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REVIEW

## Miller Union

A Southern food champion and a British charmer deliver the best Westside story yet

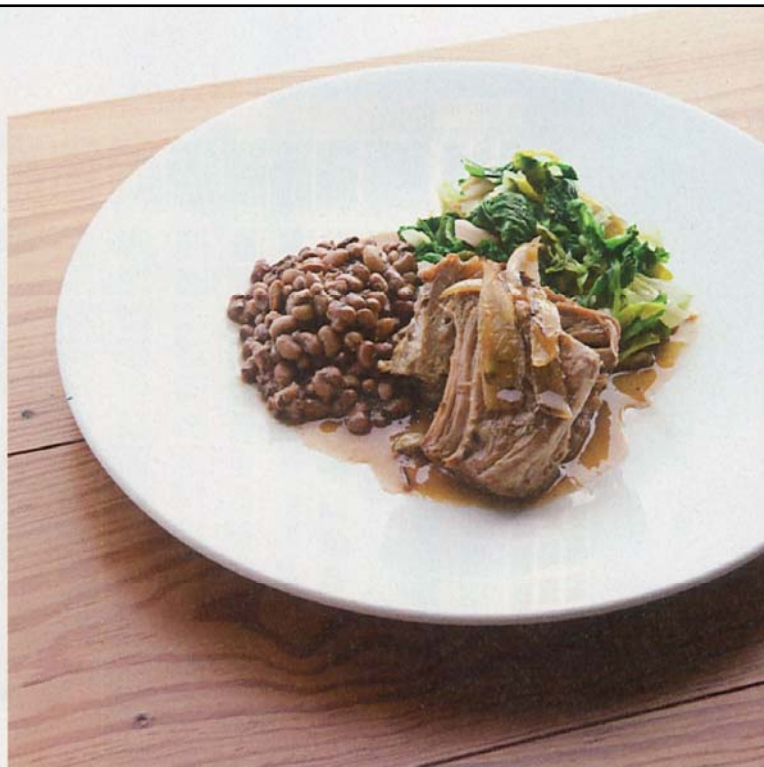
by BILL ADDISON

THE BRAISED RABBIT AT MILLER UNION looks homely, as many of the South's finest dishes do. Shredded meat, sauteed mushrooms, russet-colored gravy, and a moat of grits make for an unglamorous collage of earth tones. But, oh, the taste. Bite after bite, this entree reminds me of Nat King Cole's voice: velvety, soothing, timeless. The rabbit is cooked for two hours with carrots, celery, and fennel in chicken stock and red wine before being pulled from the bone—a step that helps squeamish eaters disassociate their meal from the cuteness of bunnies. No fancy seasonings mar the Logan Turnpike grits from North Georgia. They are simmered in water and milk and finished with salt, pepper, cream, and butter. The mushrooms add pleasant murkiness, and the braising liquid, acting as gravy, curtails the richness. This is food in high definition, a vivid sequence of flavors that reflects the agrarian roots and ingenuity of our region's cooking.

Steven Satterfield, Miller Union's co-owner and executive chef, has a knack for unpretentious food that transcends cliché. His business partner, Neal McCarthy, wields a similar talent as the restaurant's general manager: He directs a front-of-the-house staff that radiates warmth, interacts intelligently with customers, and generally appears excited to be a part of this venture.

Their synthesis of know-how, on display since Miller Union opened in November, is impressive but not surprising. Both Satterfield and McCarthy are dining-scene veterans who spent lengthy tenures at two of the area's most enduring restaurants. Satterfield, a Georgia native, worked as Scott Peacock's executive sous chef at Watershed, where he absorbed powerful respect for the simplicity and seasonality of Southern cuisine. McCarthy, a native of Kent, England, managed Sot to Sot to and Fritti for five years, and his suave Brit accent, lanky frame, and sly humor became as much a part of those Italian darlings as the Tortelli di Michelangelo and Regina Margherita pizza.

So while it doesn't startle that these two have created a destination that many food lovers were instantly urging their friends to try, what does astonish is how fresh the perspective of the restaurant feels in both design and menu. It's an antidote for jaded diners, and the renewing effects kick in almost as soon as you walk in the door. Of course it makes sense that this next generation of restaurateurs would pioneer yet another forlorn industrial



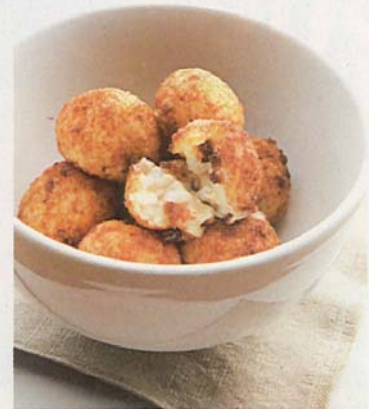
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Miller Union's executive chef, Steven Satterfield, displays his Southern roots with menu favorites such as (opposite) beer-braised pork with sauteed greens and sea island red peas, an ever-changing vegetable plate, and (this page) spheres of fried grits with cheese and country ham.



is an environmentally conscious bordello, perhaps? Across the hall is a much more modern dining room with chocolate banquettes and slate-gray walls.

It's a thoroughly inviting atmosphere in which to plunk down and seriously chow. As much as I enjoy the cocktails, I'm equally drawn to start the meal with a bourbon on the rocks, which attunes the palate to the food ahead. (McCarthy can make fantastic wine recommendations as the meal progresses.) I don't think I've had one meal at Miller Union that didn't begin with the little spheres of fried grits that burst with flecks of country ham and melted globs of Thomasville Tomme from South Georgia's Sweet Grass Dairy.

corner of the Westside, in an area that was once the Miller Union stockyards. When you enter, the concrete world outside recedes. Start the evening with a cocktail at the rustic stretch of bar, where Cara Laudino pours novel cocktails such as The Evergreen (gin, rosemary, citrus, and a judicious splash of potent Zirbenz pine liqueur) and the signature Miller Thyme (Miller's gin, lemon, and thyme syrup), a sunny potion that will particularly entice come summertime.

Design firm AI3 grabs the lion's share of work for edgier new restaurants in town these days, but it outdid itself with the sophistication of Miller Union's space. From the bar, black-rimmed windows frame the center dining area, which looks like the set piece for a sitting-room drama Tennessee Williams might have penned. Whitewashed cabinets display homemade canned goods and winter squashes. To the left, a hallway is covered with a silky burgundy pattern that suggests a house of ill repute. Notice the subtle tree print running through the material—this

The other inexpensive, don't-miss nibble is the "radish and feta snack"—a peppery, salty, crisp, creamy contrast between cheese and vegetable that only makes you hungrier with each crunch.

Satterfield keeps his menu tight, with around nine appetizers and seven main courses. Several starters have become immediate keepers: The farm egg baked in celery cream, a sumptuous union of custardy textures that you heap onto thick pieces of toast; smooth chicken liver mousse accented with pickled vegetables; and any of the revolving soups. Satterfield's mustard greens soup during the zenith of winter was a particular masterwork of pureed nuance: The greens were gently tamed with chicken stock without being stripped of their wintry brawn.

There's something radically understated about Satterfield's cooking. At its best, it hits a reset button in the head, reawakening memories of how gratifying clean, uncomplicated flavors can be. Chicory lettuces are dotted with pieces of grapefruit and tossed in a shallot vinaigrette that is barely visible but so piquant in the

mouth. The unflinching sear on griddled poulet rouge reinforces the essential pleasure of deftly prepared chicken. The honest simplicity of beer-braised pork shoulder with sauteed greens and sea island red peas can induce sighs of contentment. Satterfield was almost too shy with his seasoning in the restaurant's first weeks, but that's mostly been resolved. I wish that an entree of unadorned pan-seared flounder (the type of fish changes frequently but the preparation largely remains the same) had a light sauce or chutney; it's too austere. And I find the Carolina Gold risotto with roasted pumpkin and escarole is better as a side dish split among the table than as a stand-alone main course. Vegetarians should instead opt for the vegetable plate composed of five ever-changing sides that add up to a satisfying whole.

Satterfield has found a worthy sweets counterpart in pastry chef Lauren Raymond, who embraces Miller Union's aesthetic with unfussy but intense desserts such as the trio of herb ice creams (thyme, rosemary, sage), pear tart with textbook flaky pastry, and a coconut cake with whipped cream-like meringue icing and freshly grated coconut. I loved the orange-cardamom upside-down cake she crafted for the restaurant's first Harvest Dinner, a weekly Tuesday night family-style meal that incorporates the best of-the-moment ingredients the chefs can collect from local farmers. For the inaugural dinner, Satterfield served silken carrot soup, roast pork loin with apple cider jus, whipped rutabagas, sauteed escarole, those lovely sea island red peas, and cornbread as light as spoon bread. I'll not be surprised if this weekly feature flowers into as much of a tradition as the Tuesday night fried chicken at Watershed. Miller Union has all the makings of a restaurant poised to inspire the next generation of Atlanta's food professionals. ■

**VITAL STATISTICS RATING ★★☆☆**

**ADDRESS** 999 Brady Avenue **PHONE**

678-733-8550 **WEBSITE** millerunion.com

**HOURS** Dinner Monday–Thursday 5–10 p.m.; Friday–Saturday 5–11 p.m.

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