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Only Birmingham's most delectable dishes make this "menu."

by Jan Walsh

Dining out is a national—and local—obsession. Foodies search for new restaurants, undiscovered eateries, and cuisines deserving of long-held reputations. They want to know where to eat, what to order, and read restaurant reviews for guidance and insights. For some reviewers, this following has brought unexpected clout. "The king of Spain is waiting at the bar, but your table is ready," Sirio Maccioni of *Le Cirque* once told *New York Times* restaurant critic Ruth Reichl—now editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine.

Photography By Beau Gustafson



Gravlax at Chez Fonfon

Yet no review satisfies readers' ultimate craving: to know a food writer's favorite restaurant. Often asked, in hushed tones, to reveal my favorite local restaurant, the answer—that I really do not have one—is met with skepticism. Fortunately, Birmingham has many great ones, making this somebody-has-to-do-it job even better and making choosing one impossible.

But I do admit, after reviewing the city's best restaurants for several years, to having favorite dishes. And I have always wished they could be ordered on a single menu. "I'll start with GianMarco's cheese torta, have an entrée of Brock's pork tenderloin and Chris Dupont's beignets for dessert." Now that would be clout. So in addition to my long list of favorites, I invited some of the staff at the magazine—Katie Chipman, Robin Colter and Marietta Urquhart—to contribute some of theirs and developed this divulging and indulging menu of our 50 Favorites. Bon appétit!

Top Ten Appetizers

Cheese Torta

Marco's Cheese Torta is GianMarco's divine signature dish. The stack of red, white and green layers of mascarpone, pesto and sun-dried tomatoes makes a scrumptious spread for Marco's crostini—but is also good enough to eat with a fork. "I developed the dish when I was the chef for a gourmet catering company in south Florida," executive chef Marco Respinto recalls. "Then my brother (Giani) and I thought it would make a nice appetizer here. It took off, and now we can't keep it in the house."

Crab and Shrimp Cakes

One look at McCormick and Schmick's Dungeness Crab and Bay Shrimp Cakes, and you know they are not your typical cake. They are plump-full of crab and shrimp—rather than breading. "We use the Dungeness Crab, which is a delicate, sweet west coast crab that is unlike the rich, buttery blue crabmeat. And we add bay shrimp and seasonings to bring out flavor," executive chef

Harvey Blanchard explains. Then he tops it off with a jalapeño tartar sauce made of roasted jalapeño and Cajun seasoning for a spicy but mild flavor that complements the rich, sweetness of the crab perfectly.

Fried Green Tomatoes

Standard Bistro's Fried Green Tomatoes are perfection. This tower of tomatoes is topped with roumolade sauce and served with a black-eyed pea salad. Executive chef Alan Martin buys local, organic tomatoes and learned from his mother to slice them thin. "If they are too thick they will be too meaty," he describes. "And the longer you soak them in buttermilk, the better the batter will stick to the tomatoes." He soaks the tomatoes in buttermilk for 20 to 30 minutes before battering them. The batter stays intact from the initial cut with a fork until the last bite. Flavors of red tomato, red onion, shallots and a touch of jalapeño from the pea salad create a lively melody that turns up the volume on this Southern classic.

Gravlax

The Gravlax at Chez Fonfon is a classic French dish. "This dish originated as a method of preserving the salmon before today's refrigeration. But today the dish is a delicacy," chef de cuisine Brian Somersshield explains. Chez Fonfon previously served it with a knife and fork. But it is now made even easier to eat served atop pieces of sourdough bread with a thin layer of horseradish cream. These are placed atop a frisee salad with thinly sliced pickled onions, celery and potatoes all tossed in olive oil and lemon juice. You may just make a meal of it.

Hummus

There is no better hummus than George Reis makes at his new restaurant 26 (Twenty-six). This house-made Roasted Shallot Hummus with Pesto Tapenade is served with crisped bread, rather than the traditional pita bread. "We don't try to do too much to it, so it is so simple that it is embarrassing," Reis explains. "We take dried chickpeas, soak them, cook slightly until just done, and puree them with roasted shallots. To that we add lemon juice, extra virgin olive oil, salt, pepper and a touch of chicken stock if needed—if the paste is too thick." Available on the mid-day and dinner menus, but not available at lunch or late night, it's good enough to eat—24/7!

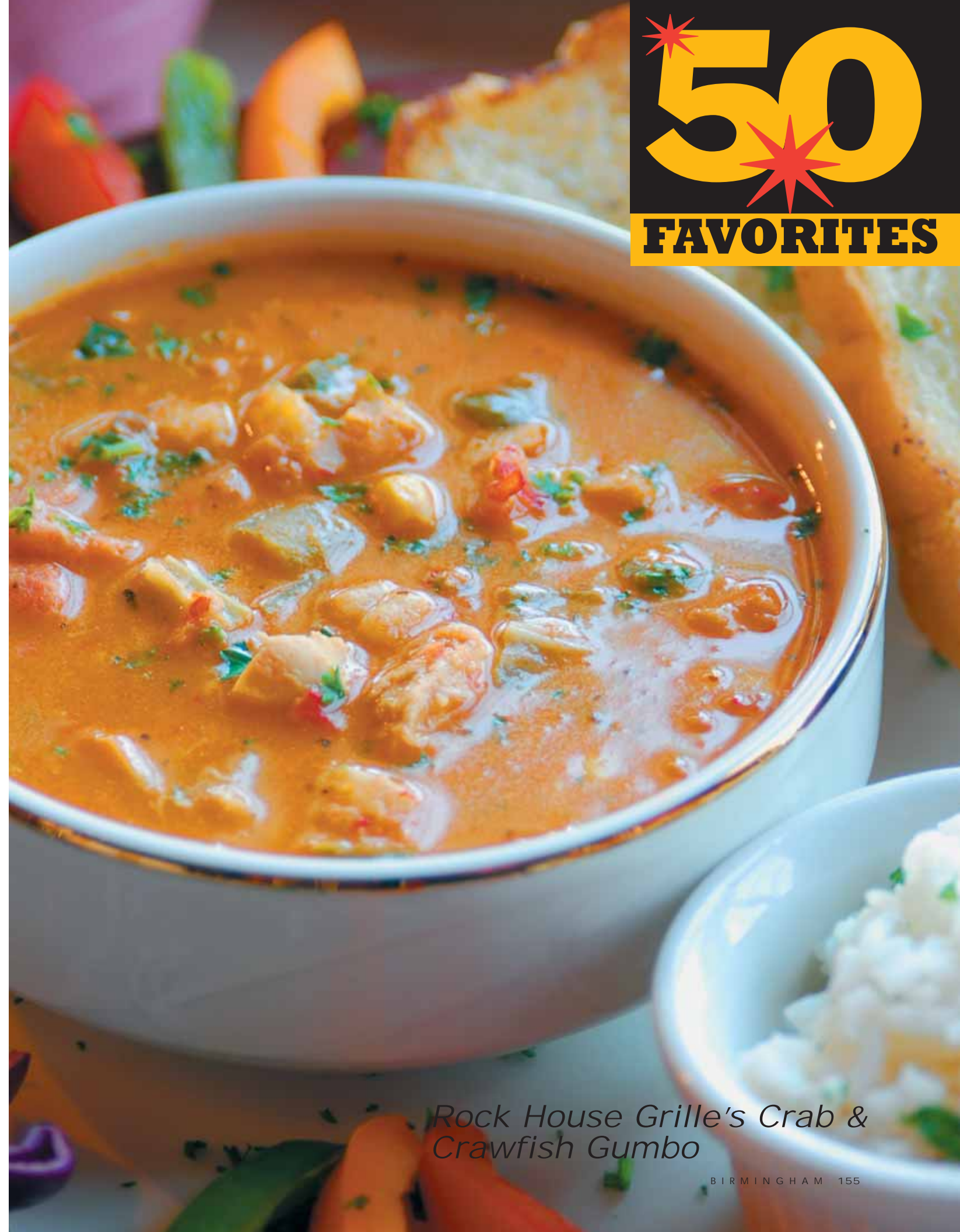
Lettuce Wraps

P.F. Chang's Chicken in Soothing Lettuce Wraps has been a favorite since the day they opened. The spicy chicken is mixed with green onions, water chestnuts, black mushrooms, rice sticks, sesame oil, garlic and a minced chicken sauce. Spoon as much as you can get into a leaf of lettuce and wrap it. The combination of the warm and spicy center with the cool and crisp lettuce is a contrast that complements.

Oysters

Cocina's Ostiones at Cocina Superior are for both oyster lovers and those who aren't. These oysters are char-grilled in the half shell, topped with a garlic butter and

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Rock House Grille's Crab & Crawfish Gumbo

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Jinsei's Kobe Beef Baby Burgers



queso, served with hot bread and roasted pico sauce. And the secret is in both the sauce and in the cooking method. “We put them on the grill top and alternate layers of garlic butter with Parmesan-Reggiano and Pecorino Romano cheeses, three or five layers (depending on size of the oysters) until this melts into a gooey delicious sauce on top of the oysters,” chef Jess Bourgeois divulges. He also cooks the oysters on a char-griller that has a smoke box in the bottom. “We put mesquite wood in the smoke box. And when the butter and cheese overflow from the oysters, they hit the coals, adding extra flavor to the dish.”

Potato Chips

Bet you can't eat just one of Bottega Café's Homemade Chips dipped in their Charred Onion Dip. “The secret to the potatoes is to slice and soak in water, changing the water several times,” Bottega's Dean Robb explains. “This removes sugar from the potatoes that would burn easily when frying. But you also have to stay right with them while cooking, watching carefully to keep them from burning.” Bite after bite of these light and thin slices of potato satisfy without filling—leaving room for an entrée. After all, you don't go to Bottega just to eat chips. Or do you?

Prawns

Los Angeles chef/owner Guillermo Castro's Dry Rubbed Sugar Cane Prawn Skewers with pear reduction sauce is a tempting tapa. He hand cuts the sugarcane and skewers huge prawns with the edible strips. And the sauce includes the Cachaca liqueur (a distilled sugar cane liqueur). “The flavors of the sugar cane remain in the pear reduction sauce, but the alcohol burns off,” he describes. Pair with his Caipirinha—made of the same Cachaca.

Tartare

Local has a tartar or two for both steak and fish lovers. Steak Tartar is a tender treat encircled with red pepper relish, farmed greens and grilled sourdough. The Duo of Tartares is a fresh fish pairing of yellow fin tuna and king salmon with cold roasted sweet and golden Chioga, served with a side of sweet potato noodles mixed with spicy spa vinaigrette. Love both steak and fish? Order both.

Five Favorite Soups

Coconut Soup

The Coconut Soup at Surin is a creamy white with mushrooms and tofu floating on top.

Small white bowls of the soup come with every entrée. It is much heartier than it looks, is served hot and makes you warm inside. The coconut soup makes a great start to every Surin experience.

Chicken Soup

Zôes Homemade Chicken and Orzo Soup warms the body and the soul. Orzo is pasta in the shape of rice—only much bigger. These “pearls of barley,” chicken, carrots and onions create a deliciously simple comforting soup that is available by cup, bowl, or for those who can't get enough—the quart. Have a bowl at home in front of the fire.

Clam Chowder

Watch The Irish Deli's menu for Clam Chowder as the soup of the day. It is thick, full of clams, potatoes, and a synthesis of chowder flavors that is as good as it gets. An oversized bowl is served with Saltine crackers—fitting for both the dish and this rustic restaurant.

Crab and Crawfish Gumbo

Every bite of Rock House Grille's Crab and Crawfish Gumbo is distinctive and delectable. No deep, dark rice-filled bowls here—Casey's gumbo is full of Maryland lump crabmeat, crawfish tail meat, fresh, whole okra and just the right amount of spice, cooked to rich layers of flavors and served in a shallow dish.

Lobster Bisque

Brio Tuscan Grille's Lobster Bisque is hearty and creamy. The bisque is the color of a lobster's shell and served in a big, white bowl. It includes shrimp, a touch of sherry and arrives with hot bread and butter, which together can make a meal. Consistently delicious, it is not too thick, not too thin, but always just right. And it is available on both the lunch and dinner menus.

Ten Best Salads

Beef Tenderloin

Grey House Grille's Marinated Beef Tenderloin was a welcome addition to the city's salad offerings. Grilled beef tenderloin medallions are served on mixed field greens with Roma tomatoes, red onion and wild mushrooms with a creamy buttermilk Blue Cheese dressing. “I hate raw mushrooms in a salad because they are too hard,” chef Shelby Adams says. “So we sear fresh mushrooms in a hot pan to caramelize them a little bit and bring out flavors.”

The beef is marinated with a chopped garlic, onion and olive oil mix for four hours, seasoned with salt and pepper, grilled to perfection, and rests before slicing—allowing the juices to go back to the center of the meat.

Chicken

Café Ciao's Ripe Tomato Crown Stuffed With Chopped Chicken Salad over mixed greens with balsamic vinaigrette is a long-time favorite. It is the ultimate “chicken salad-salad” because it is both—a plate of baby greens and eight ounces of chicken salad—made of chopped chicken breast meat. “This has been on the menu since

we opened in 2000. We have to make 20 to 25 pounds per day,” owner Carl Anderson says. “People are here for lunch, not a snack, so the serving is quite large.” When local tomatoes are in season, the chicken salad is stuffed into a whole tomato, and when good tomatoes are scarce, slices are served atop the salad.

Grouper

Lakeview Oyster House's signature salad is a mix of green leaf and spring mix lettuces, sliced onion, red and green bell peppers, cherry tomatoes, sliced cucumbers and pepperchinis. Order it with fried red grouper on top. “The red grouper filets are dipped in a seasoned flour, buttermilk and egg wash, and seasoned corn meal. The buttermilk makes the cornmeal stick. And it is fired in peanut oil,” owner and chef Kevin Witherington describes. This salad makes a delicious lunch and is also available on the dinner menu.

Grapefruit

The Restaurant at Culinary has a lunch salad that is an interesting mix. Hearts of Romaine, Ruby Red Grapefruit and spicy pecans with creamy Point Ryes Dressing is a balance of flavors not typically found on a salad. The cream of the dressing cuts the tartness of the grapefruit. And the spicy, crunchy pecans add both texture and another layer of flavor. No boring dishes are ever found at Culinary!

Shrimp

Billy's Bar & Grill's Shrimp Salad is bursting with flavors of the coast. The salad is a combo of romaine and iceberg lettuces with cucumber, tomato and huge shrimp. The shrimp are boiled in a shrimp and crab boil until medium pink. Then they are shelled, cooled and mixed with garlic and paprika-based white sauce and marinated in the sauce. “Most people order it with our homemade Ranch dressing. It is the perfect complement to the salad,” owner Paul Humphries describes.

Spinach

The City Diner Spinach Salad is John's City Diner's signature salad. Fresh baby spinach leaves are tossed with roasted red peppers, grilled mushrooms and a warm bacon vinaigrette. The garnish of egg and garlic croutons add just enough protein and carbs for balance. Have a small one as a first course, or order the large size for a meal.

Taco

Pablo's Restaurante & Cantina's Taco Salad with ground beef, beans, shredded lettuce, tomato, and cheese in a light and crispy shell is just what—and more than—you expect in a taco salad. Ingredients are top quality and plentiful. There is plenty of meat, lettuce and white cheese, topped with a tomato slice. Pour their homemade salsa atop, and dig in.

Thai

Out Take's Thai Chicken is a combination of chicken slivers, cabbage, water chestnuts, and other crunchy veg-

Cocktails of Choice

Brock's Espresso

Not your coffee shop espresso—Absolut Vanilla, Bailey's, Kahlua, and a shot of Starbucks Espresso—Brock's version is a flavorful mouthful of rich vanilla, cream and coffee topped with chocolate shavings and cinnamon sprinkles.

Highlands' Martini

Highlands Bar and Grill's signature drink is a classic. Made of Bombay gin with a splash of dry vermouth, and olives, it goes down smoothly at this bar lined with locals and visitors.

La Dama's Chatwood

The most popular drink in the house at La Dama includes Grey Goose Vodka, orange juice, pineapple juice and cranberry juice. It is shaken and can be served on the rocks or straight up.

Local's Vanilla Milkshake

No one can outgrow this snow white, light, frothy, and delectable shake of Stolli Vodka, Kahlua, Crème de Cacao, and half & half—garnished with a sliced cherry and served in chilled martini glasses.

Ocean's Butterscotch Martini

This drink is a foamy, smooth and sweet reminder of the original hard candy and includes Absolut Vanilla Vodka, Dekuyper Buttershots, Baileys, a hint of Frangelico and a splash of cream.

Shula's Post Game Martini

Served in a mug with a caramelized Kahlua and sugar rim comes a mixture of B&B, Kahlua, Tia Maria liqueur and hot coffee topped with whipped cream.

Standard Bistro's Chocolate Covered Strawberry Martini

A reduction of fresh strawberry puree, Godiva Chocolate Liqueur and Stolli Vanilla Vodka are poured into a glass rimmed with the same semi-sweet chocolate used in the restaurant's pastries and garnished with a chocolate covered strawberry. While enjoying the first half, the other remains cold (and not watered down) as it waits in its icy sidecar.

The Tavern At The Summit's Bloody Mary

Get any day off to a good start at The Tavern. This secret mix of bloody good ingredients has just enough spice and is served over the rocks garnished with olives.

gies. This is tossed in a spicy sesame ginger dressing and served on a bed of greens and topped with almonds. It is made fresh daily and is found on their "complete meal salad" menu.

Tossed

Alex's Salad at J. Alexander's includes iceberg, romaine, and spring mix tossed with finely diced bacon and cucumbers, chopped carrots, julienne white and red cabbage, grape tomatoes, croutons, and topped with shredded cheddar. At your request they will grill and slice a chicken breast. "We marinate the chicken in buttermilk and grill to order with coarse ground black pepper and kosher salt. Then we slice it on a bias and add to the salad," executive chef Matt McCormick describes. Order extra dressing. All dressings are made in house. And the Ranch is recommended for this salad.

Trio

Café Iz offers a Trio Salad with your choice of three of their salads. Select among the chicken salad, pimento cheese, egg salad, fruit, Caesar, Pasta and Iz Too. Kay Bruno Reed makes all from scratch. Both her chicken salad and pimento cheese are legendary. The fruit is in season and flavorful. The Caesar includes fresh romaine, bake croutons and shaved asiago. And Iz Too is a mix of baby greens with mandarin oranges, goat cheese, toasted almonds and honey vinaigrette. Decisions, decisions!

Five Superb Sandwiches

Burger

Not your typical burger joint, but Jinsei Sushi Bar and Lounge has two of the best burgers in town—Kobe Beef Baby Burgers. Kobe Beef is a well-marbled and tender beef from Japanese cattle, which are fed a diet enriched with beer and even massaged. The Kobe Beef is seared with truffle oil and grape seed oil and served with tempura vegetables and two dipping sauces. Chef Nobuhito Kadoma knew that one bite would lead to another, so the burgers come in pairs.

Chicken Pita

The Pita Stop has been serving the finest of Lebanese specialties on 12th Street South for as long as regulars can remember. Here a mix of doctors, lawyers, politicians, UAB professors and couples meet for lunch or dinner. The Grilled Chicken Sandwich is made of a fresh pita bread pocket with mustard, mayo, lettuce, tomato, pickles, and cheese. It is served with a side of wild rice or tabooi—just as good as the sandwich. In fact, everything at The Pita Stop is consistently perfect, making it difficult to choose a favorite dish here.

Prime Rib

The Tavern On The Summit's Prime Rib Sandwich has a loyal following. It is consistently tender and arrives as ordered—whether that is rare or well done. This eight ounce trimmed prime rib is served on toasted sourdough with accompaniments of au jus, Burgundy mushrooms and horseradish sauce. "We first rub the beef with The Tavern's special seasoning. Then we put the prime rib on a sheet pan, so the juice can fall and settle underneath. And we cook to rare in a moisture rich oven," general manager Cody Benson describes. And based on the desired doneness

of the guest, they either add the beef to au jus on the steam table or grill it to order. Both the sandwich and a pile of their potatoes cut into skinny sliver French fries arrive hot to the table, time after time.

Breakfast Sandwich

The most important meal of the day is a breakfast sandwich at V. Richard's. Order scrambled eggs on toasted wheat with sausage, cheese and a touch of mayo. Add a side of hash browns. Sprinkle all with a little salt and pepper. And you will never skip breakfast again.

Turkey

Garage Café makes a sandwich just the way you like it—and the way you order it. Have a seat in the courtyard under the shade of the towering tree and among the wisteria. Select among a variety of deli meats, cheeses, and toppings to create your own favorite, or take it from us and have the turkey piled high on wheat, with cheddar cheese, lettuce, tomato, mayo and mustard—slightly toasted.

Top Ten Entrees

Beef Tenderloin

Fleming's Prime Steakhouse and Wine Bar's Prime Beef Tenderloin Filet with a Cognac Cream Sauce and Mushrooms pleases all appetites. Although a Fleming's filet needs nothing more than a fork, the cognac cream puts this dish over the top. The beef may be simple, but the sauce is a complex creation of sautéed shallots, fresh thyme, beef tips, cognac, cream, butter and mushrooms—button, Portobello and shiitake. The sauce and the filet are a marvelous match.

Gourmet Pizza

La Dama Pizzeria's Marilyn Monroe is the super star of pizzas. Much like its namesake, the Marilyn Monroe will tempt you time after time at this upscale Italian bistro. Tim Stevens' combination of hand-tossed dough, grilled chicken, spinach, red peppers, onions, feta, mozzarella and his own white sauce

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Veal Piccata at danielgeorge

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combine and cook into a pizza with layers of delicious flavors. Dine in, or call for delivery to Liberty Park and the surrounding area.

Lasagna

There is something different about

the Baked Lasagna at Bongiorno Italian Restaurant in Crestline Village—something that makes it the best. Maybe they use less sauce. Or is it the addition of mushrooms to the beef, Ricotta, and Mozzarella? Whatever it is, it is delicious! The lasagna is found on both the lunch or dinner menus.

Lobster Pie

The Lobster Pot Pie has been a mainstay on the menu of Ocean since George Reis opened the doors in 2002. “We lightly poach the Maine lobster in the shell under boiling water and vinegar and dice it. The (still raw) lobster bakes in the copper sauté pan along with wild mushrooms, onions, baby carrots and asparagus under a cover of pastry dough,” Reis describes. Each pie is cooked when ordered. So it arrives freshly prepared and piping hot every time.

Moussaka

Nabeel’s Moussaka is a blend of ground beef, eggplant, pasta and béchamel sauce garnished with a splash of tomato fondue. After ordering it once, we became regulars who just can’t resist it. Along with the delicious Moussaka come their small Greek salad and homemade bread.

Pork Tenderloin

Brock’s Pork Tenderloin can be cut with a fork. The pork is grilled and served with a semolina cake and pepperonata. “We butcher all meats in house and leave some fat to self baste the meat as it cooks. The pork is marinated in thyme, marjoram, a hint of rosemary, a bit of garlic and olive oil,” sous chef Scott Cohen describes. The presentation is as beautiful as the flavor and makes a hearty yet elegant entrée at this Renaissance Ross Bridge restaurant.

Red Snapper

Little Savannah’s Gulf Red Snapper makes a memorable meal. Chef Clif Holt cooks the filets in a cast iron pan with butter and crushed fennel seeds until the edges are crisp and the flesh starts to turn from opaque to white and then finishes in the oven. The fish is topped with fennel and a lovely sauce made of tomatoes and vermouth. Catch it if you can!

Scallops

Highlands Bar and Grill’s Bayou La Batre Shrimp and Scallops with corn sauté and tomato basil relish is a new find at Highlands Bar and Grill. The corn and tomatoes provide the base for the biggest and best-fried scallops

ever tasted. And adding to both the presentation and the flavor of the dish are the (heads on) shrimp. Chef Frank Stitt’s search for the freshest of fish is found on this plate.

Shrimp and Grits

It takes a chef who was raised in New Orleans to make Open Door Café’s Sautéed Gulf Shrimp and Scallion Grits with Balsamic Vinaigrette. Chef Phillip Baio brings the flavor of the Big Easy to this Dunston Avenue dish, which is served for dinner and Sunday brunch. The shrimp are perfection, the scallion grits more flavorful than just grits. And the vinaigrette adds yet another dimension. “The two flavor sensations in the vinaigrette hit you. First is the brown butter followed by the hint of vinegar,” Baio describes. It’s a knock out.

Veal

Danielgeorge’s Veal Piccata has been a favorite at this neighborhood restaurant for four years. This traditional Italian dish of veal top round is prepared by pounding the veal to thin cutlets under paper, for tenderness. Sautéed in salt, pepper, and butter, some of the meat and flour sticks to the pan. These fonds are deglazed with white wine, shallots and capers. “We then reduce it, add a splash of lemon and melt butter into it slowly.” The result satisfies the appetites of those looking for comfort in a dish.

10 Divine Desserts

Banana Split

SoHo Sweets makes a Banana Split that will bring out the kid in everyone. Inside the banana are three scoops: strawberry, vanilla and chocolate drizzled with caramel hot fudge, topped with whipped cream, and chopped nuts or sprinkles-and a cherry atop each scoop.

Banana Tart

Hot and Hot’s Baked Banana Tart with Caramel and Hazelnuts is a towering fall treat-and not too sweet. “I have always enjoyed the fall flavor pairings of the sweet bananas with the slightly bitter caramel, flaky pastry and toasted hazelnuts. Together they remind me of a perfect fall evening,” Chris Hastings describes. Hastings takes these flavor components, deconstructs them and layers them between lightened pastry cream for a more dramatic presentation and divine flavor.

Beignets

Great beignets are easy to eat and difficult to make. Chris Dupont’s beignets at Café Dupont are without rival. Made of handmade fritter dough, they are golden, but not brown, on the outside and moist on the inside. “If you get the dough too thick they won’t cook in the middle. If it is too thin, they won’t rise,” he describes. Dupont also combats dryness by using melted butter, oil and buttermilk in the mix. “This additional fat content assures moisture on the inside.” No wonder they are so good!

Cheesecake

Edgar’s Bakery can make a cheesecake in just about

Meals and Memories

After 55 years The Club remains magical.

By Jan Walsh

The Club is a magical place where memories are made. Driving through the massive white gates and up Red Mountain, anticipation escalates with the view. A valet ceremoniously opens the car door, and as you walk through the heavy glass doors—with The Club scripted in forest green—you know you have arrived. Stars twinkle overhead, lights of the city glow below, and the circular glass dance floor that inspired *Saturday Night Fever* lights up and rises.

From its original 400 members, The Club has grown to more than 5,000 members, representing 25 states. Yet no one arrives at this club with golf clubs, tennis rackets or inner tubes. Members and guests dress in formal attire, for this is a supper club. And whether the evening is a friend’s wedding reception for 400 or dinner for four, times spent here are long remembered. “I hear a great story every single day, from people who went to The Club as a child with their grandparents, to a wedding for 1,000 of their closest friends, or a 50th wedding anniversary held here,” executive chef Benjamin Floyd (better known as “Chef Ben”) describes.

Frank Stitt shares his own childhood memories of The Club in *Frank Stitt’s Southern Table*, “...Rufus and then Lovejoy—were like uncles who loved us and always took care of the little ones with a twinkle in their eyes. My birthday meal, usually lamb chops, became a ritual.” And the good times have not changed. Ladies still play bridge in the

Bridge Room. The old piano in the Gold Room, which was once covered in mother of pearl, is now painted white and played during cocktail hours.

“Appropriately named, ‘The View’ is where I most enjoy taking business clients and newcomers to the city,” local attorney and member Charlie Waldrep says. “Every dish is excellent. And after you come in once, bartender Todd Lachina remembers both your name and your favorite drink.”

Yet a view not privy to the members is the back of the house—where the combined effort of 32 cooks and chefs ensures that each meal is memorable. Culinary careers culminate to create the historic cuisine. Floyd began flipping burgers at Mickey Dee’s at the age of 15, worked for many fine restaurants in Birmingham for 37 years, and brought this experience to The Club almost three years ago. Butcher Ramon Perez came to America as a teen, learned to cook in Miami, and has been at the club since 1971.

For Perez’s cuts, saucier Bernard Busutil arrives at 3 a.m. to prepare accompanying sauces. His culinary career began in Tunisia in 1955. He went to Europe from there and came to the United States to be a Culinary instructor at the CIA (The Culinary Institute of America). He moved to Birmingham and served as the chef of the former Hyatt House, before joining the staff at The Club 22 years ago.

Kenny Fisher runs the lunch line and

the Monday night Seafood Buffet. After cooking up and down the East Coast, from the bright lights of New York City to Alabama, Fisher worked two jobs while raising three children—at the old Ramada in Bessemer and The Club. He has been here for almost 30 years and is known as the “walking cookbook,” in addition to his title of Chef de Cuisine. Fisher created many of the recipes, invents more each week, and keeps them in his head rather than written down.

A much-loved item at The Club are its famous orange rolls, made from Essie Johnson’s 1960s recipe. “Miss Essie is another of our veterans with over 50 years in the kitchen. She has been here 46 years and is still kicking out the legendary orange rolls,” Floyd says. Her recipe remains a guarded secret.

“Mr. Ray Nash, our long time general manager, is the driving force behind our success, as he is involved in every step of the game, from menu planning and design to quality and portion control,” Floyd explains. Nash joined the staff 24 years ago, coming from the former The Downtown Club.

This success story that reads like a fairy tale is the result of all the hardworking, dedicated and loyal people who make the magic happen. And with each drive down Red Mountain, with the lights from The Club shining in the rear view mirror, the memory of another enchanting evening goes along for the ride.



Ben Floyd, Essie Johnson, Bernard Busutil

any flavor that you can dream of, and one is just as good as the next. Whether you want a snickers or a New York style, each is tall, creamy, thick, and luscious. And they will decorate them for special themes or occasions—putting a sheet cake to shame.

Chocolate Tart

The voice of chocolate is calling. It is coming from the pastry case in Tria Market. And after taking home a box of these Chocolate Tarts, they call from the refrigerator. Made of a Swiss bittersweet chocolate mixed with eggs, cream and baked in a simple almond tart shell to set, pastry chef Brian Christopher then chills the tart and tops with organic cream. Buy extra for tonight’s dessert, and stop those voices in your head.

Chocolate Cookie

Full Moon Bar-B-Que’s Half Moon Chocolate Chip Cookies—half dipped in chocolate—are what made them famous. They come in bags of six. Baked from scratch and dipped in chocolate daily, these are delightful—when the moon is full and when it is not.

Caramel Apple Pie

Olexa’s is famous for their cakes. But nothing they bake outdoes their oversized Caramel Apple Pie. This pie feeds 10 to 12 and is perfect for times when a regular pie is too small or half of a cake would be wasted. Add it to your dessert table for the holidays. Serve it warm with ice cream. And if there is any left—it makes an irresistible breakfast.



Hot & Hot's Baked Banana Tart

Hot Fudge Sundae

Just when you thought that the old fashioned, drug store style hot fudge sundaes were a thing of the past... Fire's Hot Fudge Sundae is served in a frozen, soda fountain glass—with a napkin-topped under-plate for the luscious drips of melting cream. Two scoops of vanilla bean ice cream fill the center of the glass, and rich hot fudge coats the sides and the bottom. It is topped with a homemade caramel sauce, whipped cream, chopped nuts and...a cherry.

Pecan Pie

Carole Griffin bakes from scratch every day using only the highest quality ingredients, which is evident in all of her sweets and breads. The bakery case of delights includes a Pecan Pie at Continental Bakery with the biggest, meatiest pecan halves and with a perfect ratio of homemade crust and filling. This simple pie, much like all of her desserts, is simply wonderful and available by the slice or the whole pie.

Torte

Klingler's European Bakery & Café in Vestavia is famous for their Black Forest Cake. And their Black Forest Torte is just as delicious. This torte is made of chocolate cake filled with brandy-soaked cherries and topped with whipped cream and chocolate shavings. Delectable!

Birmingham Dine Originals

Dine Originals is a trade organization of CIRA, the Council of Independent Restaurants of America. Each chapter works to preserve its culinary sense of place. Rather than rivals, these restaurateurs work together, sharing purchasing and marketing costs and referring diners to member restaurants when they travel. There are more than 700 members across the country, and the Birmingham chapter is 24 members strong.

Local members include the following: Bright Star, Chez Lulu, Continental Bakery, Cosmos Pizza, Costa's Famous BBQ & Steakhouse, GianMarco's, Homewood Gourmet, Hot & Hot Fish Club, Icon, Irondale Café, Little Savannah, Los Angeles Restaurant, Local, Nabeel's, Ocean, Open Door Café, Out Takes, Silvertron Café, Sol Y Luna, Standard Bistro, The Fish Market, 26 (Twenty-Six) and V. Richard's. These independent restaurants strive to offer authentic dining experiences with recipes and menus that reflect local culture and cuisine.



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Prawn Skewers at Los Angeles