



Dining in style

Whether you are eating in Aiken, Augusta, Columbia County or North Augusta, restaurants all across the CSRA are offering excellence

By Brian Neill

Located in a newly rejuvenated historic inn that used to entertain wealthy winter colonists in Aiken, The Restaurant at The Willcox offers locals delectable dishes like salmon filet with stone-ground grit sticks, asparagus and smoked tomato sauce, or risotto of roasted, marinated artichoke, lemon, arugula and feta.

It wasn't that long ago that dining options in Aiken were limited to a handful of old-time establishments, barbecue joints and fast-food restaurants.

Suffice it to say, a lot has changed since then.

Now diners can choose between offerings like pasture-raised filet of beef topped with red wine jus, tomato herb jam and chevre at

Malia's, or veal scallopini with baby arugula, shaved parmesan and truffle oil at Oliv'a.

Some of it has to do with the "sport of kings" — polo. Aiken's reputation as a horse community has attracted a surge of wealthy residents over the last decade or so, many of whom live in golf-like communities that situate stately homes around polo fields instead of 18 holes.

There is also Aiken's ever-growing reputation as a hidden gem. The city with a population of roughly 30,000 showed up on *Money* magazine's 2008 list of best places to live and has also been ranked in various publications as one of the nation's best places to retire.

These factors have helped raise the bar for Aiken dining.

Price point was a "huge consideration" for Geoffrey Ellis, who started a restaurant in The Willcox in September and ended up buying out the entire hotel at the beginning of this year.

Ellis, who grew up in Aiken but had moved to New Zealand to operate restaurants there, returned to his hometown and took on the mission of keeping the legacy of The Willcox alive.

Before he stepped in, the chain that had owned the hotel had abandoned food and beverage service and was catering primarily to out-of-town visitors seeking expensive lodging packages.

The Willcox already had the reputation of being a blue-blood establishment, with its stately columns and lodge-like interior.

So Ellis and his wife, Shannon, set out to keep the hotel's distinguished history intact, while bringing its dining atmosphere down to earth.

"It's been catering to the well-to-do since the early 1900s, so I think the hotel, itself, kind of emanates that feeling," Geoffrey Ellis says. "So our thoughts were that everyone who walks through those doors is important. The prices definitely were our No. 1 consideration. Part of the objective was to break down that wall that The Willcox had before of being too expensive."

Jackets and ties are fine, but so are jeans and polo shirts, says Shannon Ellis.

But a casual air and competitive prices don't equate with food being taken lightly at The Willcox.

For instance, the restaurant prides itself on its fresh seafood.

"All of our fish is flown in from Hawaii twice a week," Geoffrey Ellis says. "It's never more than 24 hours out of the water."

Steaks and hamburgers are certified Angus beef.

"It's more a quality of food with an atmosphere that is very relaxed," Shannon Ellis says.

Across the river in Augusta, there are a number of restaurants that have also elevated dinner to a new level.

Chef Andrew Crumrine, owner of Crums on Central, offers dishes like Baked North Georgia Trout, which is butterflied, deboned and baked before being topped with three enormous fried oysters and a Bernaise sauce.

There are also appetizers like Portabella Fries, which are served with a feta aioli the restaurant calls Crummy Sauce.

Crums on Central, which opened in the summer of 2008, could perhaps best be

described as upscale casual, but Crumrine is determined not to make prices a barrier to the average customer.

"We're here to be an Augusta restaurant," Crumrine says. "We're not here to be the highest-end restaurant with prices that make your nose bleed."

Crumrine is very hands-on, and enjoys mingling with guests and doing what he does best — putting out mouth-watering food.

"They're my recipes," Crumrine says. "I'm back there. I taste everything every night and make sure things are going out the way I want them."

At Bistro 491, Head Chef Warren Chitty offers dishes in the restaurant at Surrey Center that scream forth with an assertiveness that is certain to dazzle and delight diners such as a pistachio-crust rack of lamb with an herbed polenta and roasted radishes or the "Crispy Chicken Under a Brick" with melted leeks, Bistro fries and "A Really Good Sauce."

"We actually put a weight on it when we cook it," Chitty says of the chicken. "It holds in the juice and it also really crisps the skin a lot."

A bit off the beaten path in North Augusta is a gem of a restaurant that those in the local area will want to take the time to find.

Manuel's Bread Cafe is situated in the Hammond's Ferry development next to the Greenway, North Augusta's series of biking and walking trails on the Savannah River. Chef Manuel Verney-Carron, a native of France, specializes in simple French dishes, prepared with precision.

There are dishes like Chicken Provençal, pan-seared chicken breast stuffed with prosciutto and fresh mozzarella, baked and topped with a zesty tomato sauce and served with Manuel's authentic French fries.

Nearly everything that hits a plate at Manuel's Bread Cafe has been made in-house, Verney-Carron says.

"We make our own pâtes. Ninety-five percent of what we make here is made from scratch," he says. "I rotate my stock twice a week and there is nothing that stays in that cooler for more than a week. We concentrate on being very fresh."



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