

# creative loafing

WENT TO PRESS BEFORE OBAMA WON

## All Woodfired up

After Michael Tuohy's departure as chef and owner of Woodfire Grill, new chef Kevin Gillespie carries on Tuohy's legacy with style. Gillespie's simple, elegant cooking (including items such as wood-oven roasted mushrooms, right), and the restaurant's formal service are both in line with the fine dining restaurant Tuohy ran for years. But are the new owners missing an opportunity to shake things up?

**food & drink 31**

## Next of kin

New owners carry the torch at Woodfire Grill ■ **By Beshia Rodell**

**Woodfire Grill** ★★☆☆☆

1782 Cheshire Bridge Road. 404-347-9055.

www.woodfiregrill.com. Tues.-Thurs., 6-10 p.m.; Fri., 6-11 p.m.; Sat., 5:30-11 p.m. Full bar. Valet parking.

**A**s a former devotee of various types of music that began as underground movements and then, before my contemptuous eyes, became highly commercialized, I can imagine how the original supporters of farm-to-table must feel. After years of struggling to make diners understand the beauty of über-fresh produce, of extolling the heroism of the small organic farmer, now Slow Food and locavorism are marketing tools for even the most cynical-minded restaurateurs. And while there must be some comfort in the widespread recognition that eating locally is a good idea, there must also be a smidge of resentment that years of hard-fought idealism can so easily become a ubiquitous trend. As Robert Smith sang on the Cure's first (and best) American release, "Everyone's happy, they're finally all the same, 'cause everyone's jumping everybody else's train."



When chef Michael Tuohy came to Atlanta from California in 1986, he brought ideas about fresh and local ingredients that this city hadn't yet seen. He opened Woodfire Grill in 2001, while there was still minimal appreciation among the general public for farm-to-table cooking. When I interviewed him two years ago, Tuohy said he still felt as though he was "pushing a boulder" when it came to educating Atlanta diners.

But despite a mainly uncaring, non-locavore public, Woodfire Grill thrived, thanks to a foodie clientele who realized the value of Tuohy's philosophy way ahead of the pack.

In August, Tuohy moved back to California to open a restaurant in Sacramento. Perhaps, in the midst of a farm-to-table boom in our city's restaurants, Tuohy thought his work here was done. Or perhaps it was purely a business decision. No matter his motives, after 22 years in Atlanta, Tuohy left just as everyone was jumping on a train he had a major hand in fueling.

The restaurant was sold to Nicolas Quinones and Bernard Moussa, a pair who had worked together as managers of Midtown's Loca Luna. Executive chef duties fell to Kevin Gillespie, who had been serving as Tuohy's chef de cuisine for two years. The new owners promised a "seamless" transition, insisting that longtime customers would barely notice the change.

Indeed, the Woodfire Grill of today is barely distinguishable from the Woodfire Grill of a year ago, save a new coat of paint and the absence of Tuohy's face in the open kitchen. There are still pristine meals to be had here, service is still crisp and formal, and Gillespie has absorbed Tuohy's cooking style so completely you'd never know the difference.

Wood-grilled duck breast is tender and meaty, fanned out over a smear of immensely flavorful grits. Sitting primly across the plate, roasted hakeuri turnips whisper their autumn secrets, barely dressed in butter and herbs.

California cuisine's elegance is showcased in a jumble of chanterelle and shiitake mushrooms, lined up along the plate and accompanied by a wedge of melting Camembert and a buttery croûton.

Tuohy's aesthetic always leaned toward simplicity, and Gillespie follows suit. Chicken is grilled with just the right amount of salt and pepper, placed next to a round of sweet roasted tomato relish topped with vibrant green beans. Rather than wild creativity, ingredients get the limelight.

But since Tuohy's departure (and perhaps even before it), Woodfire Grill has been slow. I'm not sure that the problem can be traced to factors as simple as the loss of a chef and owner, and it obviously isn't a question of quality.

This type of cooking has a reputation for being an elitist cuisine, and, until recently, there was a lot of truth to that perception. When only a handful of restaurants in town were serving locally raised, coddled ingredients, people were willing to accept that the quality alone was worth the cost and fine-dining formality. As farm-to-table's popularity grows, by definition it becomes a more populist movement. In terms of the greater health of our food systems, this is good news. In terms of the longevity of expensive restaurants that have survived on the cache of local food, not so good.



NEW KID ON THE BLOCK: Chef Kevin Gillespie of Woodfire Grill

Which is why I feel as though Woodfire Grill is on the cusp of a missed opportunity. It's obvious that the restaurant has been toying with less formality and more flexibility for some time. In 2005, a "market menu" appeared in the bar area, and in February of this year the restaurant announced a new "small plates" format (which seems to have since been abandoned).

The market menu offers a burger, some wood-oven pizzas, and a huge pile of fried seafood (by far the best bargain in the building) that goes way beyond its description of "calamari." But even here, a \$12 seasonal vegetable plate consists of an austere line of three side items rather than a fun hodgepodge of nibbles befitting a bar menu.

With new young owners and a chef who obviously has the chops to outgrow Tuohy's shadow, the restaurant has the chance to remake itself, to lose some of that austerity and evolve into the next generation of local food champions.

I wish Robert Smith had lyrics I could insert here, about reinvention and newness. But he doesn't — he just kept singing the same kind of song, and ceased to matter.

food&drink

