Foodies with flight plans

Jay Reed
Eats Out Ate

We are in intense decision mode at the Reed household these days. Son is a high school senior, you see, and a fine university in Colorado is one of his options. We decided we needed to see it for ourselves and spring break turned out to be the best time to go. So off we went.

We were only thirty minutes out of Starkville when we faced our first food decision. Short of some travel supplies, I had already planned a quick stop in Columbus. While in the drugstore we ran across the ice cream section, full of intriguing flavors in handy pint size. Son looked at me with some anticipation, reminding me that it wouldn't be the first road trip we had knocked down a pint of the cold and creamy. I couldn't argue the point, and I rarely turn down ice cream, but it was already a bit late and I wasn't feeling it, so we chose not to indulge. But lo and behold, as we pointed the truck back towards the highway, a bright red light beckoned us, pulling us in like a spaceship's tractor beam. You know this light if you are of like mind. It is round, with hieroglyphics that cry out, "Hot Donuts Now". This one was harder to pass up. (Did I mention the tractor beam? Pulling us unwillingly across the street and into the drive-through?) Our only saving grace was that we didn't get a dozen hot glazed. Just four. Because when they are hot, they collapse into the mouth so easily that eating two is basically like eating one that has reached room temperature.

This visit was entirely for Son, but I guess I've taught him well: he left the meal planning to me. We could have taken any number of flight combinations to get to Denver, but the best deal happened to give us a little over two hours in the ATL. Usually I'm not crazy about a layover that long, but it would fall at lunchtime and I had a plan. Airport food is not a culinary genre I often crave, but I think the options are improving now. In Birmingham there was a Jim 'N Nick's and a Good People Brewing company — both have local roots. In Atlanta I spotted a Five Guys Burgers and a branch of The Varsity. I would have easily settled for a chili cheese dog and a Frosted Orange, were it not for another tractor beam that had locked in on us from Terminal E: a place called One Flew South.

Along the way in my association with the Southern Foodways Alliance, I kept hearing about this place in the Atlanta airport that actually made layovers there tolerable. I don't fly that much anymore so this was my chance. After all, how many opportunities does one get to eat at a fine dining restaurant in the middle of the international terminal? And on top of that Chef Deano Natter has competed on Iron Chef America and is a part-time comedian. Not to mention that I looked up the menu online — they call it "southern-inspired" cuisine — and was sold even before I knew the chef was funny.

I was especially proud of Son when he ordered the ORS Dirty South: an open-faced meatloaf sandwich with pimiento cheese, fried egg, sautéed spinach, Benton's bacon and barbecue sauce. Layers and layers of flavor happening on that plate. Son said that the slightly candied Benton's bacon was the MVP of the dish — I picked the whole team. I ordered the Pulled Duck Sandwich: duck confit, fig and peanut relish and scallions. Pulled Duck Confit. In the airport. I was bordering on giddy.

We also tag-teamed on dessert. Banana pudding with vanilla bean flecks, house made whipped cream and a hazelnut crunch sprinkled on top. And Pineapple "Not" Upside Down Cake: grilled pumpkin bread, bourbon-braised pineapple chunks and more whipped cream. Eventually we had to catch a plane to Denver, or we might have stayed and started over.

Dinner in Denver was already settled before we left home. First Cousin Y is married to Chef Ed Kane, who recently took over the kitchen at The Park House in the Bluebird District of Denver. In a previous life, the Park House was a fine French restaurant called The Normandy, serving the likes of Liz Taylor and Elvis. These days they serve a different kind of French food — we know it as Cajun. Chef Ed is not a Cajun himself, but Cousin Y has deep Louisiana roots, as I understand it, when he fell for her he also fell for her food.

The signature item on the menu is The Peacemaker, an oyster po-boy. Neither Son nor I are particularly big fans of the oyster, but we easily found plenty to eat. The first plate sent out was Crawfish Cheese toast. I have had similar dishes — in other places — that were okay but not memorable. His was great. Not overly crawfishy, plenty of cheese, and I'm pretty sure some rendition of the holy trinity of Cajun cooking was in the mix somewhere. Next out was a big basket of fried okra with remoulade sauce and Son got a fried shrimp po-boy. I chose small plates because I didn't want to decide. A bowl of gumbo. Red beans and rice (with andouille sausage and pepper jack cheese, a tasty new twist.) Good Cajun food in the Rockies. Who'd a' thunk? I hated to leave even a bite, but as you might imagine, by this point we were stuffed. Plus Cousin Y had been talking up the buttermilk pie (her own recipe) drizzled with blackberry sauce.

We ate the pie — it was worth the ensuing waddle to the car — then drove on to Golden, where more good eats (oh, and a college) awaited.

Jay Reed is a local foodie and pharmacist. The culinary tastes expressed here are his and do not necessarily reflect the appetites of the Starkville Daily News or individual members of its staff. He welcomes your comments at eatsoneats@gmail.com.

For Starkville Restaurant Week, John Fitzgerald from Restaurant Tyler is serving up shrimp etouffee as one of their specials. Starkville residents have through Sunday to enjoy the specials created for the event. **(Submitted photo)**

Restaurant Week serves up delicious new dishes

By CONNOR GUYTON
life@starkvilledailynews.com

Starkville Restaurant Week (and a half) is halfway over, but Starkville restaurants are still dishing up their best dishes to support three local charities.

Thirty participating Starkville restaurants are offering diners the opportunity to vote between three local charities which are vying for monetary prizes. At the end of the week, the charity with the most votes in their favor will receive $5,000 presented by Cadence Bank. The second place finisher will receive $1,000 from Vollor Law Firm; the third place charity will get $500 from ScrubVille.

Several local chefs have chosen to create special menus or dishes to feature during this year's 10-day Restaurant Week.

John Fitzgerald, chef de cuisine at Restaurant Tyler, said Restaurant Week helps build Starkville's food culture, which is beneficial to the entire restaurant scene.

"Our food culture has come a long way since when I came here 10 years ago," Fitzgerald said. "Mississippi State has grown and the culture in Starkville has really grown with it."

For Restaurant Week diners, Restaurant Tyler is offering lunch and dinner tasting menus, with speciality items that are not on their everyday menu. Each tasting menu consists of three courses, an appetizer, main dish and dessert.

"For lunch, we have a $10 menu that consists of a small pimiento and grilled cheese sandwich on french bread with tomato gravy, a bit of an hors d'oeuvre," Fitzgerald said. "The entree we are featuring is a shrimp étouffée — Gulf shrimp served over Delta Blue rice, which is a long-grained white rice. For dessert, we are offering a maple bacon chocolate chip cookie.

Delta Blues is a brand of rice harvested in Ruleville, a small town in the Mississippi Delta.

At dinner, the $18 menu turns the shrimp étouffée into the appetizer and Fitzgerald prepared a salmon amandine for the main course.

Amandine — often spelled almondine in American cookbooks — is a culinary term indicating a garnish of almonds.

"The salmon amandine is a New Orleans-style preparation that is pecan crusted and served with an almond beurre blanc," Fitzgerald said.

Following Restaurant Tyler's "eat local" slogan, the pecans used to crust the salmon come from Duke Pecan Company in West Point.

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Buerre blanc is translated literally from French as "white butter" and is a sauce typically made of hot emulsified butter with a reduction of white wine. Fitzgerald is using amaretto in addition to the white wine to give the dish a light almond flavor.

The maple bacon chocolate chip cookie is found on both the lunch and dessert menus, but each meal provides a different variation of the dish. At lunch, Fitzgerald said the dessert consists of the maple bacon chocolate chip cookie, topped with bacon caramel. At dinner, the cookie dough is cooked in a small cast-iron skillet and topped with candied bourbon ice cream and bacon caramel.

"I've tried bacon in our desserts a few different ways," Fitzgerald said. "Bacon fat is good to make caramel with and adds the perfect amount of smokey bacon flavor. We've also done a bacon ice cream before, too. People are always looking for an excuse to put bacon in things, but I try to use restraint."

Restaurant Tyler's limited-time dishes will be gone at the end of the weekend, but Fitzgerald said they may show up again in the future.

"Every week on Friday and Saturday evenings, we have a five-course tasting menu," he said. "That menu changes weekly, so these menu items could show up on that. We save the best of our specials for our tasting menus."

Bin 612 in the Cotton District has also designed menu items solely for Restaurant Week.

Chef de cuisine Paul Brasfield created two dishes that would feature fresh produce and have a spring feel to them.

"For lunch, we've got a roasted salmon and avocado poboy," Brasfield said. "It's light, fresh, good for spring. It's got a garlic aioli and red onion on it. The salmon itself is seasoned with salt, pepper and fennel seed. The fresh fish and avocado just mesh really well."

At dinner, Brasfield is serving up sun dried tomato and basil pesto grilled chicken pasta in a white wine sauce.

Additionally, Bin 612's "50 Days of Cheese Fries" will continue through Restaurant Week, with a different version of cheese fries served each day. Brasfield said he has lots of delicious, original variations planned for this week.

"We've had awesome reaction locally and across the country to our fries," he said. "People are asking for cheese fries from all over the place — Nashville, the Carolinas. It's so great because I wake up and come up with move variations for cheese fries."

Some of the fries that Brasfield has dished up so far are sautéed shrimp and avocado with sriracha, Juke Joint Tamales from Cleveland over cheese fries, black bean salsa served over the cheese fries, and Brasfield's favorite — a local farm-raised chicken egg to make a breakfast cheese fries dish.

A third Starkville eatery that is serving up specials this week is The Veranda. Chef Jay Yates has created a menu of dishes that are inspired by areas north of the Mason Dixon line.

Poutine with crispy fries, "debris" gravy and cheese curds; lamb sliders; Alaskan cod sandwich on brioche; and Tammy Jones' eclair in a glass of Belgian chocolate and a rich vanilla custard.

Poutine, a dish that originated in Canada, typically features fries, a brown gravy and cheese curds. However, cheese curds can be difficult to source in the South. Yates said his curds were shipped to Starkville from Wisconsin.

Restaurant Week runs through March 22.