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"BITING REALITY SINCE"

Southern comfort

Miller Union's perfect storm on the Westside ■ By Besha Rodell



SNACK ATTACK: The radish and feta appetizer at Miller Union

Miller Union ★★★☆☆
999 Brady Ave. 678-733-8550. www.millerunion.com. Dinner:
Mon.-Thurs., 5-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat. 5-11 p.m. Full bar. Valet parking.

On a small plate, a pot of creamy feta cheese sits surrounded by three kinds of crunch. The first is tiny breakfast radishes, cut in quarters. The second is demure baby carrots, so adorable they look lifted from your childhood Peter Rabbit dinnerware. The third is watermelon radishes, sliced crosswise into chips, revealing the vegetable's vermilion burst of color in its prettiest possible aspect. The plate is attractive enough to discourage disturbance, but gobble you must, because the play on the classic use of radishes as a pre-dinner bite (usually served with butter and salt) is addictive. Here, the feta serves as salt and butter; one creamy foil to the radish's vegetal snap. This is barely a dish — on Miller Union's menu, it is in fact referred to as a "snack." Nonetheless, it might be the perfect ambassador for the restaurant, representative in its humor, beauty, and simplicity of what the place is all about.

In many ways, Miller Union is a perfect storm of a restaurant. Longtime Watershed sous chef Steven Satterfield and Sotto Sotto manager Neal McCarthy have come together to deliver a personal-feeling, truly regional restaurant. Miller Union serves Southern food without shtick or embellishment, making it unlikely that the restaurant would exist anywhere outside the American South. Its industrial setting, among the

warehouses and train tracks of the Westside, make it more specific still. This is an Atlanta restaurant, from its cocktails to its menu items to its talent and location.

Rather than opt for the wide-open dramatic space popular these days, Miller Union comprises a warren of rooms. These small, high-ceilinged spaces flow into each other in a line behind the bar that fronts the restaurant. They have a cozy atrium feel, particularly the middle room with its dark wood shelving and library theme. Almost everything about Miller Union walks a high-end/low-key line, at once endearing and reserved.

Much of Satterfield's cooking resembles home cooking — not aw-shucks country kookin', but honest, straightforward food made with stellar ingredients. He has an obvious affinity for vegetables — more than once I ordered a dish not for its protein but its accompaniment. This is the home cooking of a foodie friend with a produce obsession, making it patently delicious at almost every turn.

I ordered the steak one night just for the promise of creamed turnips, and was rewarded with puréed turnips so luscious and generous in spirit that I barely minded the steak's slightly flabby cook (not enough sear, leading to a lack in bite and contrast). The turnips' inherent astringent tang mingled with a creaminess that reminded me of coconut milk and looked like fine grits. Paired with charred and melting sweet grilled Vidalias, this is a steak dish worth its price for the veggies alone.

The same could be said of the griddle-cooked

poulet rouge and its buttery whipped rutabaga and roasted Brussels sprouts. But the chicken's skin is so thoroughly crisped — caramelized, cracklin'-style, pure chicken fat goodness — it warrants its own cheering section.

The carrot soup offered recently at the restaurant's inaugural Tuesday night harvest dinner (which is served communally and costs \$30 for three courses) reminded me of the silken soup that wooed the Tawny Scrawny Lion away from eating bunnies in the classic children's book. And speaking of eating bunnies, Satterfield's rabbit over soft grits with mushrooms manages a trifecta of comfort in its woody, dusky warmth.

Another dish that tugs at the soft nostalgia of childhood while simultaneously channeling sophistication is the egg in celery cream. A farm egg is soft-cooked in a dish with custardy celery root purée, and served with crusty toasted bread.

Occasionally, Satterfield's penchant for soft textures and kiddy food references oversteps the mark of cleverness and veers into mushiness. I found the melted mushrooms and cabbage toast bland and uninspired, and a Carolina gold risotto with roasted pumpkin reminded me of the lazy one-pot rice dishes I make at home when I'm looking for fuel without flavor.

Skate wing over radicchio and cauliflower seemed ascetic in its presentation — an example of when simplicity can become too simple, leaving me longing for more pizzazz on the plate.

A former *CL* intern at the hostess stand had me made as a critic from the second I stepped foot in the place, but McCarthy's tall British presence is full of a warmth and professionalism that'd be impossible to fake. Turn to him for recommendations from the diverse wine list, one of the restaurant's features that moves well beyond basics and into the territory of pleasurable culinary education. (An Austrian clone of the pinot noir grape? Sure, why not?)

When you put Miller Union in the sphere of Atlanta's best restaurants — and I believe it deserves such distinguished company — it occupies a very different position than most in its class. The food comes down squarely on the side of comfort over thrills, and yet much of it is so heartening it elicits excitement nonetheless. Satterfield and McCarthy have achieved exactly what it is they set out to do. And in that, we should all find comfort.

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