

## food reservations



## Crossing Cultural Boundaries

The city's first churrasqueria—a traditional South American restaurant—there is simply nothing else to compare to Vestavia's Brazil.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

Located in the Vestavia City Centre next door to its sister restaurant, Nonna Rose, Brazil is, to date, the culmination of the fertile culinary mind of Arman DeLorenz. Birmingham's first churrasqueria—a traditional South American restaurant—there is simply nothing else to compare Brazil to in the entire metro area.

Brazil is different in every aspect from what a normal restaurant is expected to be. Some of the changes

are, frankly, a little hard to get used to at first. For instance, there are no menus to sneak a quick look at before coming in and there is a large, beautifully displayed appetizer bar exhibiting a plethora of Brazilian-influenced dishes every night.

But, as diners become comfortable with the restaurant's eccentricities, it is easy to get caught up in the fun, celebratory mood that DeLorenz and his staff have worked hard to cre-

ate in this, his third, Birmingham area restaurant.

While it's easy to lose yourself in the mood, color and fragrant aromas emanating from the kitchen, one can't help but wonder, "where on earth did this idea come from in the first place."

"We knew this space was available and we were kind of looking for something that was unusual. We didn't want to open up another Italian





restaurant or just another Prairie Fire Grill," DeLorenz explains.

"I had been familiar with the churrasquerias from my travels in South America and we knew that there was a Brazilian restaurant that was doing quite well in Atlanta called Fogo Di Chao," DeLorenz says. "We went there and we thought this would work because there is nothing like this in Birmingham."

When it came to the food, DeLorenz, his partner Chris Lakey and head chef Chuck Gwin—formerly head chef at Nonna Rose—spent months researching the food, flavors and techniques of Brazil. From the emphasis on such spices as rosemary, cumin and cilantro, to the meat and vegetables central to the nation's cuisine, to the techniques used to create traditional Brazilian dishes, such as feijoada—an aromatic and flavorful black bean soup with pork, sausage and beef slowly cooked for several hours in a heavy pot—DeLorenz admits they had a lot to learn, but, as the publicity of Brazil's opening spread, he and his staff sought the advice of Birmingham's local Brazilian community.

"We talked to some people from the Brazilian community in town and

drew them in. We read books and did a great deal of research and we had many testings with the Brazilian community," DeLorenz says. "For instance, the feijoada must have changed eleven times if it changed once in order to get the authentic taste that the Brazilians who live in this community remember from home."

Gwin also received some help from a Brazil native named Joao Vasconeelos. A former waiter, Vasconeelos is now Gwin's grill chief despite having little experience in the restaurant business and has been vital in helping Gwin understand Brazilian cooking.

"He's been a waiter but he never cooked in a restaurant in his life, but he enjoys cooking. He and I struck up a conversation when we first opened up and he was telling me about how he loves to cook and he could help us out because he understands the flavors. He was a wealth of information," Gwin says.

DeLorenz, Lakey and Gwin came away with an understanding of the culture of food in Brazil which, like the United States, is a melting-pot of émigrés from other cultures, but primarily Spain, Italy, Africa and Caribbean.

"The polyglot of people that have come to Brazil have created a cuisine that is one unto its own. You find remnants of what all know—they use the same products we do in many cases—but the way that they blend them is completely original," DeLorenz says. "We in America talk about fusion and that it started in France and we brought it to the United States. Brazilians have been doing that for hundreds of years."

For this reason, many of the dishes at Brazil (particularly on the appetizer bar) are a blend of foods, spices and flavor from across several cultural boundaries. For instance, the bow-tie pasta with jerk chicken is a wonderful blend of traditional seasoning methods from the Caribbean with a distinctly Italian twist. You'll also find stuffed cherry tomatoes with a cheese mouse made primarily of marscapone cheese, heirloom red, green and yellow tomatoes with rosemary and oregano and feta cheese, mushrooms stuffed with lump crab meat and spices, and even a slow-smoked salmon pastrami, one of the more unique items on the bar.

One of the great things about Brazil is that diners don't have to wait long at all before getting a chance to eat. No sooner than you are seated



## THE DETAILS:

# Brazil

Address: 700 Montgomery Hwy.  
Phone: 978-8878  
Open for dinner only, Monday  
through Saturday  
Hours: 5 p.m. until 9:30 p.m.,  
10:30 p.m. on weekends  
Reservations recommended  
Full bar  
Nonsmoking  
Take-out not available



and have ordered your drinks, you are encouraged to wander to the appetizer bar, which is a work of art unto itself. Made of coal-black ceramic tile and glass, with a stunning flower arrangement placed in the middle and towering at least eight feet in the air. Diners are also encouraged to visit the bar as many times as they wish.

Then, when you are ready for your main course, you raise a small flag located on the table. This lets a team of specially trained servers called *gauchos*—a term most commonly referring to the indigenous cowboys of Argentina—that you are ready to sample from the 11 cuts of meat prepared every day at Brazil. This is where the real fun begins. Once the flag is raised, *Gauchos* begin to descend upon your table carrying with them skewers featuring one of the meats prepared that day. The *gaucha* slices a cut of meat for you and allows you to take it from the skewer yourself using a small pair of tongs that come with your silverware.

Diners, again, are encouraged to sample as much as they wish, and there is plenty to sample. As long as your flag is raised, *gauchos* will continue to come by your table offering you such items as cuts of filet wrapped in apple-smoked bacon or crusted in a savory mixture of Parmesan cheese, garlic, salt and black pepper. Gwin and his staff also prepare chicken tenderloin on the bone marinated in parsley, cilantro,

basil and chives mixed in with a little garlic and extra virgin olive oil.

All of the cuts are tender and juicy and exhibit their own personalities based on the variations of spice rubs and marinades that are utilized at Brazil. However, Gwin has his favorites, particularly the leg of lamb and flank steak.

For the lamb, Gwin starts out with a whole leg of lamb a day before serving. After cutting the meat to a workable size, Gwin rubs the lamb down with a spice mixture of juniper berries, rosemary, mint, garlic, extra virgin olive oil and rock salt—a very important spice in Brazilian cooking. Gwin allows the lamb to marinate overnight.

“We then cook it over low heat to start off with to let the fat cook off and baste itself on the rotisserie as it slowly roasts. As it cooks, it just puts that fat back into the meat and all of the flavors in the marinade seep into the meat,” Gwin says.

Gwin’s other favorite, the flank steak, is a little simpler in its approach, marinated with just a little oregano, garlic and olive oil and finished off with a little teriyaki sauce. Other cuts on the selection include a top sirloin marinated in a honey, pineapple and chipotle pepper sauce, for a sweet and somewhat spicy taste combination. The honey burns a little on the outside, creating a sweet, charred crust that helps keep the sirloin moist and accentuate the flavors.

The pork tenderloin is another

one of Gwin’s favorites. Seasoned with cumin and cilantro, Gwin rubs lime juice and rock salt on the tenderloin right before he places it on the grill. Gwin also features swordfish that is basted with lime juice, champagne vinegar, pepper and lemon zest for a light and flaky selection for the seafood lover at your table.

The wine list is not as extensive at the other restaurants owned by DeLorenz, but that doesn’t mean you can’t find something to suit your tastes. For instance, a bottle of Prevenance Cabernet Sauvignon from California has a full, robust flavor to accompany any of the red meats, particularly the flank steak. For the chicken or fish, the wait staff suggests a bottle of Erath Pinot Noir from Oregon.

For dessert, pastry chef Lauren Woods has a selection of creative sweet dishes to finish off your meal, including an assortment of fruit sorbets and the white chocolate bread pudding—a staple at all of DeLorenz’s restaurants. However, Woods adds a macadamia and cashew crunch topping adding a bit of a bite to this indulgent desert.

The verdict is in; Brazil is, without question, Birmingham’s most unique restaurant to date and is well worth the flat rate of \$32 per person. A culinary carnival, Brazil is an entertaining culinary celebration, and, besides, it’s just fun to see the look on the babysitter’s face when you tell her you’re going to Brazil. ☐