

THE ATLANTAN

March/April 2010

“Overnight Celebrities” by Danny Bonvissuto

FOOD DRINK

REVIEW Elegance meets innovation at Livingston and Pacci, two gems that break the old hotel-restaurant mold. 114



Pacci

RATING: ★★★
866 W. Peachtree St. NW,
678.412.2402

HOURS Dinner 7 days
5-11 PM; Lunch Mon-Fri,
11 AM-2 PM; Branch Sat &
Sun 8 AM-2 PM

WHO'S THERE Guests of the
hotel; businesspeople; couples
who enjoy sitting sideaddle;
TV production crews on
expense accounts

BEST SEAT Any of the half-
moon booths along the wall
toward the kitchen

WHEN TO GO Steaks and
pastas are always better at
dinner, but Pacci's doing
a fun Lunchtime Lasto

promo where guests can win
everything from a weekend
stay at the Hotel Palomar to
20 percent off lunch.

WHAT IT COSTS At least \$60
per person, and definitely
spring for the carpaccio

Overnight Celebrities

Check in and check out Livingston and Pacci, a new crop of
marquee restaurants in boutique Midtown hotels

| By Danny Bonvissuto | Photography by Rinne Allen |

During a recent stay at the Hotel Palomar Philadelphia, I visited the front desk to inquire about the best local restaurants for Sunday brunch. The desk agent—or guest pleasure aficionado, or whatever they're called these days—said, “Our hotel restaurant puts on a spectacular brunch.” Five beats of silence passed before she reluctantly reached under the counter, pulled out a binder full of menus from nearby restaurants, and plopped it in front of me. Without saying anything, I'd said it all: Hotel restaurant food? Please.

Pacci, in the Hotel Palomar Atlanta, hasn't exactly garnered hoards of local buzz. Even when *Esquire* restaurant columnist John Mariani included it in his “best new

restaurants of 2009,” it barely registered a citywide raising of the eyebrows. And it's one of a painfully few restaurants in the city with a woman, chef Keira Moritz, successfully calling the culinary shots. Have we been conditioned to think that hotel restaurants must have celebrity chef names like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Tom Colicchio on the menus or they're not nearly as important and couldn't possibly be as good? Probably. But boy does it taste good to be wrong.

Even though I prefer to visit restaurants when there's a lot more hubbub going on, a scheduling snafu has me down for dinner at Pacci at 5 PM. After the requisite Peachtree Street suicide-valet situation, CONTINUED...

Livingston

RATING: ★★★
659 Peachtree St. NE,
404.897.5000

HOURS Dinner 7 days
5-10 PM; Sun-Thurs and
5-11 PM; Fri & Sat

Lunch Mon-Fri,
11 AM-2:30 PM; Branch Sat
& Sun 10:30 AM-3 PM

WHO'S THERE Lovey-dovey
couples for the pre-theater
prix fixe; distinguished hotel
guests; brides and grooms
who didn't get enough to eat
at their reception

BEST SEAT Near the wall
of windows or terrace
overlooking Peachtree and
the Fox

WHEN TO GO Definitely pre-
theater; the prix fixe is an
absolute steal; three courses
and a glass of wine for \$29

WHAT IT COSTS The two-bite
starters are \$4 to \$8; entrees
range from \$18 to \$30

What the stars mean: ★ = fair, above network's quality; ★★ = good, above average; ★★★ = very good, well above norm; ★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best; ★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

...CONTINUED I enter the eclectic calm of the Hotel Palomar, with the entrance to Pacci just beyond the front desk. (There's also a street entrance.) The hostess deposits me in a paisley padded half-moon booth, perfect for sitting sidesaddle without looking like a gigantic nerd.

Immediate turn-off: the phrase "the universal language spoken at Pacci is 'food'" is scrawled across the top of the menu. It's hokey at best, meaningless in an attempt to be meaningful at worst. But things become much more interesting a few lines later with two versions of carpaccio (get it? Pacci is short for carpaccio). I choose the Kobe beef instead of the tuna and it is textbook: paper-thin with a hint of fat around the edge

Street, and the blazing lights of the Fox Theatre marquee seal the deal. It's that big-city Broadway feel on a much more manageable scale.

Now with a setting like this, a lot of chefs might feel the need to whip up a bunch of foams and fancy-pants presentations to keep up, but Mennie seems to say, hey, let's not take ourselves so seriously. The dinner menu is broken down into two-bite, four-bite, six-bite and next-course categories, each one packed with interesting, locally sourced and downright playful options like the Livingston cracker jax (popcorn with rosemary almonds and manchego cheese); peekytoe crab fritters with yuzu and toasted sesame; and the oyster gratin—a bubbly blend of spinach, cream cheese, béarnaise, and Benton's



and a salty toss of rucola shiny with oil on top. Amount of chewing required: zero. This is the kind of dish that makes carnivores out of iffy vegetarians.

The amuse bouche is an artfully constructed smoked salmon crostini with crème fraîche and pickled onion secured by a tiny button of goat cheese. The pappardelle Bolognese is perfectly lazy layers of thick pasta ribbons dotted with soft bits of carrot in the sauce to add just a hint of sweet. The mushroom risotto is perfumed with truffle oil atop plump, al dente rice and slices of button mushrooms and shitakes. And the braised beef short ribs over pesto mashed potatoes is slicked with a brown glaze so rich and thick, I scrape it off the bone and don't care who's looking.

A few quibbles: I question putting dog biscuits on the dessert menu. It undermines any sort of clout established by the tiramisu trio (espresso, limoncello and banana cream) to put what is essentially a bag of homemade Milk-Bones in the same category. And I never quite warmed up to the room, no matter how many more tables were occupied, which has all the elements of a solid space (comfortable seating, not too crowded, striking bubble-esque light fixture in the center) but no soul—something the menu has in spades.

Just a few blocks down Peachtree, Livingston—the in-house restaurant for the Georgian Terrace Hotel—has soul to spare, so much so that it has the potential to eclipse the menu, if not for the talented hands and institutional Atlanta knowledge of chef Gary Mennie, formerly of Taurus. The ambience at Livingston just does not stop: iconic, historic hotel structure with built-in, Old-World glamour, grand columns and oversized paintings resembling blurry photographs of the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*, which was held here in 1939. A wall of windows face Peachtree

MADE SERVICE Clockwise from far left: Pacci's handmade pappardelle Bolognese; chef Keira Moritz at Pacci; Livingston's chilled Georgia white shrimp with spaghetti squash, ginger and citrus; stately architecture at Livingston; Louisiana rabbit over arachette with olives and crispy garlic at Livingston; Kobe carpaccio at Pacci.

smoked bacon served over a bed of sea salt and sprinkled with anise for an extrasensory experience.

The menu's mix of highbrow and humor gives the room a come-as-you-are feeling, and the clientele has clearly responded. To my right, a family in ball gowns and black tie celebrates a special occasion. To my left, a couple in denim shirts, jeans and tennis shoes talks wine with the server, and, just behind me, two couples have wandered in from a society event in the hotel ballroom across the hall. Three of

them are so drunk they can't read the menu, so the fourth takes the liberty of reading the entire thing, from the 'papas fritas' (potato gnocchi with spicy aioli) to the chicken-fried pork, very, very loudly.

This, of course, is not going to deter me from the Louisiana rabbit loin, wrapped in speck and served over truffled potato puree garnished with celery leaves and carrot slices, or "stuff rabbits eat," according to the server; the tender Carolina pheasant clinging to the last legs of winter over chestnut polenta; or the venison in veal jus—its ruby color darkened with a hint of chocolate.

As the courses start to soak up the sins of the party table's gin and tonics, they quiet down, not that I would have heard them anyway, because I am in a sugary bubble of silence where it's just me, some dulce de leche ice cream, tres leches cake with spiced anglaise, a pecan tart with honey rosemary ice cream, and a few cinnamon beignets thrown in for very tasty measure.

It took a long time for Atlantans to wrap our heads around hotel dining. Go to a hotel? When you're not staying there? For dinner? How terribly touristy. Big-name chefs broke the mold, but it's time to spread the love around. Sometimes under-the-radar can be wonderfully over-the-top. **A**