

Rathbun steaks his claim

A visit to the newest addition to the Krog Street empire

By Cliff Bostock
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When I was a kid, my father traveled constantly for business. Occasionally he would take me with him for a week. Since we were often driving through rural areas, lunch was usually at a barbecue shack, but dinner was always in the hotel.

My father always ordered the same thing: a steak and a baked potato. He explained that he would like to dine more adventurously, but that years of being on the road had taught him a steak was the only safe choice. Actually, when my own work required that I travel the rural South as a magazine writer, I found myself eating a lot of bad steak – but it was never as bad as anything else on most menus.

So I'm a programmed red-meat eater. Of course, beef's popularity has been subject to the usual dietary trends. One year it is said to cause colon cancer. The next year it is the central ingredient in high-protein weight-loss diets. Vegans and vegetarians despise it for humanitarian and health reasons. Others point at their incisors and claim that man is by nature a carnivore.

If you are thusly conflicted, you'll probably want to avoid the new **Kevin Rathbun Steak** (154 Krog St., 404-524-5600). The brand-new restaurant is a block or two across North Highland from the wildly popular Rathbun's and Krog Bar. Rathbun's partners in all three ventures are his wife Melissa, Cliff Bramble and Kirk Parks.

The restaurant is located in a former cotton warehouse that later became a Clorox factory and then a rehearsal space for musicians. The Johnson Studio has done its usual magnificent job with the space, which is meant to evoke a speakeasy. I guess. Speakeasies were dark and the new restaurant certainly replicates that effect – a complete contrast to the original Rathbun's open, airy feeling. I couldn't even read the menu without hovering over a candle. I doubt I'd recommend turning up the lighting, provided by a cool branch-shaped chandelier and countless candles, but more readable menus might be in order. Then again, I could be less vain and wear reading glasses.

The walls of the restaurant are stacked walnut, a surprisingly pleasant effect that does engender speakeasy intimacy, as do the leather seating and white tablecloths. The floor is aged hardwood. It's cozy.

The restaurant had only been open a few days when we visited – this is a first impression – but the staff seemed to be firing on all cylinders. The manager is Clay Williams, who was most recently assistant manager of Chops. (Fair disclosure: Clay is a friend of my niece and joined us for dinner one night.)

The menu, despite the restaurant's name, is a blend of seafood and steaks. Most steakhouses long ago began adding fish, as well as chicken, to their menus because of beef's controversial status. So you won't be compromised if you're not a red-meat eater.

We sampled a couple of the hot appetizers. The first was oysters and okra, both lightly batter-fried and served with a remoulade. As is usual with Rathbun's food, the ingredients' natural flavor, rather than peculiar seasonings, stand out. The okra was fried whole, not in slices like your mama fries it, so the vegetable's juices were intact and there was no excess of batter.

We also ordered expensive "salt and pepper lobster fritters." These were basically large chunks of tail meat, fried and served, like the Chinese salt-and-pepper squid, with some serrano chili slices and sesame oil. Honestly, the lobster flavor was not very strong, as it seldom seems to be in most restaurants these days, and the serrano and sesame flavors were likewise very diluted. I recommend you sample another hot plate or one of the cold apps such as the daily changing ceviche.

A popular starter is a "seafood tower" – a construction made of a diner's choice of mix-and-match ingredients such as ahi sashimi, shrimp, lump crabmeat and various shellfish. You can spend a fortune or a moderate amount.

We decided for our first visit to stick to the beef entrees, and we ordered the prime, aged porterhouse for two, about \$64. It was brought to the table presliced on a white platter that was placed at an angle on a smaller, inverted plate so that the beef's jus collected in a convenient puddle. "I hope you're hungry," our server Randall said as he put the plate on the table.

Wayne and I looked at one another. To our eyes, the serving didn't look that big.

The steaks are cooked by an 1,800-degree infrared broiler. The high heat caramelizes the meat's surface, charring it slightly, and seals in juices. "It's like buttah!" Wayne announced. "But it's not enough buttah!"

In fact there are several butters available for anointing the meat. I chose the black truffle and Wayne got one flavored with Stilton. And the portion, despite our initial reaction, was plenty big. Wayne scraped the bone with his knife. By the time we were done, I was stuffed.

Sides are available à la carte. At Clay's recommendation, we ordered the creamed corn with jalapeño. You'll probably want to get another. One side is really not adequate for two.

We ordered two desserts. Like the desserts at Rathbun's, their making is overseen here by co-owner Parks, who is also a pastry chef. I had a praline parfait and Wayne ordered an ice cream bombe featuring raspberry, chocolate and pistachio flavors. Get the parfait.

As far as I can recall, this is the first glitzy steakhouse to open in our city in quite a while. Let me hear your own opinions.