

Dining boom, reconsidered

By JOHN KESSLER

Published on: 02/15/07 in The Atlanta Journal Constitution

Many eons ago, when I used to be the dining critic for this newspaper, I wrote a really obnoxious column about how the booming economy of the late 1990s was undermining the dining scene in Atlanta — killing it with kindness.

Restaurants were opening left and right. In Buckhead bungalows, in retail spaces on Peachtree Street, in big-box buildouts along Ga. 400, there were new places aplenty to check out.

Young chefs with only a couple of years under their belts [cooking](#) at a decent restaurant were striking out with "New American" bistros and "casual Mediterranean flavors" and whatever other mantle their publicists hoisted upon them. Chains opened like mad.

I used to crack up at the beautifully packaged but poorly written press releases that landed on my desk. One boasted "artesian cheese," as if the brie spurted forth from an underground well. Another assured us that the chef had a "flare for fine dining." I assumed he would only ignite it in case of emergency.

These restaurants opened and opened and opened. I dutifully checked them out.

And? I ate lots of OK [crab cakes](#). And beet and goat cheese salad, variously crusted grouper, chocolate goo cakes and knockoffs of every other popular dish at the time.

So, I reasoned in my column, a slowing down of the economy would weed out the opportunists from the true craftsmen. Instead of real estate speculators dreaming up a restaurant and hiring others to carry out his not-quite-formed vision, we'd encourage a scrappier breed of chef-entrepreneur.

The economy obliged and bottomed out. What did we get? A few chef-driven restaurants. A bunch of trendy martini crud. Another load of big chains. It was the same mix of restaurants, just a whole lot less of it.

Now, once again, restaurants are opening left and right.

I can barely keep up with all the places to try: Trois, Shaun's, Saga, Bistro VG, Sweet Lowdown and Dolce Enoteca, to name the most prominent ones that first come to mind.

What else? Riccardo Ullio's still unnamed Spanish restaurant should open in early spring. Just-opened Thrive will add some sorely needed pizazz to downtown.

Kevin Rathbun Steak, with a spring opening, will likely jump-start a rash of new places in the Inman Park/Old Fourth Ward border. Of the several entries in the Allen Plaza complex going up just east of the Georgia Aquarium, none is as anticipated as F.A.B., or "French-American Brasserie" — the reincarnation of Brasserie Le Coze.

Down the road we'll have serious fine dining in the Mansion and St. Regis hotels in Buckhead. In Midtown will appear New York imports clustered around the Trump Atlanta and the retrofitting of the Sheraton into a W Hotel.

And when you put it all together? We'll probably see the same ratio of chef-driven concepts, trendy glitz driven by real estate speculators and opportunistic chains spreading the sameness.

But there's so much more! So much to try or to avoid. So many places that will promise to raise the bar in Atlanta, and at least a few that will do just that.

I stand corrected. A robust economy is indeed a very good thing for the diner.

