

Muss & Turner's: Eager to please

A dinner menu that may have just what a hungry soul needs

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Creative Loafing Atlanta

I recently discovered it's possible to feel more comfortable and at home in someone else's neighborhood restaurant than in one of your own. The possibility you've put down roots in the wrong niche of town notwithstanding, it's tempting to wish the place away somewhere closer to home. If my fleeting wishful thinking ever materialized, you'd find Muss & Turner's smack in the middle of Midtown next week.

There is something so very sincere and down-to-earth about this restaurant; it has an earnest desire to please and more than enough chops to do it. Pretense clings to nothing here. This is a place whose ingredient sourcing is easily some of the most scrupulous in the city, whose forward-thinking beer list is among the pioneers in Atlanta's craft-beer movement, and whose sandwich menu alone convinced much of metro Atlanta that Smyrna really wasn't that far out of the way.

Since the deli's opening two years ago, M&T has cultivated a rabid following for its gorgeous, hulking sandwiches, such as its reuben, stacked with juicy, housemade corned brisket and spice-tinged sauerkraut, and its grass-fed burger, made with local beef from Riverview Farms, which was a substitute menu item-turned-mainstay the regulars won't bid goodbye to. As a specialty market, the shop won over local food enthusiasts who no longer had to drive intown for prosciutto, taleggio or the makings of an olive tasting.

Since the store began serving dinner last year, it's revealed an entirely new side of itself. Weeknights, the restaurant feels cozy and intimate, and you're as likely to see young couples with well-behaved babies as those who splurged on a sitter. Regulars talk wine with the friendly bartender at the small, crescent-shaped bar, and talk beer with each other. Weekends, the place turns into a scene, the sort that feels energizing to be a part of, and the crowd is so cheery that the line to the ladies room makes conversation with itself.

Though the deli has never been heralded for budget pricing (thanks to the unfortunate popular consensus that all sandwiches are created equal and should be priced accordingly), this is some of the most affordable food of its caliber in the city.

The beer list takes a few minutes to get over -- it's a food-loving roster of Belgians, microbrews and craft beers, including a rotating selection on draft -- but the wine list is also a good read. On to the food, and you begin to wonder how a restaurant has this much love to go around.

Wagyu beef tartar, minced finely with capers and chives and doused through with a heady mustard oil that shares the pungent clarity of wasabi, is a voluptuous tease on the tongue, yet such an expression of purity on the palate.

A bowl of pudgy mussels are simultaneously coddled and jolted in their broth, a creamy, smoky elixir with a double hit of bacon and chipotle peppers that lends a bold heat.

One of the most luxurious, pleasurable dishes I've tasted here has also been the simplest: an ultra-creamy chicken-liver mousse, rich with that primordial, musky twang, and full with the fatty mouthfeel that gives you an endorphin rush within seconds.

Other dishes might soar with a little more creativity, but when you get down to it, the lack of embellishment is part of their low-maintenance appeal. There was the near-perfect roast chicken, its juices running into a mash of potatoes and a silky pile of slow-roasted leeks, and another night, the nutty grits that were cooked to a toothy al dente with shrimp, melted frisée and surprise bits of perky, preserved Meyer lemons. A simple shrimp and grits that is perfectly ordinary in concept turns out to be an exemplary expression of humble corn.

All this makes the occasional misstep or two -- mussels in an otherwise lovely, limey, Thai-inspired coconut broth had that unfortunate taste of smelly socks, for instance -- easier to bear.

One little personality quirk: M&T offers no dessert menu. Your sometimes-addled but always-affable server can recite the offerings to you, but you might as well peek into the deli case and scout them out yourself. Don't be fooled by the presentation, much of which is designed with takeout in mind. Vanilla-bean panna cotta, its silky custard laced with honey, tastes like a reduction of the purest milk down to its barest core. The fact that it's packaged in a plastic beverage cup just makes it easier to tote home so that you can save some of the enormous portion for later.

A shallow ramekin of dense, fudgy chocolate, curiously labeled a pots de crème, has more in common with a tub of rich ganache destined for a batch of truffles. At first, you might be startled by the misnomer; then, when you're staring down the last bite, you'll begin to wonder why you haven't been eating ganache with a spoon all along.

It's that sort of restaurant, the kind that, like a really good friend, convinces you

that a batch of ganache is just what your hungry soul needs. That's worth driving for.

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Muss & Turner's

3 stars.

1675 Cumberland Parkway, suite 309, Smyrna.

770-434-1114. www.mussandturners.com. Mon.-Thurs., 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Beer and wine served. Lot parking.