

The Park Café (730 Rutledge Ave. (843) 410-1070 theparkcafes.com)

written by JEFF ALLEN /// photographs by RUTA ELVIKYTE

In the gentrifying enclave just beyond Hampton Park, this sunny spot beckons with the promise of a simple, leisurely meal. In warm weather, it's best to perch out front at a breezy picnic table, but a blustery chill demands a small table inside beneath the

cascading wall of plants. This creative, makeshift terrarium of sorts fits perfectly in the wheelhouse of Karalee Fallert, the driving force behind many of Charleston's more successful and stylized eateries: Taco Boy, Monza, Closed for Business, The Royal American, and recent addition Lee Lee's

THE DRAW: Modern, reasonably priced food served without pretense

THE DRAWBACK: Those looking for white tablecloth dining will find it too casual.

DON'T MISS: Danish *aebleskivers*, the best doughnuts in town

PRICE: \$7-\$17

Hot Kitchen. Here in the bright, bustling café, she and business partner Xan McLaughlin field her finest effort yet.

Carnivores will love the imaginative house-made Daily Dogs—a chicken sausage served on a benne-studded bun one day, a lamb *merguez* firmly planted upon a *tzatziki*-smearred toasted pita the next. And there's something rather satisfying about the fried egg sandwich, a dark yellow yolk sporting



A SEASONED CHEF: Before landing at The Park Café, John Amato worked at FIG, then owned his own food truck.



FRESH & ELEGANT: Fish dishes change daily; this swordfish came served over squash puree and topped with greens and more.



FARM TO TABLE: Local, seasonal produce stars in dishes such as charred okra (above); The Park Café (top).

mounds of house-cured bacon smothered in cheddar cheese and cold avocado. But on a recent evening, my date insisted on salads, because the vegetables at The Park Café demand equal billing with meatier dishes.

An avowed purist might argue the roasted cauliflower isn't a salad at all since it lacks the requisite leafy green base, but the stack of cauliflower florets, dusted with a light caramel char and tossed with warm, toasty hazelnuts and fresh parsley, sits in splendid juxtaposition to the mustard vinaigrette. This dish makes for a proper introduction to chef John Amato's culinary intent, which has little to do with classical convention or passing trend. His work displays a certain freedom; a modernism of his own making; and a

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practicality that means good, tasty food.

Amato eschews the spotlight; you'll rarely see him gallivanting outside of his cook space. If you peek through the foggy windows of the swinging kitchen doors, you might spot him, head down, intent in disposition. The former owner of his own mobile food truck, he came up early under Mike Lata at FIG. More interested in food than media attention, he's the kind of cook who actually deserves to be called a chef.

In Amato's current kitchen, the salads are not an afterthought. They could constitute a main course. In the shredded kale salad, a big bowl of greens gets mixed about with sweet chunks of medjool dates, crunchy almonds, and citrus-spiked dressing. The beautifully constructed local head lettuces' menagerie of shaved garden vegetables, balsamic-tinged shiitake, cold-poached marinated shrimp, fried shallots, and orange slices leaves nothing more to desire, confirming my date's insistence upon such a first-course order. In a search for healthy, bright salads downtown, or regular lunchtime commitments proffering a more demure indulgence, Amato's selection is unequalled.

A more substantial appetite might pair



BOWLED OVER: The local head lettuce salad comes studded with area produce and poached shrimp.



GREEN ROOM: The interior walls of the sunny café are brightened by a lush grouping of plants.

When the butcher's steak hits the table, wrapped in a rich bordelaise sauce and flanked with roasted potatoes and sautéed rapini, it won't confront you with ironic plot twists or ingredients promoting faux historicity.

those toasty florets of cauliflower alongside one of the numerous daily offerings that take full advantage of local sourcing and seasonality. There are assorted plates of daily fish, perhaps a seared triggerfish or wreckfish. The daily pasta is made in-house. There's even a daily salad that takes advantage of Amato's relationships with local vegetable farmers. Much like the kitchen at FIG, the food at The Park Café never tries to be something it's not and is never pretentious or overreaching. When he says you're getting a bone-in pork chop with white ham gravy, that's exactly what he means. When the butcher's steak hits the table, wrapped in a rich bordelaise sauce and flanked with roasted potatoes and sautéed rapini, it won't confront you with ironic plot twists or ingredients promoting faux historicity. It will just be delicious, simple, and reduced to its core.

When served the eggplant caponata tart, you'll find the pastry incredibly light and flaky and the eggplant subtly charred, all topped with a cooling dollop of fresh cheese. The rich smoked fish dip gets studded with chunks of

salmon alongside spicy jalapeños. The light and airy mushroom and walnut paté also provides a rich diversion, served with spicy shishito peppers and a smattering of heirloom radishes, carrots, and cucumbers dressed simply in oil and balsamic vinegar.

By the time you work your way through a tableful of plates and come across the luscious *aebleskivers* for dessert, you'll be thankful that the prior offerings were light enough to leave room. But even these small rounds of Danish doughnuts dusted in powdered sugar won't interfere with an afternoon at the office or a show downtown. They're light as feathers and impeccably executed; soft wisps of steam pour forth when you crack them open. They go down well with a shot of coffee and leave one sated with a will to return. Because The Park Café is not a fancy destination restaurant. It's a favorite place, a little out of the way, that you'll want to visit as often as you can. **C**



NEW & NOTABLE

Our taste & tell guide to the latest F&B openings in Charleston

Tokyo Crepes

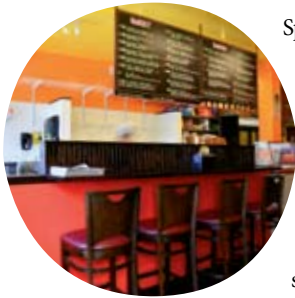
You no longer have to venture to Folly Beach to snag the Japanese-style treats Tokyo Crepes has been doling out from a roadside stand for the last five years. Owners Yukari Yada and John Baker recently added a second location:

a cheery slip of a restaurant at 62 Spring Street that's open until

11 p.m. Monday through Saturday (and until 9 p.m. on Sunday). While savory options such as the Sunny Chicken and Smoky Pork are tasty, we think the

sweet offerings are the way to go. The delicious "Dream"—filled with homemade custard pudding, your choice of fruits such as strawberries and bananas, chocolate syrup, and whipped cream—will be

hard to pass up on a return visit, though varieties incorporating Nutella and even cheese tempt our curiosity. **Find "Tokyo Crepes-Downtown Charleston" on Facebook**



Rollin' South Kitchen

The folks at Rollin' South Kitchen have worked out most of the front-of-house kinks since the

food truck took over the former Sloppy Cow digs on James Island's Harbor View Road last summer. Happily, since day one,

their basic diner fare—breakfast, lunch/dinner, and

Sunday brunch—served in a basic, boxy space has been spot-on.

Think bacon and eggs and biscuits and gravy, as well as apps (jalapeño-spiked pimiento cheese dip), sandwiches, "from the grill" items (try the Green Eggs and Hamburger served sunny-side up with a slather of house-smoked jalapeño salsa verde and cilantro mayo), and nightly specials. Now if we could just get them to dim the lights after sundown. **rollinsouthkitchen.com**







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