

## BIG CITY RESTAURANT

HAROLD RUTTENBERG HAS CREATED A BIG CITY  
FEEL AT COPPER GRILL

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



Photos: B. Gustafson

It's a rare accomplishment when a new restaurant developed by an unproven restaurateur moves into a town and creates such an immediate splash that it develops a loyal following just as soon as it opens its doors. However, it appears that Copper Grill Lobster & Steak House, located at Brookwood Village, has done just that. In under a year, Copper Grill, owned by former Just for Feet CEO and South African native Harold Ruttenberg, has evolved into one of the hottest places for Birmingham's foodie elites to see and be seen.

And, as the region's restaurant scene perseveres, the concepts behind these new establishments continue to become more and more offbeat and imaginative. Copper Grill

definitely fits into that mold, throwing everything but the kitchen sink at the diner. The restaurant is, perhaps, the culmination of a period of time in which the Birmingham dining community has experienced unprecedented change. Ruttenberg through his creation, Copper Grill, is intent on adding new tastes, flavors and styles to the city's palette, and, he hopes, eventually to the rest of the nation.

After leaving Just For Feet, Ruttenberg rolled out in Florida his concept for a modern, metropolitan restaurant specializing in fresh caught Maine lobster and high-end Certified Angus steaks. He opened the first Copper Grill in Destin, Florida nearly five years ago, perfecting his concept and system—a sys-

tem that includes one kitchen visible to diners and another traditional kitchen in the back of the restaurant—on the Gulf Coast.

After three years of development, Ruttenberg opened the second Copper Grill in Birmingham in April 2002, the anchor establishment of the new restaurant row accompanying the newly renovated Brookwood Village. Ruttenberg says that after those first few years in Destin, he is now ready to introduce Copper Grill to other U.S. cities in the very near future.

"We practiced for nearly three years in Florida and now we're ready to roll this concept out. We've got this thing nailed," Ruttenberg says. "Our third restaurant in Chicago and



fourth in Richmond are coming up, and everybody wants us. This is a big city restaurant."

A combination of 1950s-era excitement with 21st Century technological flair, Copper Grill is the result of Ruttenberg's desire to incorporate his interest in the foods and flavors experienced during his travels. Ruttenberg, a frequent world traveler, explains where the concept for Copper Grill came from.

"Right off the top of my head. From the design of the restaurant, to the menu, and on to the method of cooking the types of food that I have experienced in some of the finest restaurants in all parts of the world and in a desire to just be different. Ruttenberg says. "Loretta Lynn, the singer, once had a saying 'in order to succeed in life you need to be either first, best or different.' We strive to be all three."

Copper Grill is a distinctively modernist take on the American steak house. The restaurant foregoes the conservative and stoic atmosphere of white tablecloths, dark woods and quiet business-like manner for a more lively and energetic 21st Century approach to fine dining. Copper Grill energizes the space with leopard-print cloth napkins and matching fabric covering the cushions of the restaurants spacious booths; contemporary lighting and artistic elements; and open floor plan that allows diners the opportunity to see everything going on around them, with music from Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett adding a bit of nostalgic hip-ness and anchoring Copper Grill in the glorious, swinging America of the past.

As you walk in the door of Copper Grill and into the main dining room, visitors are greeted with the restaurant's huge lobster tank full of five-pound Maine lobsters. The interior of the space has tiered dining levels, similar to a small theatre with a large, open kitchen right in the middle of

the floor. Surrounding the exterior kitchen are dining tables that rest on various levels that work their way up to the upper level of the space where most of the booths are located, along with the bar, which is stocked with cognacs, wines, beer and other liquor from all parts of the globe.

If you consider yourself something of a food expert and enjoy the process of a fine meal coming together, then the best spot in the house for you is at one of the tables in the middle of the main dining floor where you can get an up-close view of the exterior kitchen. Seats in this section of the dining room are reminiscent of sitting ringside at a boxing match or having box seats at a baseball game. From this vantage point you can see

Copper Grill's staff of sous chefs and other cooks prepare steak, shrimp and other grilled foods right in front of you under the direction of executive chef Tom Minchola.

Most of the responsibility for making sure things run smoothly and that the quality of the food is up to Ruttenberg's standards falls in the capable hands of Minchola. Moving from Atlanta to help establish Copper Grill for Birmingham, Minchola has served as the executive chef for such establishments as Pannos & Paul Restaurant, the Atlanta Fish Market, and Chops in Atlanta, which was rated among the top five steak houses in America by Knife & Fork Magazine during his tenure.

Even though the lobsters gets







## food reservations

### THE DETAILS:

COPPER GRILL LOBSTER &  
STEAKHOUSE

PHONE: 414-1411

ADDRESS: 628 BROOKWOOD  
VILLAGE

HOURS: MON.-THURS. 5:30-  
10 P.M.; FRI. & SAT. 5-10  
P.M.; SUN. BRUNCH 11-2:30  
P.M. / DINNER 5-9 P.M.

RESERVATIONS  
ENCOURAGED

WINE TASTINGS  
PRIVATE DINING ROOM

most of the attention, Minchola says that having spent most of his career in steak houses influences how he approaches his work at Copper Grill.

"At a steak house they tend to take a lot more care of their steaks rather than regular restaurants, which may only have a strip and a filet on the menu," Minchola said.

Visitors will find nine steaks to choose from on the menu at Copper Grill. Chief among all is the Cowboy Steak, a 22-ouncer cut from the heart of the rib grilled on the bone and is considered to be the best steak on the menu by Ruttenberg and his staff. However, another good choice especially for couples that want to sample a steak and lobster is the Kansas City Strip, a 20-ounce steak similar to the classic New York Strip. Servers regularly suggest this cut for a couple to share with each other and also leave room for lobster. Minchola and his staff will prepare each half to different temperatures according to each diner's tastes. Other steaks on the menu include a 24-ounce and a 36-ounce Porterhouse, a 10-ounce filet

and a steak brochette, which is 14-ounces of tenderloin served on a skewer.

However, the main event at Copper Grill is the lobster. Flown-in daily from Maine, these are full-grown lobsters that average between four-and-a-half and seven pounds, but are usually around five pounds. When ordered, Ruttenberg and other hosts will bring the live lobster to your table and allow the diner to inspect it before it is prepared. It is then boiled and cracked open for easier serving and served with drawn butter and a lemon Beurre Blanc sauce.

The presentation of the lobster — before and after cooking—always creates a buzz around the surrounding tables. The finished product is served bright red and steaming on a platter with claws still attached in the center of the table. For Minchola, the excitement that is created when a lobster is presented for inspection and ultimately served is a large component in the restaurant's appeal.

"I really didn't know how

Birmingham would react to the lobsters in the beginning, but I think what makes us special is the way we present the lobsters," Minchola said. "We have the tank up front and we walk the lobsters around and let everybody see them. We like our guests to have fun and we like them to be happy and joyful, and I think having one big lobster on the table and having six people share it creates excitement and talk between people."

In addition, Copper Grill sports a wine collection that reflects the best wines made in America, Europe and Ruttenberg's native South Africa. The wine list includes items such as Schug Pinot Noir from the Russian River Valley, Honig Sauvignon Blanc from the Napa Valley, and Spice Root Pinotage Malmosbury from South Africa.

There is one word of caution to heed before dining at Copper Grill: It's expensive. However, knowing that going in, Copper Grill is a truly unique and flavorful experience unlike any restaurant in Birmingham. 