

# Living&Arts

**Food & more**  
by John Kessler

## Hotel dining can be a tough sell

Buckhead's Southern Art one of the latest to test Atlanta tastes.

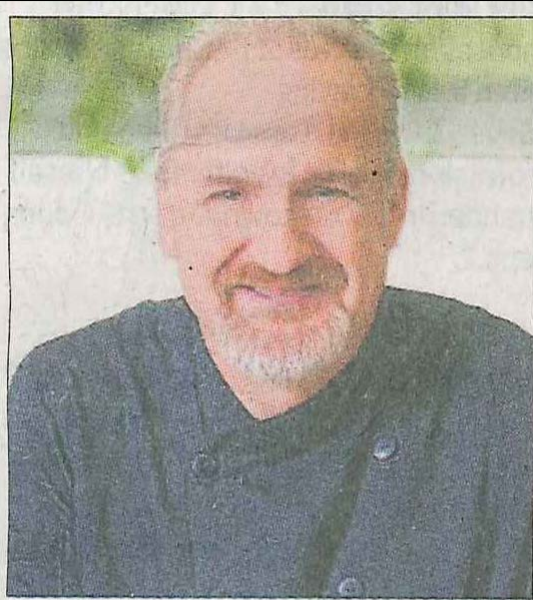
In late September, Art Smith, a Chicago restaurateur who made his name as the personal chef to Oprah Winfrey, will open Southern Art restaurant in Buckhead's Intercontinental Hotel. It will replace the elaborately decorated but underperforming Au Pied de Cochon, a spinoff of a famed Parisian brasserie. Smith, a native Southerner, plans to ply customers with plenty of country ham, bourbon and updated takes on down-home cooking in a dining room filled with original artwork.

It sounds quite cool, but will regular Atlantans treat this restaurant as a new hot spot, worthy of a night on the town? Or will they leave it to hotel guests, too complacent to go anywhere else?

Only time will tell. In recent years this town has had a much better track record of building hotel restaurants than actually supporting them.

Go back to 2008 and early 2009, when the city was supposedly embarking on a new

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Art Smith, a Chicago restaurateur, plans to open Southern Art in September. Special

[editorial]



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# Some have proved worthy

## Hotel dining

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age of hotel dining. During those anxious days, when we were already mired in recession but didn't quite realize it, luxurious new hotels were opening all over the city. The Mansion on Peachtree, the St. Regis and the Palomar swanned about as the swankiest of this new vanguard, but then the venerable Georgian Terrace decided to renovate, W Hotels arrived en masse and the Loews Atlanta broke ground in the heart of the so-called "Midtown mile."

All of these hotels promised a lot more than high thread-count linens and swimsuit spin-dryers in the gym. They had restaurants – real restaurants, not sad commissaries carved from a corner of the lobby. Many of these hotels appealed to famous New York chefs, such as Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Tom Colicchio, with franchise agreements, and Atlanta became a magnet for the most exclusive mini-chains.

To prove just how destination-worthy these new eateries were – and to overcome the inherent stigma of hotel dining – the management did what they could to physically distance the restaurants. Many, like Pacci Ristorante at the Palomar, opened with separate street entrances.

One of Vongerichten's two Atlanta ventures, Market, hit the scene like a space-age pod attached to the side of the W Hotel Buckhead. Its wacky, color-saturated, undulating interior (like a ride on the S.S. Amoeba space-ship) looked wholly unrelated to the design of the hotel itself. The building that housed Colicchio's Craft and Craftbar abutted the street and was set so far away from the high-



Vongerichten's Spice Market in the W Hotel Midtown has cut back its service hours and no longer offers lunch. Others have closed because of changes in hotel ownership. Special

rise Mansion on Peachtree that diners needed not even know they were dining on hotel property.

The intervening years have not been kind to many of these restaurants. Some, such as Pacci and Craft, have closed because of changes in hotel ownership. Vongerichten's Spice Market in the W Hotel Midtown has cut back its service hours and no longer offers lunch.

I've noticed – and this is quite subjective – that people just don't talk about these newer hotel eateries much. From my vantage point at the intersection of Yumville Pike and I-285, I hear people talk about hundreds of restaurants. Readers often ask about our dining team's impressions of everywhere from the most expensive destination joints to the newest fried chicken stands. But no one asks about, say, the gorgeously appointed Paces 88 at the St. Regis. On my last visit a few months ago, our party had the only occupied table in the dining room.

There are exceptions. Robert Gerstenecker has toiled through many changes and promotions at Park 75 at the Four Seasons, and he keeps his name out there with demonstrations and events. He

helps maintain this dining room's relevance. Livingston, the jazzed-up bar and restaurant that now fronts the Georgian Terrace, spills life onto the street across from the Fox Theatre. BLT Steak in the W Hotel downtown has proven itself a reliable (if expensive) choice in the downtown dining desert, and the management has smartly hired local chefs who've proven their mettle elsewhere. Current chef Cyrille Holota, formerly of Joël Brasserie, has been getting great reviews.

Not only can hotel restaurants keep fine dining from totally vaporizing, they can be vital players that add to the dining capital trust. With their prime real estate and upscale appointments, they inject a dose of glamour into the metro area's dining options.

Or they fail to catch on with the public and, like hotel restaurants of yore, live only to service those overnight guests who don't want to venture far. It will be interesting to see how Atlantans take to Southern Art. I'll tell you this: Bourbon and ham can't hurt.

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