and Parmesan cheese ($14) and pork shank with “a mess of greens” and cornbread ($30). I settled on a winter salad with black-eyed peas ($10), a side of roasted beets with beet greens ($9) and braised eel with cabbage and tomato ($28) — which was inspired by an Italian road trip Morisano, his wife and Bailey took before the restaurant opened.

Everyone, it seemed, was excited about the Grey stories — the food, the chef (whom the servers uncharacteristically call by her first name) and the rebirth of the building. In conversation with the couple next to me, the bartender said, “To have a black female chef in a Jim Crow-era building — it’s pretty cool.”

The eel arrived in a white ceramic pot that seemed large enough to hold two meals. The tender meat fell off the bones, and I dipped chewy, house-made sourdough into the stew. The beets melted in my mouth.

After dinner, a palate-cleanser arrived — what Bailey calls a “Thrill,” based on frozen Kool-Aid popsicles she remembers from her childhood as a summertime treat served by Southern African American women.

As I walked out of the now-packed restaurant, I paused in front of the rounded window to the open kitchen. I counted nine people quickly flowing around one another in tight spaces and found Bailey partially hidden in the back. She didn’t look at all like the harried, hollering chef we’ve come to expect in notable kitchens. Before stepping away, I watched her long enough to confirm what I thought I saw at first glance. She was smiling.

IF YOU GO

Where to eat
The Grey

109 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

912-662-5999

www.thegreyrestaurant.com

Outdoor seating, lunch, weekend whole-pig roasts with Bloody Marys and gin punch to begin this spring. Open Tuesday to Sunday.