

Florida Trend | Dining and Spirits

New College Try *by Chris Sherman*

Watermelon is the best reason for summer. And a salad of cold watermelon with feta cheese refreshes best of all. Melon and cheese is an old Greek favorite, but the bright chunks of yellow watermelon in the \$13 salad at Gainesville's Ti Amo are pure Alachua County, grown at Possum Hollow and selected by a smart modern chef.

Bert Gill knows town and country here well, having cooked up the New Deal Cafe and Mildred's Big City Diner in Gainesville's new century. His latest setting is downtown in the rustic building that was the seat of the Sovereign that ruled big-shot dining for decades.

When students, parents and alumni come back for SEC or ACC action, they should sample the changed game here and in Tallahassee, where the hot new spot is boldly named Urbane and serves elk chops or shrimp cakes with fried green tomatoes.

Gumby's pizza and Guthrie's chicken fingers are still in both cities, but college-town dining has moved up to sushi, tapas and new culinary frontiers where ingredients are local, flavors global, the baking rustic and styling city slick.

The revolution in American food started 25 years ago in campus zones from Berkeley to Cambridge, where good food became a passion of the well-educated, not just the well-heeled. Chez Panisse in Hogtown? Not yet, but north Florida cooking is fresher and more local.

At the former Sovereign, veal Oscar and Chateaubriand are replaced by grilled pork with lentils braised with bacon and seared scallops with fennel salad and candied lemons. And that watermelon salad.

The old Victorian stable is still tucked down a brick alley, but it's relit with sleek George Nelson lamps and inspired with a Mediterranean soundtrack — Piaf, fado and no Sinatra. Fast forward from musty Continental to a 2008 fusion of old Southern cooking and sunny cuisine plucked from Spain, Italy, Morocco and Greece, in dishes big and small.

Oxtail on pumpkin puree is a treat, and crisp sardines are refreshing, but in starters of eggplant and artichoke, too much flavor is frittered away in frying. The menu tops out at \$30 for lobster tail and pasta in truffle oil and Manchego cheese.

A few blocks away, the Paramount Grill has the smart bright whites of a big-city boite. It too features the decal of North Florida Local Produce, an experimental green alliance of farmers, chefs and state ag folks a few years ago.

Salmon and Granny Smiths aren't local, but the organic herbs, grouper, mahi and Cedar Key clams and Vidalia onions are close to home. "We've got a nice variety of heirloom tomatoes, fennel and beets," says chef-owner Clif Nelson, and oh yes, blueberries and Japanese eggplant, and in the fall pumpkins and Florida's own Seminole squash. Still he admits, "I don't feel it's at the point where you can get exclusively local."

Local ingredients luck out if they enter Nelson's kitchen, where they meet cumin potatoes, cheddar polenta, curried cilantro aioli or apple cider spiked with lemon and thyme.

In Tallahassee, new tastes are newer for big-spending lobbyists and pols, as well as the mandarins of FSU, FAMU and state government.

Farther out, Sage strikes a retro pose in black and white lino tiles, between country and "Happy Days" before TV dinners. The menu's homey and far-flung, from saffron mussels or escargot and fennel to fried catfish (with baby green beans and Anson Mills grits) and curried chicken salad (free-range, natch). Vegetarian fricassee is earthy and exotic, turnips, ramps, ferns and wild mushrooms and hearty red meats are enhanced with the likes of bacon-sweet potato mash, fava beans and artichokes as well as Worcestershire made in house.

Urbane RESTAURANT & BAR



Lobster Shitake mushroom pancakes at Urbane in Tallahassee

The flashiest is Urbane, where Bruce and Pam Pollett installed thoroughly modern cooking — and drinking — in a sleek downtown restaurant with crisp lines and hip colors. Cocktail nibbles of duck spring rolls and tuna tartare and big plates of sea bass, elk chops and lamb T-bones all get smart sides. Updated from the farmhouse, there's wilted chard, blue cheese fritters, cherry cornbread, watermelon vinaigrette and bushels of roasted corn. From the outlands come plantain hash, mango slaw and chile ponzu sauce.

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That's modern taste moved up from South Beach to campus towns closer to the beans and greens bounty of north Florida. Savvy diners and chefs want recipes with a bit of country and a lot of the outside world. And cooked from scratch.