

DINING REVIEW - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Overall rating: ★★★★★

Kevin Rathbun Steak
154 Krog St., Suite 200, Atlanta

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PHILOSOPHER Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted in the 18th century that "greater eaters of meat are in general more cruel and ferocious than other men."

Color me cruel and ferocious. A well-cooked steak, in particular, is a luscious, solely human delight — a meaty pleasure far outranking the joys of pot roast or grilled hamburgers. There is something in the singe of the meat — the char to its exterior that gives way to the juices within, that makes a girl's mouth water.



And Atlanta is a steak town. As much as we would like to say that we've come a long way, baby, in the development of our local cuisine (and we have), we still love our steaks. The people who visit love our steaks. Steaks, like sushi, have become something of a phenomenon as part of the dining scene here: if you grill it, they will come.

So it only stands to reason that restaurateur Kevin Rathbun — raised in Kansas City, with a penchant for cooking approachable cuisine and an Atlanta pedigree that includes the Buckhead Life group and his own growing family of popular restaurants (Rathbun's, Krog Bar) — might, just might, decide to open a steakhouse. The no-way-this-could-fail idea must have been irresistible to the chef

we love to love.

And while the menu indeed caters to the carnivorous, the most surprising and perhaps pleasing thing about Kevin Rathbun Steak is that someone who doesn't eat meat could find plenty to eat — and like — about it. Portion sizes, as expected, are generous. Sides of crispy, light fried okra (with Rathbun's pleasing remoulade) and a cute crock of scalloped [sweet potatoes](#) intermingled with Gruyère cheese are reason enough to not order steak.



A shellfish tamale is very much like something you'd find on the menu at Rathbun's, with sautéed scallops and shrimp nestled next to a plump tamale (caution, vegetarians: It's made with lard) and draped in a pan sauce of cream, cilantro, garlic, julienned ancho chiles and a touch of lime. Listed under hot appetizers, it is large enough to be an entree.

Other goodies to start with run the gamut from scrumptious little meatballs with a heavy note of Asian five spice and mushroom-spiked [soy sauce](#) to a plated salad of ripe tomatoes, sliced fat, with Vidalia onions and a vinaigrette that reaches toward sweetness but pulls back just before it gets there. It would be nice to not have the option of ordering hamachi and ahi tuna, sashimi style, since having them on the menu seems to cater a little too much to the crowd.



Don't get the idea that this is a typically dark, weathered and leathered, VIP-boys-in-the-backroom kind of steakhouse. Dark, yes, but with a dining room studded with stacked black walnut, brick and brushed aluminum lighting that looks like deer antlers adorned with Christmas lights. Designed by the Johnson Studio (who I'm

sure I'll find had a hand in designing heaven if I get there), all that's missing is a fireplace and a bear rug. The front room sports a 4-by-5-foot portrait of Rathbun by Georgia artist Steve Penley; while lovely, it's too Emeril-esque for Rathbun, who (like Emeril) is immediately likable but has far less ego. An outdoor area,

cheekily called the "Beltline Lounge" (the restaurant sits on Atlanta's proposed Beltline), is a sexy spot to sip wine, smoke cigars and perhaps order a dozen or so oysters to slurp back.

The 2-inch-thick prime steaks are beautiful, though the crown for best in the city still belongs to Bones. Gorgeous nonetheless, they certainly put in a grand showing for close second. Rathbun gets them from the famed Chicago meat house Allen Brothers. Early on the kitchen had a problem with temperatures, which was very disappointing for the enjoyment of what would otherwise have been a nice cut of bone-in rib-eye. Subsequent visits proved that someone in the kitchen had mastered the use of Rathbun's 1,800-degree infrared broilers — a porterhouse for two, served sliced but still attached to the bone, was a happy, juicily seasoned meat fest. Steak Diane, an old steakhouse standby that is traditionally served tableside, gets a little lost in translation, with a lackluster sauce of brandy, mushrooms and shallots.

Pastry chef Kirk Parks has made a national name for himself at Rathbun's, and the legacy will continue with Kevin Rathbun Steak. From a happy little bread basket (ask for extra onion rolls) of house-made breads to "after steak" sweets like the Italian blackstrap rum cake (which is actually a yummy zuppa inglese in disguise), the desserts are a perfect accompaniment to the rest of the menu, especially since this is the one area most steakhouses pay little attention to, figuring that most people will be too stuffed with meat and potatoes to care. Here, it's wise to save room for a black bottom crème brûlée reminiscent of an old-fashioned chocolate pudding, silky smooth and layered with rich chocolate flavor.

Perhaps Rathbun's biggest coup is the ability to attract and keep a happy, informed staff. Servers here exude what's best about American service: relaxed and casual, they manage to maintain a proper distance while remaining cordial.

Plus, the bar stocks Hendrick's gin. I'm in.

Food: Steakhouse

Service: These guys define American service at its best: friendly, cordial and informed, they manage to maintain a respectable distance without seeming snooty.

Address, telephone: 154 Krog St., Suite 200, 404-524-5600

Price range: \$\$\$\$

Credit cards: Visa, MasterCard, American Express, Discover

Hours: Open for dinner Monday through Thursday from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 5:30 to 11:30 p.m.

Best dishes: Porterhouse steak for two, shellfish tamale, fried okra, scalloped sweet potatoes, oysters on the half-shell, black bottom crème brûlée

Vegetarian selections: Tomato salad, fried okra, twice-baked potato of the day

Children: Lots of goodies children will like, including mashed potatoes and mac 'n' cheese

Parking: Complimentary valet

Reservations: Accepted

Wheelchair access: Yes

Smoking: Patio only

Noise level: Medium

Patio: Yes

Takeout: Yes

Web site: www.kevinrathbunsteak.com

KEY TO RATINGS

★★★★★ **Excellent:** One of the best in the Atlanta area.