**FIRST IMPRESSION**

**Bocado  NotRated**

887 Howell Mill Rd.
Lunch Mon-Fri 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Sat 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.
Dinner Mon-Thur 5-10; Fri & Sat 5-11
Reservations accepted (404-815-1399)
Credit cards: AE, V, MC, Dis  $$

The name, Spanish for "mouthful" or "little bite," is playful and light, a perfect introduction to what this low-key, stylish restaurant is trying to accomplish. No one is lecturing you on the need to eat smaller, healthier portions, and the menu doesn't wrap itself in sanctimonious lingo. Chic, modern, and with a decor reminiscent of the early days of The Globe, brand-new Bocado is the kind of place that sneaks up on you and makes you want to tell your friends.

Released from his golden corporate shackles (most recently Concentrics and previously The Ritz-Carlton Buckhead), Chef Todd Ginsberg puts his signature on affordable dishes made with delicious ingredients. Just picture yourself sitting at the bar with a glass of Riesling and a fabulous boneless chicken thigh on a neat square of fried polenta with bacon, brussels sprouts, and chicken jus. What should you have next? A cup of delectable tomato soup with a neat grilled pimento cheese, green tomato, and bacon sandwich? Gnocchi with dinosaur kale and lemon butter? Wild American shrimp on Logan Turnpike grits with a swirl of intense white wine-Tabasco sauce? A Honey Crisp apple salad with spicy raisins, walnuts, and a sheep's milk cheese made in Europe exclusively for Cypress Grove Chevre?

Ginsberg plunks melt-in-your-mouth veal cheeks (so much better than beef or pork ones) dead-center on what he calls a risotto but, to us, feels like good, creamy saffron rice made with Italian carnaroli grains and topped with shaved scallions. Given the same dish in a larger installment, we might not be as excited. What makes the plate work is its perfectly calibrated size. There is admirable creative restraint in the baby beet salad with fluffy Valbreso feta, olives, and tangy young arugula. We may think that the chicken liver spread is a little too smooth, but a sprinkle of sea salt awakens its flavor, and although it could stand to lose a few jalapeños, the Mexican sandwich made with thin slices of freshly roasted pork, avocado, beans, cheese, lettuce, and wickedly hot sauce is a fun, casual treat.

On Bocado's menu, the appetizers outnumber the entrees three to one and the prices ($6 to $16) are gentle all around, yet corners are never cut. The pastry chef, Jennifer von Schlichten, is young, talented, and eager to unfold her wings, gradually assuming ownership of a list originally designed by Aaron Russell, late of The Chocolate Bar. The subtle tropical fruit panna cotta made with crème fraîche, the
in at the same time, the staff can slam a fresh pie in front of you in minutes, beautifully charred and blistered, with the bufala mozzarella still bubbling and the San Marzano tomatoes sputtering juice.

Visually, the pies are amazing. The authentic range of flavors impresses the heck out of us. But while the first slice is usually magic, the soft dough collapses in the middle soon after and fails to deliver a good bite. Trying to fold a puffy and superwet wedge of pizza Margherita in the style of a portafoglio (a wallet) as instructed is an exercise in frustration, and we must confess that, as long as it doesn’t feel like cardboard, we like a bit of stiffness at the bottom of our pie.

While a certified Margherita is hard to beat, we also have considerable enthusiasm for the pomodorini pizza with fresh Vesuvian cherry tomatoes, bufala mozzarella, garlic, and basil and the pizza bianca with fior di latte, bufala, ricotta, and pecorino. Meat lovers should try the San Gennaro (salciccia, sweet red peppers, bufala, and cipolline) and trust the lasagna pizza’s meatballs, ricotta, and romano. Meat lovers should try the San Gennaro (salciccia, sweet red peppers, bufala, and cipolline) and trust the lasagna pizza’s meatballs, ricotta, and romano. Delightfully bitter broccoli rabe gives just the right punch to the Verdura with mushrooms, pomodorini, and garlic. Various condiments displayed on the community table range from olive oil to premium Italian salt, chopped fresh garlic, bouquets of oregano with scissors to do your own clipping, and sweet hot peppers packed in olive oil, the better for you to season your pizza to taste.

It seems churlish of us already to regret the days when standing room only created its own camaraderie at Antico Pizza, and, even with stools, we still love eating among the bags of flour, cans of tomatoes, and packages of mozzarella in the prep room while some of the cooks mince garlic, slice cheese, and chat quietly. We have yet to gather enough folks to reserve the chef’s table in the kitchen (the $60 surcharge includes a corking fee) or buy and ship a packaged pizza from a small selection displayed in an upright cooler. All pies are large (eight slices), and the average price ($19) attracts a self-selecting clientele.

Grindhouse Killer Burgers
★★½★★
209 Edgewood Ave., inside the Sweet Auburn Curb Market
Open Mon-Sat 11 a.m.-4 p.m.
No reservations (404-522-3444)
Credit cards: AE, V, MC, Dis $ 

The tide may finally be turning for a municipal market that has been almost nothing but heartache to those who, for more than two decades, have been trying to make it into the kind of place a city could be proud of. Latest in the bunch is Alex Brounstein, a young entrepreneur with a law degree from Emory who, for the last year, has worked pro bono on improving a facility whose gentrification has been sporadic. Despite having the right mix of ambitions and connections, he, too, got tangled in red tape. And even though his big plans to manage the renovation came to naught, he decided to teach by example and opened a sit-down hamburger counter.

Thanks to Brounstein, yuppies and foodies are returning in droves to a place that still mostly functions as a resource for cheap staples of the Southern diet such as greens, fatback, peanuts, and the occasional gooey sweet or baggie of kaolin. The high-profile customers are unlikely to check out the food court surrounded by modest stalls, but they may trickle over to a centrally located pizza counter that does steady, unremarkable business. Mostly though, they go straight to Grindhouse Killer Burgers, where everything registers as hip.

Although we appreciate the aesthetics of the restaurant (beautiful old-fashioned neon sign, cult flicks projected on a wall of glorious white tiles, baskets of Vidalia onions and boxes of fresh green chiles from New Mexico used as legitimate props), we are all about the burgers. Some may object to the fact that the meat (custom-ground certified Angus chuck and brisket, formed by hand into firm 1/4 lb patties) is only available grilled medium. We don’t. Because of the cooking time, the beef develops a toasty flavor of rendered fat that is
infinitely compatible with the buttered toasted potato bun heaped with such premium ingredients as thick-cut bacon, house-roasted green chiles, fresh avocado, and crispy Vidalia onions. The burgers are available Grindhouse, Euro, Yankee, Cowboy, and Apache style with various combinations of cheeses, sauces, and toppers.

We may be partial to the Euro-style burger (sauteed mushrooms, Swiss, mustard, and mayonnaise), but we love all of them and we are happy to see that the concept is met with enthusiasm and a new influx of visitors to the historic market. From onion rings to stubby curly fries, there are many creative ways to increase your calorie count, but we are especially pleased with Grindhouse Killer Burgers for keeping its burgers reasonable in size and making them portable by inserting them into sleeves of folded paper. The sliders (three mini burgers on steamed potato buns), the chili, and the thick hand-spun milkshakes add much joy to our lunches, and those who prefer turkey or veggie burgers will also be impressed with their respective patties.

CULINARY MERRY-GO-ROUND: Chef Drew Van Leuvan is kicking the kitchen up a notch at ONE MIDTOWN KITCHEN; OCTANE has taken over the former METHOD coffee shop in the Emory Village; RED SALT in Roswell has changed its name to SALT FACTORY; 57TH FIGHTER GROUP is back in business practically on the runway at Peachtree-Dekalb Airport in Chamblee; the peripatetic COLLARD GREEN CAFE is now bringing home cooking to the suburbs with a move to 1805 Hembree Rd., in Alpharetta.

A NEW ACCOMPLISHMENT FOR MAN-KIND? According to the manufacturer’s site, Perky Jerky is “the world’s first all-natural performance enhancing meat snack,” harnessing the power of proteins and the chemical high of an energy drink.

UPDATE

Leon’s Full Service ★★½ ★★

131 E. Ponce de Leon Ave., in Decatur (404-687-0500)
Reviewed Mar. ’09, rated ★★½ ★★

One of our new goals in life is to experience every single cocktail on bartender Miles Macquarrie’s mind. Involved since the beginning with Dave Blanchard and Mike Gallagher’s fun new gastropub, Macquarrie has an incredibly sophisticated palate. Known for his Sazerac, worshipped for his Vieux Carré (Prunier V.S. cognac, Old Overholt rye whisky, Noilly Prat sweet vermouth, Bénédictine, Angostura and Peychaud’s bitters), and master of at least two dozen other classics, he also follows the seasons closely and adds quarterly cocktail specialties to the list.

Whatever we expected from Macquarrie’s new Sloe Hand (Hayman’s Old Tom gin, Plymouth sloe gin, fresh pressed cranberries, orange-maple foam) was trumped and then some. A less expert bartender might have used the same ingredients and produced a sweet drink, rather than a mysterious elixir meant to be sipped through an elegant and slightly clingy layer of foam with a soupçon of maple and a shower of finely grated orange zest. The holidays get closer every day, and we are inching toward Macquarrie’s Yuleside Cocktail (house-spiced rum, Compass Box Peat Monster whisky, fresh ginger, whiskey-barrel-aged bitters, J.K.’s Scrumpy organic hard cider).

After a frantic beginning, Chef Eric Ottensmeyer finally has his kitchen under control. Like Macquarrie, he is super-young and he wants to have fun. Bacon in a glass (with or without peanut butter), kiosk waffles in a bag, pig smorgås on open toast, and new all-natural chicken liver croquettes with shallot pickles all are great little nibbles. The pub frites with a dozen frisky sauces to choose from are now light and golden rather than droopy. New among the entrees, a seared veggie loaf