



Peach Sopaipilla Napoleon with Fresh Blueberries

Perfect Neighbor

Little Savannah has charmed an eclectic neighborhood with its creative, progressive menu and friendly atmosphere.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

Offering progressive Southern cuisine, Little Savannah has earned a glowing reputation throughout the eclectic Forest Park community as a wonderful little spot for lunch and dinner with its interesting menu, friendly atmosphere and neighborly feel.

Little Savannah's owner and chef Clifton Holt went practically around the world before discovering his passion in the kitchen. The Cullman native spent more than 15 years in the military, joining the Navy when he was 18 years old. He spent some time in special operations and even a few months in the Marines Corps. Upon leaving military service, Holt "fumbled" for a few years in engineering and architecture before finding that business too confining.

In his mid 30s, Holt discovered his love for food and for people and set about training for a new career in the culinary arts. He eventually found work as an apprentice under Frank Stitt at Highlands Bar and Grill. He learned his trade while working with Stitt and renowned sous chef Greg Martin for two-and-a-half years, eventually working his way up to pastry chef. Still, even though he gained valuable experience about the restaurant business during his tenure at Highlands, Holt's restless spirit and desire for creative control took over.

Holt and his wife, Maureen—also a veteran of the Birmingham restaurant scene—came across a small space on Clairmont Avenue in a historic building in Forest Park. The Holts signed the papers on July 5, 2003 and opened up two months

later.

Inside, the restaurant is warm and inviting, with bright paint colors throughout, opening up the intimate space. It is adorned with a hodgepodge of reworked second-hand furnishings, exposed woods and some modern accoutrements that add to the eccentric feel. For instance, there is a pair of refurbished church pews serving as seating against each wall,



Jalapeño-marinated Pork Chop

a colorful mural of Savannah, Ga. painted by a local artist, and an old window from Samford University adorned with all types of items from seashells to corks.

"It suits the neighborhood very well. The neighborhood itself is very close-knit," Holt says. "So, when you have guests in it's not uncommon at all to have several people who may be next door neighbors or a few

doors down that come in, and the next thing you know they're pouring wine across the tables or sampling each other's entrees."

A self-described people-person, Holt not only enjoys spending time with his guests during their visit but listens to them about their likes and dislikes. While he has a restless, creative spirit that takes pleasure in change, he has found that many of his dishes have created such a loyal following with regular diners that change is often met with resistance. But that doesn't bother Holt who is primarily interested in making sure guests enjoy their experience at Little Savannah.

Taking a cue from his creative desire to experiment with Southern food, Holt named his restaurant Little Savannah in tribute to his daughter. However, the name creates an impression because Savannah is one of the South's most distinctive cities. Little Savannah's motto is "progressive Southern Cuisine—historic Southern neighborhood," but Holt's interpretation of "South" isn't limited to a particular corner of the United States.

"Any place in the world that has a south and a cuisine is fair game, it's not just held up to American-Southern. The progressive side is how we take influences from around the world and incorporate them into what we're doing," Holt says.

"The approach there is really good, simple food and Southern food is our foundation," Holt adds. "We have mashed potatoes and grits, but at the same time we'll finish a dish

THE DETAILS:

Little Savannah

Address: 3811 Clairmont Avenue

Phone: 591-1119

Hours: Lunch Tues.-Sat., 11-2
& Dinner Tues.-Sat., 5:30-9:30

Call Ahead Wait List

No Smoking

with a salsa instead of a sauce, or I may have a salsa as a main side with an entrée."

One of Little Savannah's dishes that best exemplifies this idea is shrimp and grits on the appetizer menu. Long a staple of low-country cuisine, Holt takes this Southern specialty and stands it on its head. Holt takes fresh shrimp from the Gulf Coast and blends them with polenta, an Italian specialty similar to grits, but ground finer for a smoother texture. He brings together several cheeses—including Parmigiano-Reggiano and others from Spain and Italy—and complements the dish with sautéed mushrooms, crumbled bacon and a bacon vinaigrette dressing. The dressing adds a smoky flavor to the creamy polenta and also wakes up the shrimp in a way that, Holt says, normal cocktail sauces can't compete with. Shrimp and grits has been on the menu since Little Savannah opened, and is also one of those items that Holt has learned to leave alone.

"We've had it exactly the same since day one," Holt says. "I've tried to change it a little a couple of times and I've gotten these scathing looks from the dining room. I've said, 'I'll fix that. We'll go back.'"

The menu at Little Savannah is heavy with seafood, featuring such fish as Main Bay sockeye salmon, Gulf shrimp, grouper and Alaskan halibut prepared in a variety of ways. For instance, you can find salmon served with a buttery succotash with locally grown cherry tomatoes, fried oysters with artichokes and

remoulade on the menu.

One of Holt's signature dishes features a fresh piece of Red Destin grouper which has been seared and placed on top of a salsa of Chilton County peaches, black beans, lime and cilantro. The salsa is mixed with cold basmati rice and a citrus vinaigrette for a wonderful summer dish that boasts plenty of flavor, but is still light and crisp and not too heavy. This dish, which Holt also makes with Alaskan halibut from time to time, is perfect for dinner on a hot summer evening.

Little Savannah's menu also features lamb chops with new potatoes; squash and zucchini gratin and tomato-lamb jus; veal piccata with grits, wilted greens, and lemon caper

meunière; and grilled New York strip with garlic mashed potatoes, grilled asparagus and Stilton blue cheese.

One of Maureen Holt's favorite dishes, however, is Jalapeno marinated pork chop. Here, a pork chop marinates in a mixture of jalapeno and garlic for several hours before being grilled. The chop is served with goat cheese grits, sautéed spinach and Alecia's Tomato Chutney. For Maureen, the sweetness and spiciness of the chutney along with the spiciness of the jalapeno marinade are a perfect balance of flavors. "The pork chop is my favorite, but the chutney is delicious. It's a little sweet and it's a little spicy," she says. "It goes great on top of the pork chop."

The dessert selection is a little slim—primarily due to the restaurant's lack of space—but no less creative. As of mid-summer, Holt's sweet offerings included vanilla bean crème brûlée, Sopapilla Napoleon and Savannah-Bananas Foster with blueberries.

Little Savannah's wine and cocktail selections are exceptional. Maureen, who runs the bar, will be glad to mix up a watermelon martini—Jose Cuervo, watermelon juice, Triple Sec and lime juice—or a Cosmo "Mo"—Skyy, Grand Marnier, lime juice and Limoncello.

The wine list covers vintages from all over the world, including white wines such as Villa Maria Reisling from New Zealand, Gramona Gessami from Spain, or red wines such as Castle Rock Pinot Noir from Russian River, California and Allegrini Amarone, from Italy.

Cliff and Maureen Holt have managed to create a restaurant that feels as if it has always been a part of Birmingham's Southside. With its friendly and inviting ambiance, creative cuisine and a little luck, Little Savannah should be a mainstay of Forest Park for many years to come.

Blackjack Gardens Fried Green Tomatoes

