



Three New Restaurants Change the Game in Savannah

Bill Addison
June 26, 2015



n my nine combined years as a critic in Atlanta, one of the toughest questions I fielded from readers was: "Where should I eat in Savannah?" Ah, Savannah. Georgia's oldest city, founded in 1733 just inland from the marshy coast, is a place of otherworldly, out-of-time beauty. Statuesque oaks line the streets, frocked with Spanish moss dangling in rows that resemble fringes on a gray leather jacket. The historic district houses twenty-two squares and centuries-old churches in Greek Revival and Gothic styles. Savannah ranks among the most memorable towns in America for strolling.

For dining, though? Not so much. Before my latest trip last month, when I saw and tasted signs of true culinary transformation for the first time in the twenty years I've been visiting the city, I would pass along a handful of rote Savannah restaurant suggestions that barely shifted over the years.

For casual charmers, I'd suggest soul food favorites like Narobia's Grits & Gravy for crab stew and fried fish or Marandy's One Bite Delight for oxtails and pig's feet. For burgers, pimento cheese, and a craft beer: Green Truck Pub, which opened in 2011. And the fast moving lines at the wonderful Back In The Day Bakery rewarded with an airy, buttery biscuit filled with cheese and eggs and bacon (among many, many sweet and savory glories). But largely, Savannah has been a bastion of well intentioned, middle-of-the-road New American restaurants serving visitors the kind of food they could they could easily find back home. Paula Deen's Lady & Sons did once possess mom-and-pop appeal in its humble origins, but it's evolved into a 330-seat feedlot with all the ersatz heart of a Cracker Barrel outpost.

By contrast, the eloquence of a recent roasted chicken entree at **The Grey** seemed flabbergasting. The restaurant opened in December in a former Greyhound bus depot **given a majestic renovation**. Mashama Bailey, the chef, glossed the chicken with a restrained curry sauce and a relish studded with currants and green pepper to evoke country captain, the Lowcountry one-dish classic. Eaten with smoked collard greens ordered as a side dish, the cooking reflected the best of modern Southern cooking, timely in technique but with flavors rooted in tradition. I tasted the same finesse across town in a whole egg ravioli at **The Florence**, the year-old looker in a restored ice factory from chef-restaurateur and *Top Chef* judge Hugh Acheson. The dish delivered a carnival of textures: the al dente pasta and its gushing contents, parmesan baked into crisp chips, feathery fennel fronds, toothy mushrooms and onion slivers, and wisps of country ham mirroring the porcine broth in which the ravioli bathed.



The ambitions of these newcomers recall the culinary gumption that's been apparent since early last decade in Charleston

The ambitions of these two newcomers recall the kind of culinary gumption that's been apparent since early last decade in Charleston, 100 miles up the shoreline from Savannah. Comparisons between the two port cities are inevitable. They may compete in comeliness, but Charleston's **relentlessly documented** restaurant scene in every way eclipses the one in Savannah. "I used to say that Charleston was five or ten years ahead of Savannah in terms of food, but they're so far apart now I can't even quantify it," says Savannahian Tim Rutherford. He previously wrote restaurant reviews for the *Savannah Morning News* and is working on a book about the history of food in Savannah. "We've earned our nickname 'Slowvannah,'" he says. "Change doesn't come quickly. And if restaurants become successful here, they tend to get comfortable."

Which is why The Grey feels so game-changing: One senses in the engaged, energized staff and the menu's freshness that the place is only beginning to hit its stride. It instantly became the most stunning restaurant space in Savannah. New Yorker John O. Morisano bought the building and refurbished the exterior to its curvy Streamline Moderne slickness. The front bar, once a diner and now lined with leather dyed blue to match yesteryear's Greyhound logo, leads to an Art Deco wonderland of a dining room. Numbers on the walls correspond to gate stations where busses once lined up. Vector patterns in the paneling form hypnotic triangles and quadrilaterals. Clean-lined tables, chairs, and booths echo midcentury swank. The original pink and green floors, the lithe fixtures, the center horseshoe-shaped bar: Treats for the eyes tempt in every direction.

But this is the South, and ghosts lurk behind the glamour. The building operated as a depot from 1938 to 1964 during the Jim Crow era; there were segregated waiting areas and restrooms. It sat empty for decades before Morisano made the purchase, and it seems poignant in its rebirth that a talented African-American chef commands star billing. Morisano recruited Bailey — who mostly grew up in Queens, New York, but spent some of her childhood in Savannah — from Manhattan's Prune, where she worked as sous chef for Gabrielle Hamilton.

Bailey's menu gambols between audacious and accessible, with the surrounding region and the Mediterranean as the most tangible influences. She mixes in ground crawfish and shrimp to traditional pork and rice boudin, lightening the Cajun staple with their aquatic savor. Pan-roasted squid meets tender, inky beans in another winning earth-sea combination. Bailey shows a particular facility for wielding sweetness. She adds just the right amount of Madeira (a wine favored by Savannah's forefathers) to the brown sauce of her steak Diane variation, made daringly and brilliantly with shaved beef heart and adorned with onion rings. Piquant red pepper jelly glosses pulled pork served sizzling in a cast iron crock; it offsets the meat and a crowning fried egg without becoming too cloying.

They registered as minor gaffes in one of the most promising new restaurants I've encountered nationwide this year.

I have a feeling the country captain chicken and the smoked greens will emerge as signatures, as will skillfully stirred drinks like the vintage "improved whiskey cocktail" with its Sazerac-like nip of absinthe. Not everything that passed the kitchen window proved exemplary. Shrimp cocktail was undone by mealy little critters with their heads still attached. I have no problem with head-on shrimp, but in this refined framework the presentation came off as awkward. And a buttermilk granita, which sounded like ideal refreshment before reentering the

Southern swelter, tasted sour and oily. They registered as minor gaffes in one of the most promising new restaurants I've encountered nationwide this year.