

Kevin Rathbun Steak: Chop shop

A modern steak house on Krog Street

Kevin Rathbun Steak



4 stars. 154 Krog St., Suite 200. 404-524-5600. www.kevinrathbun.com. Mon.-Thurs., 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-11:30 p.m. Entrees: \$19-\$45. Full bar. Valet parking.

BY BESHA RODELL

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Kevin Rathbun Steak sits alongside the train tracks that divide the Old Fourth Ward from Inman Park. The tracks practically run through the restaurant's patio, and for those who consider themselves industrial romantics, it's a highly idyllic scene, watching the tracks stretch into the distance, flanked by old warehouse buildings and lush, green, untamed Southern foliage.

It's a curious talent Rathbun has, to insert these large, ambitious restaurants into this shabby industrial neighborhood and have them somehow seem to fit in. People who live in the surrounding neighborhoods flock to Rathbun's and Krog Bar, Kevin Rathbun's other restaurants located right up the street, happy for eateries of high quality so close to home. Admirers from Rathbun's days at Buckhead Life, where he served as executive corporate chef, haven't deserted him now that he's moved his talent to a less-swank locale. At Rathbun Steak, silver-haired men in linen tangerine suits emerge from the valet line, exuding the old-money confidence of the wealthy northern suburbs. This probably isn't their first time to the Old Fourth Ward; they probably came when Rathbun's opened a few years back.

What they'll find at Kevin Rathbun Steak is food perfectly suited to the modern business dinner. Contemporary steak houses were all the rage in New York and elsewhere a few years ago, and it's a surprise that it's taken so long for Atlanta to get one of this caliber. Both Chops/Lobster Bar and Prime aimed to update the Atlanta steak scene, but both went the nostalgic route, modeling their restaurants after the masculine steak houses of yesteryear. As such, it was hard to compete with Bones, a restaurant that isn't nostalgic for old-fashioned steak houses – it *is* an old-fashioned steak house.

In terms of quality of the meat, Rathbun Steak matches any of the above players. In terms of just about every other aspect – sides, nonsteak menu items, desserts and, to my taste, ambience – Rathbun's got the other guys beat.

Here's a fun game to play: comparing the flavor of dry-aged steak to wet-aged. At Rathbun Steak, the prime porterhouse for two is dry-aged while the regular rib eye and strip are wet-aged. I prefer the depth of flavor achieved by dry-aging, but if it's that soft-as-buttah quality you're looking for, the wet-aged steaks fit the bill. My steak was overcooked by a hair on one visit, but apart from that these babies are coddled. When the steak for two arrives at the table, the server fusses over it as if it were his prize possession.

Classic steak-house sides bring out the best in Rathbun – he's a master at taking familiar American staples and adding a touch of modernity, just enough to give the food a luxuriant modern personality. Creamed corn gets roasted and caramelized before it's creamed, and roasted jalapeños are added. Mac-n-cheese, which is deliriously creamy, is topped with crumbs tossed in truffle oil.

So the steak and sides are excellent, as they should be. But where Rathbun really impresses is with his other dishes, and particularly with seafood. The ceviche of the day recently was a couple

of fat scallops, dressed with some simple citrus and olive oil, a hint of truffle, and a sprinkling of parsley. The whole charred bronzini is probably the dish that will have me coming back to Rathbun Steak, the sweet flesh of the fish enhanced only by a crispy skin and a lemon wedge.

The list of appetizers gives us some sure winners, such as fried oysters and okra, and just about any of the sashimi dishes. But the appetizers also provided the only disappointments of my visits. The lobster fritters, hunks of lobster that were deep-fried, were a tad lackluster and a tiny bit tough. The beef tartare had good flavor but was texturally challenged, almost a puree with nothing to break up the mushiness.

On the other hand, desserts are successful on every level. The blackstrap rum cake is a delicious combination of soft cake, cream, nuts and booze. The icebox cheesecake tastes of classic restrained American elegance. And the chocolate layer cake, served with thick cream, is a perfect example of what a smart chef makes when he knows he needs to please the crowds without compromising his standards. Dense and rich yet restrained, this cake will remind you of a time in American baking that may have occurred before you were born. It's like layer cake is encoded in our genealogical memory. Awesome.

A word about service here: It is so assured and efficient that I occasionally felt a tiny bit rushed. I thought it was my imagination until the check appeared only slightly after my dessert arrived one evening, well before I was done eating. I admit that I tend to overreact to this particular, very small faux pas, but with such potential to be some of the best service in the city, I thought it was a shame.

The wine list is smart and not too long, filled with the regular suspects but with enough intriguing bottles to keep the geeks happy, including a lovely selection of Italian reds. And if you decide to skip the patio on the train tracks for the dining room inside, you'll be greeted by a thoroughly comfortable room, which gets a tiny bit loud, decorated with multilayered wooden paneling and overlooked by a huge Technicolor oil painting of Rathbun himself.

He's looking out over another huge success.