

New Zagat Survey of Atlanta Restaurants Shows Hearty Appetites Despite Thinning Wallets

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City Welcomes Celeb-Run Restaurants, Prices Continue to Rise But Atlantans Continue to Eat Out More Often and Tip More Than the National Average

Zagat Survey today released the results of its new Atlanta Restaurants survey, with ratings and reviews of 828 of the best restaurants in greater Atlanta, Savannah and other outlying areas. The guide is based on the collective opinions of 3,287 frequent local diners, who bring roughly 629,000 annual meals worth of experience to this survey.

"This year's survey reveals that even a slowing economy can't stop Atlantans' interest in dining out," said Tim Zagat, CEO of Zagat Survey. "84% of our surveyors say they are eating out more than or as much as they did two years ago, 67% say they're spending more and only 5% say less. In addition there has been a recent influx of celebrity chefs to the city."

Winners All Around

In keeping with tradition, Atlanta surveyors named Bacchanalia as the Top Food winner this year -- an accolade the restaurant has earned in every Zagat survey since 1996. Also familiar to the top five, Quinones Room, Rathbun's, the Ritz-Carlton Buckhead Dining Room and Aria. Quinones Room took bragging rights for Top Service, while Bacchanalia, The Dining Room, Bone's and Park 75 came in just behind. As for Decor, Nan Thai won top honors with Quinones Room coming second, The Dining Room, Canoe and Restaurant Eugene followed in order.

Celebrity Infusion

Atlanta's expansion has lured celebrity chefs to set up shop all around town. Recent additions to the city include Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Spice Market, first seen in New York City, Straits, the brainchild of San Francisco chef Chris Yeo and recording artist Ludacris (Chris Bridges), and AquaKnox, which originated in Las Vegas. 'Top Chef's' Tom Colicchio also has plans to open a Craft Atlanta late this summer.

Going Green, Gastronomically

The Atlanta Restaurants guide shows that an overwhelming 62% of surveyors say they are willing to pay more for sustainably raised food and 58% would pay more for organic dishes. In response, restaurants are popping up all over town with "green" appeal: Season Four 'Top Chef' finalist Richard Blais is serving Southern style farm-to-table fare at Home, while the new gastro-pub Cakes & Ale's American-Italian cuisine is made from locally sourced seasonal ingredients and "humanely raised" meats.

Atlantans aren't only keen on green, they're heart-conscious, too. A full 30% of surveyors said that low-carb, low-fat or heart-healthy options are extremely or very important to them when dining out, and 64% agree that trans fats should be banned.

Playing Favorites

On par with the rest of the country, Atlanta residents' cuisine of choice is Italian (27%), but many southerners won't let go of their roots -- 20% say they'd choose American blue plates over any other kind. Twelve percent of surveyors say they'd choose Thai and only 3% mentioned Indian as their favorite. Now if only restaurants could get Atlantans' favorites to the table gracefully -- a whopping 63% cited "service" as the aspect of dining out that most irritates them.

Rising Prices - But Still a Bargain!

Not much has changed since the last survey -- gas prices (along with almost everything else) continue to rise, and 67% of Atlantans say they feel the brunt of the economic recession, as they're spending more on meals than they did in 2006. Although the average meal cost in Atlanta increased 2.5% annually since the last survey, rising to \$27.53, that's still well below the national average of \$33.80 and almost \$17.00 less than the most expensive city -- Las Vegas -- with a whopping cost of \$44.44. While meal prices continue to rise, Atlanta residents are still dining out 3.7 times per week, which is well above the Zagat national average of 3.3 meals per week. Atlantans also tip more at 19.3% than diners elsewhere -- 19% nationally. Finally, surveyors said that during an average week, 52% of their lunches and dinners come from restaurants.

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