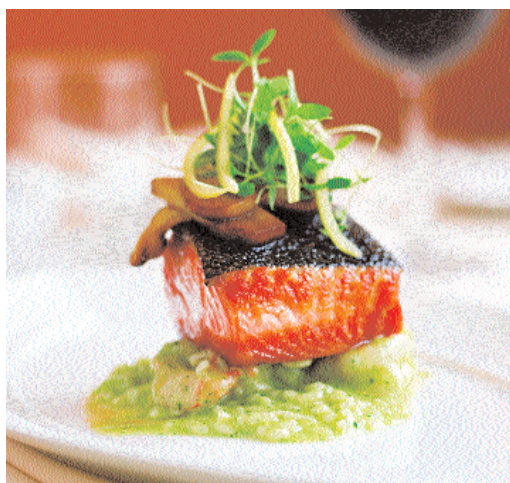
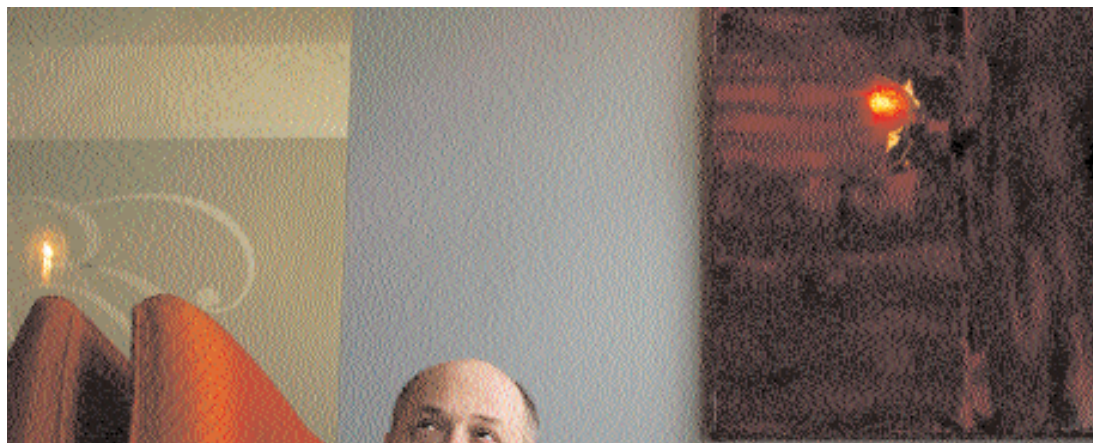


# FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY SARAH GLEIM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAIN BAGWELL



*Above:* Tasmanian salmon over Georgia white shrimp risotto with porcini mushrooms. *Right:* Executive chef/owner Linton Hopkins

## NATURAL WONDER *This morning's harvest is tonight's dinner at Restaurant Eugene.*

The 55-seat dining room at Restaurant Eugene resembles a 40s-era lounge: Sounds of Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Bill Evans fill the air as dinner guests sip cocktails and dine at oversized banquettes and white linen-covered tables. Executive chef and owner Linton Hopkins looks right at home in this sexy space and its the buttery cream walls, sheer curtains and contemporary backdrop of dark wood floors. But beneath his crisp-white chef coat beats the heart of a farmboy.

His love for farming was cultivated years ago during visits to his grandfather Eugene's farm in Tennessee. But the seeds for Hopkins' Buckhead restaurant weren't planted until he spent time as a chef in both New Orleans and Washington D.C., where he was exposed to restaurants linked to a network of local farmers. It was there he learned that it wasn't enough to just order boxes of meat and produce and plan a menu—his job was to do something special between farm and fork, and that meant keeping a close eye on, and ear to, the ground. "There's just something about a carrot that was harvested this morning that can't be matched," he says.

On the eve of his restaurant's three-year anniversary, the 40-year-old Hopkins is one of the city's most highly respected chefs. Last fall, he was one of just four chefs nominated to compete in the *Iron Chef America* Atlanta challenge. He beat out chefs Gerry Klaskala (Aria), Anne Quattrano (Bacchanalia) and Kevin Rathbun (Rathbun's) to represent Atlanta on an

episode of the Food Network's cult classic, *Iron Chef America*. (Editor's note: At presstime, no airdate was set for the episode in which Hopkins competes against *Iron Chef Masabaru Morimoto*.) But Hopkins is only one of a select few restaurateurs whose kitchen revolves around local ingredients harvested daily by organic farmers. "I search out the people that are like us—the farmers and ranchers that love their land and take great care of it," he says.

It's this philosophy that drives both Restaurant Eugene's modern American cuisine and the constantly changing menu, which on my visit includes a variety of hearty, cold-weather dishes and winter vegetables. It's a small selection—just 10 entrées and a handful of appetizers—but each dish stands out in its complexity.

Tonight's menu presents a "study of Tsukiji Market tuna," which includes both tartare and sashimi, but there's also a starter of Malaspina oysters on the half shell, harvested from the waters of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. "If you're a big fan of oysters, don't pass these up," my server suggests. "They're some of the best we've ever had."

I follow her advice and find the presentation exceptional. The pearly white shells sit in sharp contrast to a bed of black and gray pebbles, and the oysters are plump and dark, each topped with a light pink blend of crushed ice, pickled ginger, lime and vodka. The flavor is equally remarkable. The zesty taste of the pickled ginger

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Malaspina oysters on the half shell

...CONTINUED "granita" is the perfect accompaniment to the cold, semi-sweet bivalve, especially paired with my Russian Hill chardonnay. The plate of six leaves me wishing for more.

On paper, there's nothing special about the Gala apple and Gorgonzola salad's ingredients—a traditional combination of prosciutto, cipollini onions, apple, Gorgonzola and Belgian endives. When it arrives I'm surprised to find a delicate mound of finely julienned apple and endive atop several caramelized cipollini onions—a great example of Hopkins' natural ability to let the food do the talking. The slightly spicy apple and bitter endive pair delightfully with the pungent blue cheese and prosciutto. And the onions, caramelized to perfection, add a burst of sweetness to every bite.

Both of my fish entrées tonight emphasize Hopkins' commitment to technique and fine cuisine. The Gulf red snapper is pan-seared with the skin on, leaving the outside crispy and full of flavor, and the delicate fish flaky and moist. It's served with organic turnip greens from Tucker Taylor

***"I SEARCH OUT THE PEOPLE THAT ARE LIKE US—THE FARMERS AND RANCHERS THAT LOVE THEIR LAND AND TAKE GREAT CARE OF IT."***

at Woodland Gardens near Athens, and a salty country ham risotto. The small filets of sautéed wild Chesapeake striped bass melt in my mouth, but it's the creamed Georgia greens and hominy pilau that give this second entrée a truly Southern twist.

The ragout of seasonal mushrooms, a blend of chanterelles, beachams and namekos on a bed of grits, falters from the rest of the menu's successes. The earthy flavors of the mushroom blend and grits work wonderfully together, and the Parmigiano cheese on top only adds to the mix, but an intensely tart lemon broth overpowers the affair.

Cheese is one of Hopkins' passions, so I skip the classic Southern pound cake and "study in chocolate" on the dessert menu and end dinner with a port and cheese flight of Stilton and Old Codger Tawny. The Tawny adds a layer of love atop the aftertaste of this notable "stinky" cheese, making me glad I'd skipped the sweet stuff.

Hopkins and his wife/business partner Gina, director of Restaurant Eugene's wine program, not only coordinate their efforts the third Thursday of every month with a cheese-and-wine pairing dinner, but they also share a commitment to running a successful restaurant by

honoring native food and drink. "I find the best wines by visiting the wineries and meeting the people behind them," Gina says. "We couldn't stand behind our philosophy if I didn't." The list, which received the *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence in 2005 and 2006, includes a broad selection of wines from every region of the world, but focuses primarily on boutique wineries that practice the same strict attention to quality the couple has worked so hard to foster at Restaurant Eugene. "This restaurant has an identity," Hopkins says. "We pride ourselves on knowing not just where everything comes from, but who it comes from, too." **A**



The main dining room at Restaurant Eugene

**RESTAURANT EUGENE** 2277 PEACHTREE ROAD, 404.355.0321. **WHO GOES:** HERE YOU'LL RUN INTO EVERYONE FROM HIGH-BROW BUSINESSMEN MEETING WITH CLIENTS TO HIP YOUNG COUPLES CELEBRATING AN ELEGANT EVENING OUT. **WHAT TO ORDER:** DAILY OYSTERS ON THE HALF SHELL WITH GINGER GRANITA; A CHEESE AND PORT FLIGHT. **WHAT TO DRINK:** THE NEO-POLITAN SIGNATURE COCKTAIL; ANY WINE OFF THE AWARD-WINNING LIST. LET GINA SUGGEST YOUR PAIRINGS. **WHEN TO GO:** ANY EVENING FOR DINNER; THE THIRD THURSDAY OF THE MONTH FOR "CHEESE EUGENE." **WHAT TO WEAR:** LEAVE YOUR BLUE JEANS AT HOME AND DRESS FOR A NIGHT OUT. BUT ALL EYES HERE ARE REALLY ON THE FOOD. **WHAT IT COSTS:** STARTERS \$10 TO \$25, ENTRÉES \$20 TO \$45; DESSERT \$6 TO \$8; CHEESE AND PORT FLIGHTS \$20. **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.**