

culture





BLT Steak was designed by Cass Smith of CCS Architecture and combines the traditional elements of a French bistro with the American steakhouse.

Beef:

It's What's for Dinner

Chef Laurent Tourondel's new BLT at the W has nothing to do with bacon, lettuce or tomato.

A steakhouse is a steakhouse is a steakhouse, right? Well, not according to renowned French chef and restaurateur Laurent Tourondel. The classically trained chef blew critics and diners away when he took the traditional American restaurant and gave it a modern French twist at his first steakhouse, BLT Steak, in Manhattan in 2004.

And now Atlantans are the lucky ones, because we are once again the first city in the South to get a new esteemed establishment: BLT Steak. That's right, Tourondel opened the doors to Atlanta's BLT Steak in late January in the super chic W Atlanta - Downtown hotel, and the restaurant couldn't be classier.

Forget about your stereotypical steakhouse décor of dark woods and dim lighting. BLT's massive glass doors open directly from the valet parking off Ivan Allen Boulevard into the sleek lounge with a walnut bar and a shellfish raw bar made of Calcutta marble. Just be sure to make time for a cocktail or two. We love the white peach sweet tea—a mixture of Firefly Sweet Tea Vodka, white peach purée and Massenez peach liqueur.

Macassar ebony wood tables are surrounded by caramel-colored banquettes in the main dining room, where black walnut floors in a herringbone pattern add even more style and sophistication to the room that overlooks the open kitchen along the back of the space. Three large Steve Penley paintings in the lounge, as well as one enormous Penley hanging in the private dining room, make up the bulk of the restaurant's artwork.

Of course, we love the design, but it is the food that bowls us over. Massive Gruyère popovers the size of softballs come to the table steaming hot and prepared to perfection, while other tasty appetizers like hamachi with avocado and the chopped vegetable salad with vinaigrette are winners. But the must-order appetizer goes to the tuna tartare with avocado and soy-lime dressing. The presentation is simple and elegant, and when paired with a crisp Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc, it's delightful.



Q & A WITH CHEF LAURENT TOURONDEL

Q: Why did you choose to open BLT Steak in Atlanta?

A: I think coming to Atlanta was something we wanted to do because we don't have any restaurants in the South. I'm friends with Joël [Antunes] in New York and talked to him several times about Atlanta, and he was part of what convinced me to come. And I think that Atlanta is ready to experience more foods. The food quality is really high now. It's like New York.

Q: What makes BLT unique compared to other steakhouses in Atlanta?

A: I think we are certainly trying to bring some more modern dishes to the steakhouse concept, like hamachi and [tuna] tartare, things you don't find in other steakhouses. But we also incorporate traditional French cooking techniques in sauces and dishes like short ribs. And we are trying to respect the French bistro concept; we have blackboards, which is very French; the popovers; and a cheese tray also. I try to come up with some new ideas all the time.

Q: What dishes are unique to the Atlanta restaurant?

A: Spicy BBQ corn, jalapeno mashed potatoes, sweet potato and turnip gratin, grits and Gorgonzola, and roasted butternut squash.

Q: What types of diners do you hope/expect to draw?

A: I think we will be drawing W hotel guests, business people from around the hotel. We will capture business for lunch and early dinner. And, hopefully, we will drag people downtown, too.

Q: How did it feel to be named restaurateur of the year in 2007 by *Bon Appétit* magazine?

A: Well, of course, it was a big deal. It was very flattering coming from a magazine like *Bon Appétit*. But it's always challenging to keep it up.

Q: Many local Atlanta chefs participate regularly in charitable events like Share our Strength, Taste of the Nation, etc. Do you anticipate having BLT involved in local charitable events?

A: We are certainly going to do some of them. We do them in New York and are going to do them here. I am the honorary chef for Share our Strength for 2009.

Above: Chef Laurent Tourondel

From the left: porterhouse steak for two; creamed spinach with nutmeg; crêpe soufflé with passion fruit sauce



And this is a steakhouse, so you really can't go wrong with any of the beef. It's all USDA Prime or Certified Black Angus, dry aged and then broiled at 1,700 degrees. On several visits, we tried everything from the New York strip and hangar steak to the bone-in ribeye, and all were moist and juicy. However, when we ordered the 8-ounce filet, it was a bit drier than the larger cuts. But other entrées like the braised short ribs and the sautéed Dover sole are top-notch choices if you'd rather pass on a steak.

And what would a good steak be without a few good sides? Well, BLT's got those down, too. The Atlanta location will be Tourondel's only restaurant to offer sides like Gorgonzola grits, spicy BBQ corn, buttered collard greens, jalapeño mashed potatoes, and sweet potato and turnip gratin—and every one is worth ordering. But choose wisely because, trust me, you must save room for the crêpe soufflé with passion fruit sauce for dessert. It's the bomb. —SARAH GLEIM

INFO

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