

food & drink

First Look: Livingston

Gary Mennie debuts his menu in the Georgian Terrace hotel

GRAZING

By Cliff Bostock

Atlanta is not a city that's been kind to its own past. Having made the mythological Phoenix its logo to describe its own recovery from the fire of the Civil War, the city has been on a constant rebuilding campaign ever since.

I'm not talking about antebellum architecture alone — most of that was indeed destroyed in the war — but much of the architecture of the early 20th century has been razed, too. I well recall in the 1970s that Southern Bell planned to purchase and destroy the Fox Theatre to build its headquarters. Only a last-minute effort by an organization of preservationists, Atlanta Landmarks, saved it.

The hotel across the street, the Georgian Terrace, is actually older than the Fox, which opened in the '20s as a Yaarab shrine. The Georgian Terrace opened in 1911 and is famous for hosting guests of the 1939 premiere of *Gone with the Wind*.

The hotel has been up and down over the years, at one point becoming apartments. It is now at the end of an expensive renovation that has turned public areas, at least, into breathtaking spaces. This includes the new restaurant, **Livingston** (659 Peachtree St., 404-897-5000), named after Livingston Sims, Atlanta's mayor from 1901 to 1903. According to press material, Sims was an avid gastronome and the Georgian Terrace was built on the site of his home.

The restaurant, a two-story room with lots of columns, includes a large patio that looks directly at the Fox Theatre. I can't say I much like the view at night, since the Fox marquee is blinding, but that's where most diners were seated when I visited on the second day of operation.

Executive chef of the new restaurant (which replaces Savoy) is Gary Mennie, who recently closed Taurus in south Buckhead. Mennie co-founded Canoe and worked as executive chef there for 10 years. His resume includes earlier stints at Maxime's, L'Orangerie, Spago and the Ritz-Carlton Buckhead with Guenter Seeger.

I actually did not plan to file a First Look when I visited last week. A 2-day-old restaurant would normally not be working at full speed. But we did not encounter a single significant glitch during our visit. The service and the meal itself were good enough that you don't need to worry about waiting to visit. It's all the more surprising since this is a hotel restaurant that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Mennie continues his longtime style of riffs on American classics, using locally sourced ingredients whenever possible but always playing with flavors, frequently mixing ingredients from land and sea.

For example, slightly sweet and briny oysters from Onset Bay share their shells with Benton's smoked bacon, almost pungent baby spinach and anise. Served on a bed of rock salt scattered with black and white peppercorns, they have a light gratin. In another dish, he combines Georgia white shrimp with ham hocks.



GREEN WITH ENVY: The pea soup at Livingston

Regardless of ingredients' origin, they are mainly combined with a subtlety that reinforces the dominant theme. A bright-green soup of springtime peas is smooth, made only with the vegetables. It's garnished with a few Marcona almonds and here and there a sudden taste of mint bursts from a barely discernible thread. A fruity note, so faint you wonder if you're hallucinating, turns out to be a bit of tangerine oil.

Rabbit is a dish I tend to order whenever it's on a menu and I'm almost always disappointed. I keep ordering it because I want to be convinced it can be good. Mennie's is the best version I've ever been served. It's one of those dishes that convinces me the palate has its own memory. I keep craving it.

Mennie serves the roasted rabbit boneless. The meat of the leg and thigh are wrapped in speck and set atop a pool of pureed potatoes with a faint note of white truffle oil. At the opposite end of the plate is the loin, washed in a jus with garlic chips.

Wayne ordered first-class grilled chicken from Ashley Farms, arranged over forest mushrooms. Here we encountered a minor glitch. The kitchen forgot to add the menu's designated shelled peas and Parmesan. But we got rewarded for noticing the deficit: an extra dessert.

We'd ordered the "strawberries and cream" to share. It was four tiny profiteroles layered with strawberry slices and stuffed with lavender-spiked Chantilly cream. (Explore the profiterole's top with the tip of your tongue if you want to get the full effect of the lavender.) Our extra dessert was a coconut financier featuring roasted pineapple, mascarpone and a hunk of pine nut brittle. Basically, we decided, the desserts were tasty improvisations of strawberry shortcake and pineapple upside-down cake.

What else? Presentation is almost all on rectangular plates (which seem to be increasingly popular around town). The linear arrangement is interesting since the flavors of Mennie's cooking are quite associative. I like the contrast.

Don't even try to park on the street around the hotel, especially if there's an event at the Fox. The restaurant offers free valet parking at the main entrance to the hotel.

I really love that the restaurant is located in one of our city's few downtown historic landmarks. The decor does a wonderful job of recalling the past without resorting to high drama or kitsch.

CALAVINO'S OPEN AGAIN

Calavino Donati, who made her name in town with the Roman Lily Café and then opened a restaurant in Oakhurst, is back. This time, she's operating **Calavino's Soul Kitchen** (1271 Glenwood Ave., 678-705-4585) in East Atlanta Village.

The restaurant is actually located inside a lesbian bar, My Sister's Room. It's open during the bar's off hours — 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Friday for lunch, and 5-9 p.m. for dinner Tuesday-Saturday — so you don't have to worry about being abducted by lesbians.

I'm sorry to say, though, that our meal was quite sub-par compared to Calavino's earlier restaurants. My duck and waffles featured a (barely) reheated waffle and a very dry duck breast. I got what tasted like canned black-eyed peas on the side.

Wayne ordered decent grilled tilapia with cole slaw and okra gumbo. Starters of fried green tomatoes and pimento cheese with toast points tasted better than the entrées, but generally, things will have to get much better to attract the same kind of following the original Roman Lily had.

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