



Ribeye steak from BLT Steak;
(opposite page) black truffle pizza
with fontina cheese from Market

The Celebrity Dish

Star chefs are setting up shop in Atlanta, elevating its already impressive culinary scene with their buzz-worthy restaurants.

BY SARAH GLEIM



For years, Atlanta has been home to some of the best chef-driven restaurants in the country—Bacchanalia, Rathbun's, Watershed and Shaun's, to name a few award winners. So it wouldn't be fair (or necessarily true) to say the city has only recently become a destination for dining. But there's a new craze infiltrating the scene: celebrity chefs and restaurateurs.

That's right: "Top Chef" judge Tom Colicchio, and international sensations like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Laurent Tourondel have set their sights on Atlanta. But why? And why now, especially in challenging economic times?

All three stars were approached several years ago by

major hospitality brands—Starwood Hotels and Resorts (W hotels) and Rosewood Hotels and Resorts (The Mansion on Peachtree)—to establish restaurants at future properties. But ask the chefs themselves, and the answers go much deeper than just being in a chic new hotel.

Colicchio, for example, opened **Craft** and **Craftbar** (www.craftrestaurant.com; 404-995-7580) at The Mansion on Peachtree in December, his fourth Craft and only second Craftbar in the country. "I get offers all the time to do this kind of restaurant in other cities and I turn them down," Colicchio says.

"[Opening in Atlanta] was about putting down roots in the South," Colicchio says. "All the right factors have to be in place, and the bottom line is, they were in



Laurent
Tourondel



Jean-Georges
Vongerichten



Tom
Colicchio

Atlanta. It is a city I enjoy, and it has a great food culture. I had the right member of my team ready to make a move and step in to run the restaurant. I have to look at it as a step for my company, not just as a step for me.”

Atlanta is the first city where Craft and Craftbar are in a shared space—a dramatic, two-story building that is both natural and modern in design, and incorporates a limited number of building materials and architectural elements, a signature of the Craft look. Colicchio insists the menu will be consistent, too. “Will we have grits here? Yes, but we have grits on the menu in New York,” says the chef, whose dishes feature impeccably sourced regional ingredients prepared without heavy sauces or complicated presentations, allowing them to stand out on their own.

Chef and restaurateur Laurent Tourondel took a different approach when opening **Bistro Laurent Tourondel Steak** (www.bltsteak.com; 404-577-7601)—or BLT Steak—in late January in the W Atlanta Downtown hotel. He made sure to tailor the menu to its location with dishes reflective of Southern ingredients and traditions. His famous French bistro-inspired steakhouse—featuring French ingredients and cooking techniques paired with traditional American and French cuts of meat—will be the only one to offer sides like gorgonzola grits, spicy BBQ corn, buttered collard greens, jalapeño mashed potatoes, and sweet potato and turnip gratin. Cocktails like the White Peach Sweet Tea, a mixture of Firefly Sweet Tea Vodka, white peach purée and Massenez peach liqueur, also invoke Southern flavors.

“The food quality in Atlanta is really high now. It’s like New York,” Tourondel says. “After eating at several restaurants here, I knew we would have some competition. I think after going to Kevin Rathbun Steak (owned by local chef Kevin Rathbun), it really challenged me to come up with more modern Southern sides.”

Another huge name to hit Atlanta’s culinary scene: Jean-Georges Vongerichten. In March of 2008, he opened **Spice Market** (www.spicemarketatlanta.com; 404-549-5450) in the W Atlanta Midtown—the first location outside New York. And last December, the more casual **Market** (www.marketbuckhead.com; 404-523-3600) opened at the W Buckhead. And—considering the only other city in the world that has a Market is Paris—it’s quite a coup for Atlanta.

“Some of these guys are bringing attention to Atlanta as the ‘New York of the South’—and that’s a good thing.”

“I discovered Atlanta many years ago doing charity work and realized it’s a good market for us,” Vongerichten says. “We like what is happening here and when we had the opportunity to work with the W in such great locations, we jumped on it.”

Vongerichten says his decision to open in Atlanta was also based on the fact that locals are open to trying new things. “Spice Market is a very new concept for Atlanta, and we wanted to bring something totally different to the dining scene already here,” he says. “We have a great relationship with Atlanta and have been very successful here so far.”

The menu is nearly identical to the New York restaurant’s, featuring shareable appetizers and small entrées inspired by Southeast Asian street food. The elaborate, themed décor includes massive wooden boxes, ropes and bells hanging from the ceiling, and silk patterned pillows lining the seats.

Market is equally impressive, although on a slightly cozier scale. The seasonal and market-driven menu (hence the name) changes reg-

RECIPE POPOVERS WITH GRUYÈRE

From BLT Steak

2 cups of all purpose flour
1¼ teaspoons of salt
2 cups of whole milk
4 large eggs
Nonstick vegetable oil spray
1½ cups grated Gruyère
cheese (about 6 ounces)

Makes approximately 16



Place one 12-cup muffin pan and one 6-cup muffin pan in oven. Preheat to 350 degrees. Whisk flour and salt in medium bowl to blend. Heat milk in small, heavy saucepan over medium heat until very warm, about 125 degrees. Whisk eggs in large bowl to blend. Gradually whisk warm milk into eggs. Gradually stir flour mixture into milk mixture just to blend (batter may still be slightly lumpy).

Remove hot muffin pans from oven. Spray pans with nonstick spray. Spoon ¼ cup batter into each of 16 muffin cups. Top each with 1½ tablespoons of cheese. Bake until puffed and deep brown, about 40 minutes. Remove from pan.

ularly, and also includes classics from some of Vongerichten's other restaurants, like tuna spring rolls from Mercer Kitchen and steamed red snapper from Perry St (both in New York). Unique to Atlanta are the short ribs, a warm goat cheese custard with sweet and sour beets, and fried chicken.

Needless to say, some of the city's already established local chefs, like Rathbun (owner of Kevin Rathbun Steak, Rathbun's and Krog Bar), are a little skeptical about whether or not these celebrity chef restaurants will survive.

"Some of these guys are bringing attention to Atlanta as the 'New York of the South'—and that's a good thing," Rathbun says. "But these chefs can't always be in these restaurants all of the time. Unfortunately, you tend to get some 'lost in translation' in the kitchens. Just look at Emeril's."

Rathbun is, of course, talking about the now-defunct Emeril's Atlanta, which was opened by the famous Emeril Lagasse to great fanfare in 2003. But, over time, the restaurant received consistently negative reviews from critics, finally closing last April. Lagasse himself was rarely seen there, and endless turnover in both kitchen and management staff was reported.

Rathbun, who is currently eyeing another spot in the wildly popular Inman Park neighborhood to open an "underground speakeasy," says the bottom line is that Atlantans love the local chefs and will continue to support them—but admits he's eaten at Craft several times.

"I do think that Tom [Colicchio] has a great restaurant and a formula that works," Rathbun says. "And I'm always researching because I have to know my market and know who is coming in. There are only so many seats available. You don't want to do what they are doing, but you do want to be on top of your game and stay current."

Even as new celebrity chef restaurants are causing quite a stir in Atlanta, it's safe to say that established stars like Bacchanalia, Rathbun's, Watershed and Shaun's aren't going away any time soon. ✂

AIRTRAN AIRWAYS provides daily, low-fare flights to Atlanta. Visit www.airtran.com for more info.