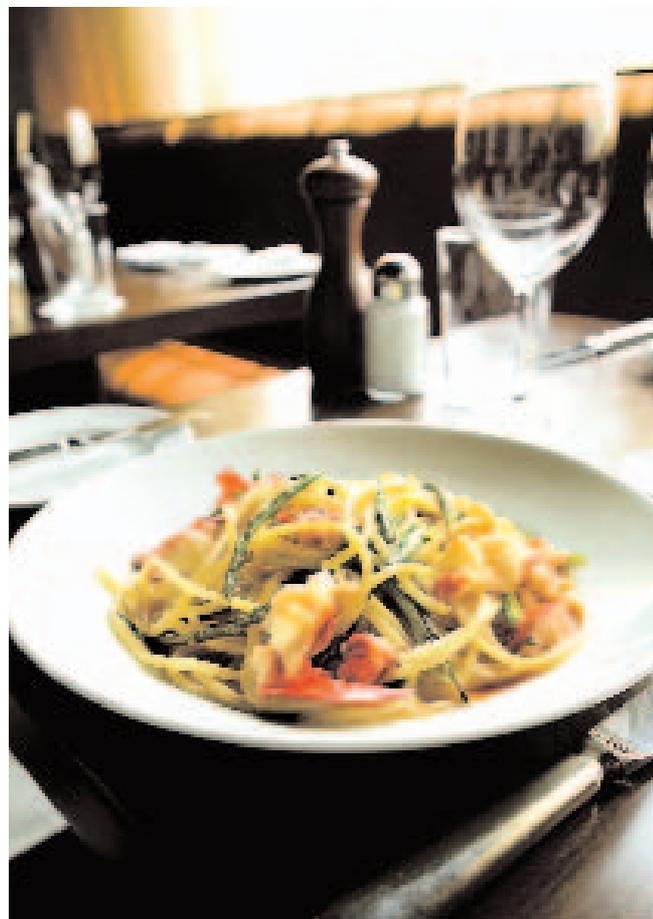


FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY SARAH GLEIM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAIN BAGWELL



Left: Ecco's dining room. Above: Maine lobster bucatini

BOLD AND BEAUTIFUL *At Ecco, the cuisine—and the interior design—take the spotlight.*

After navigating Midtown's maze of one-way streets and construction closing down parts of Peachtree, I finally see the nondescript sign for valet parking at Ecco, the newest restaurant from Fifth Group Restaurants (South City Kitchen, The Food Studio, La Tavola Trattoria), which opened in May. The restaurant is tucked away in the hip and vibrant neighborhood around Seventh and Cypress Streets, in the building that once housed the Atlanta Fencing Club. This is my second visit, and again I'm struck by how simple—even boring—the brick exterior looks from the parking area. It's not until I walk past the patio that I see the striking two-story glass-front entrance. Once inside, I'm greeted by a high-energy staff, and warm, yet sleek, interior complete with a wood-paneled ceiling, contemporary chandeliers, and an oversized bar packed with guests.

Though Ecco is billed as a simple, "European-inspired" eatery with small plates and entrees inspired by the regions along the Mediterranean (think procured meats and cheeses, fresh breads, finocchiona and fontina wood-fired pizza, and pepper flank steak paninis), the design is extremely sophisticated, thanks to Bill Johnson and The Johnson Group. He's behind some of the city's most beautiful restaurants, including Bluepointe, Rathbun's and Joël, among others.

In this case, the stunning element that sets the stage is the expansive,

open kitchen that encompasses one entire side of the 240-seat room. There, spatula-and-knife wielding chefs hustle between the wood-burning oven, cooktops and grills. At the front, a variety of meats and cheeses are on display behind a small glass case, and opposite the kitchen, the building's original wall of sprawling floor-to-ceiling windows has been preserved and is now lined with simple white sheer window treatments. Golden yellow leather booths and dark walnut tables are spread among several large farmhouse tables, which can seat up to 12 or be partitioned off to accommodate smaller groups. Soft lighting and sleek Italian Carrera marble floors are enhanced by rich yellow and brown striped velvet curtains that separate the main dining room from a smaller, private room where black and white photos adorn the walls.

But, the interior design is the backdrop to the restaurant's real showstopper: the skillfully executed cuisine of 28-year-old executive chef Micah Willix. The menu is simple, yet creative, and incorporates seasonally based ingredients—something Willix mastered while part of the core team that opened and designed the healthy cuisine concept of Seasons 52 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

On my first visit, I could see tell-tale signs of Willix's passion for fresh ingredients when I ordered the build-your-own cheese **CONTINUED...**



Oak-grilled asparagus with tomato salad

...CONTINUED and charcuterie board. The fresh selection of prosciutto, sopressata and salami sliced paper-thin, paired with hunks of mild Spanish tetilla and heady Italian fontina, arrived at the table on a rustic wooden board designed to encourage sharing. I instinctively went for a slice of the prosciutto—first on its own and then with a bite of fontina and crusty bread. The salty combination of flavors only got better when paired with a fruity California Pinot Noir, Domaine Alfred “Califa.” (The wine list contains a stellar selection of Old World and New World wines. Try the 2005 Librandi,

brick oven pizzas are served with cheese bubbling and spilling onto wooden cutting boards; grilled paninis are stacked high with a liberal portion of salty *pommes frites* on the side. The preparation of the Maine lobster and asparagus bucatini, for example, is anything but fussy; the lobster and asparagus are sautéed in butter, white wine and lobster stock, and then tossed with the pasta and served in a bowl. Still, the dish I enjoy most is the pan-roasted monkfish served with sliced potatoes. I try it at the suggestion of my server, who was dead-on with his recommendation. Willix doesn't overpower the mild, sweet taste of the fish (it's often compared to lobster) with heavy flavors; instead it's roasted in the serving dish in a light tomato-saffron sauce.

If Ecco has a weakness, it's the desserts. The two best bets on the dessert menu are the coffee panna cotta and the chocolate mille feuille; you can't go wrong with either. But when I try the pine nut tart (it's similar to pecan pie, but with pine nuts), the crust is slightly chewy and the flavor of the nuts is overwhelming. And while the burnt honey ice cream with Gorgonzola sounds like an interesting combination of sweet and tangy flavors—and piques my interest enough to order it—the first bite of the unusual ice cream leaves me wondering, “what are they thinking?” When I later ask Willix this very question he answers proudly. “I'll try anything,” he says. “I like to be adventurous and Ecco allows me to do that.” ▲

ECCO 40 SEVENTH ST., 404.347.9555, WWW.ECCO-ATLANTA.COM. **WHO GOES:** YOUNG PROFESSIONALS AND URBANITES. **WHAT TO ORDER:** FRIED GOAT CHEESE WITH HONEY; OAK GRILLED ASPARAGUS; BUILD YOUR OWN CHARCUTERIE BOARD; DARK CHOCOLATE MILLE FEUILLE. **WHAT TO DRINK:** LOTS OF WINE. TRY ONE OF ECCO'S EXCLUSIVES. **WHEN TO GO:** ANY EVENING (IT'S NOT OPEN FOR LUNCH). FOR LATE NIGHTS OUT—IT'S OPEN UNTIL 2 A.M. THURSDAYS, FRIDAYS AND SATURDAYS. **WHAT TO WEAR:** DRESSED UP OR DRESSED DOWN WORKS HERE. **WHAT IT COSTS:** MEATS AND CHEESES \$4–18, APPETIZERS \$4–\$12, ENTRÉES \$13–\$34 **RATING:** ★★★★★

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

THE MENU HERE IS SIMPLE, YET CREATIVE, AND INCORPORATES SEASONALLY BASED INGREDIENTS—SOMETHING WILLIX MASTERED WHILE PART OF THE CORE TEAM THAT OPENED AND DESIGNED THE HEALTHY CUISINE CONCEPT AT SEASONS 52.

“Critone,” Chardonnay-Sauvignon Blanc, Italy or 2003 Domaine du Pujol “Proteus,” France—they're exclusive to Ecco.) I could have spent the entire evening dining simply on the meat, wine and cheese, but instead made a mental note to come back another night for that.

Tonight, on my second visit, I opt to try more of the small plates and entrées. My favorite is the fried goat cheese balls. They arrive at the table lightly battered and deep fried, served in a pool of drizzled honey. Usually I'm not a big fan of chèvre, but these are light and sweet, with just a hint of that tart goat cheese flavor. I have to use restraint not to order a second serving. I also decide to try the short rib stuffed piquillo peppers. On my first visit, the flavor was outstanding—the pork was seasoned to perfection and tender enough to cut with a fork. This time, however, I am less impressed. While the peppers are bursting with sweetness, I can't seem to find the flavor of the pork. Reluctantly, I ended up reaching for the salt.

Ecco hits another homerun with the oak-grilled asparagus topped with marinated tomato salad. Willix uses the bold flavor of the cherry tomato salad—it's marinated in 12-year-old balsamic vinegar, olive oil, Calabresi olives and capers—to elevate the flavor of the fresh white asparagus that he cooks over the wood-burning grill. Be sure to tear off some bread and soak up the marinade before you let the plate leave your table; it's that good.

The entrées, which Willix admits aren't necessarily served with presentation in mind, are kept simple—pastas come in large white bowls;



Executive chef Micah Willix