

# food reservations

## G

Already creating a buzz for its mix of modern sophistication, Southern charm and expertly prepared cuisine, G might just lead a new restaurant renaissance in the city center.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



Ask any restaurateur about the prospects of opening a new establishment and they'll almost universally say the same thing: It's risky. Even restaurants with great food, a good atmosphere in a hip and trendy part of town can, and often do, fail. To succeed, a culinary entrepreneur needs all of these things as well as good timing, a willingness to work hard and get your hands dirty, and a little bit of luck on your side as well. But, of course, a location in a prime area certainly can't hurt.

That's why when Kathy G. Mezrano, president and owner of Kathy G. & Company, Inc., was pondering the idea of opening a modern and sophisticated fine-dining establishment in downtown Birmingham, many of her closest confidantes thought she was crazy. This idea was too risky. Those of us who have spent any time in the Birmingham-area have undoubtedly heard the question at least one time or another, "Who goes downtown anymore?" However, we should be thankful that Kathy G.,

as she is most commonly known, took a chance on this fabulous new restaurant known simply as G.

Kathy G. has spent a lifetime around food, growing up in a Mediterranean family in the culinary melting pot of mid-century Birmingham. She established Kathy G. & Company in the mid-1980s and, since then, has built her business into a veritable catering empire. However, G is her first foray into restaurant ownership. Kathy G. and her husband decided to make G a reality even after being cautioned that the move might not be such a great idea.

"My husband and I always kid each other that we were the only ones who would do it, but it really was taking a risk. My catering friends tell me just opening a restaurant period, in any location, is crazy, because it's so much more demanding," Kathy G. said. "We did take a chance in doing this, that's for sure."

In reality, the timing to open a restaurant like G in downtown per-

haps couldn't be any better than it is right now. Situated on the corner of 18th Street and 4th Avenue North, G is located in the new One Federal Place office building developed by Sloss Properties and officially opened for business in the summer of 2002. G opened its doors in October, serving lunch for the first few weeks until all proper licenses could be secured and began serving dinner three weeks later.

The building also serves as home to the law firm of Bradley Arant Rose & White—for whom G also provides all catering services—and was developed as a starting point for what many of the area's business leaders, regional planners and real estate developers hope will be a dramatic downtown revitalization. Already creating a buzz for its mix of modern sophistication, Southern charm and expertly prepared cuisine, G could very well become the keystone in a movement to return people to working, shopping, dining and experiencing the cultural landmarks of downtown Birmingham.

"Birmingham is my home. It is my pleasure and honor to be able to open G for the downtown area," Kathy G. said. "We're really being pioneers doing a contemporary fine dining restaurant in downtown. I don't want to say there is no fine dining in downtown Birmingham, but this is certainly the first contemporary, renewed fine dining facility."

For Kathy G., a Birmingham native, that chance to be a part of the downtown's revitalization was a perfect opportunity to do something positive for the city's image and to



Wok Seared Shrimp with Thai Rice Noodles, Asian Vegetables and Coconut Curry Broth.



diversify her company, Kathy G. & Company, Inc, which she has built into a successful catering business over the past 15 years.

"We just felt like there was a lot of potential here. My husband and I are both natives of Birmingham. We grew up coming to downtown. It was where everything was at one time," Kathy G said. "We knew that there are a lot of people working downtown who would like a nice place to go and would like to have some new options."

Initially hoping to capitalize on the business clientele that occupies most of the One Federal Place, G is, at first, a visual treat. The space is sleek and classy and is grounded in the art deco style of 1950s New York merged with the updated stylings of a modern art gallery or museum. This style, of course, fits G to a tee, since Kathy G. has operated the Terrace Café at the

Birmingham Museum of Art for years. However, G doesn't have the stuffy, overly formal atmosphere that you may find in a museum. From the Brazilian cherry hardwood floors, to the bar made of granite and the same cherry wood as the floors, to the artwork focusing on Alabama artists—an important and central theme throughout One Federal Place—G presents urban sophistication with a little down-home Southern hospitality.

Designed by Tammy Cohen of Cohen & Associates, visitors to G are immediately drawn to an elegant and winding staircase made of silver perforated steel connecting the lower dining room with the second floor dining area where you get an eagle's eye view of the open and airy space as well as a great view of the surrounding downtown area. The space's 22-foot loft-like feel is accen-

tuated with several enormous windows stretching from floor to ceiling. Colorful works of art provided by Marilyn Wilson Gallery adorn the interior's white and airy walls and provide pops of color throughout the space.

The fully stocked bar is tucked away in the back of the space directly under the second-floor terrace. Managed by Cheree Dobbs, the bar has already developed a reputation for its funky and whimsical cocktails, such as the "G" Tini, a martini with Belvedere Vodka and Bombay Sapphire, chilled and served with Bleu Cheese stuffed olives, the Orange Crush made with Grey Goose L'Orange and Cointreau and complemented with a splash of orange juice, and the most popular of all, the "G" Cosmo, which is a blend of Bacardi O, Cointreau and cranberry juice.

As for the style of cuisine pre-



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Lemon Meringue Tart.

pared at G, Kathy G. would classify it as a mix of classic simple flavors with some modern touches and styles that accentuate each other, but do not detract and confuse the palette.

"I like dishes that are a little more straight forward; clean and simple in presentation. We do a little bit of design and flair with our presentation, but, personally, I don't like plates that have too many things involved and take away from the main focal point of the dish or that cram too many fusion ideas on the same plate," Kathy G. said. "I like my food to be authentic and to include quality ingredients. That's why we use local purveyors as much as possible. I feel that is very important."

Kathy G. has placed her restaurant in the capable hands of executive

chef Geoffrey Slate, a native of Hartselle, Alabama whose style of cooking can be traced back to his adolescence spent in rural north Alabama. Slate, who comes to G after spending the last five-and-a-half years as the executive chef at the Terrace Café, shares Kathy G.'s penchant for uncluttered, simple, and elegant food.

Slate graduated from the New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier, Vermont, and worked at several restaurants throughout New England before returning to the South in 1993. Since that time, Slate has worked as sous chef Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina—a James Beard award winning restaurant—and then became executive chef at La Residence in Chapel Hill, NC. He then

spent two years as executive chef at Peasant on Piedmont in Atlanta before returning to Birmingham in 1997. After a stint at Jimmy's at Brookwood, Slate came to work as executive chef at Kathy G. & Company, Inc.

Slate incorporates his background of growing up in his grandmother's kitchen, cooking with seasonal vegetables and meats grown by family and friends along with his Classical French training to develop his own contemporary style of Southern cooking. He also brings to the table the styles and flavors of Asian cuisine.

One special dish on the menu at G that is a result of all of Slate's influences is the organic salmon wrapped in rice paper with baby bok choy, udon noodles and shitake dashi.

Slate, who has had the opportunity to work with some of the nation's best Asian chefs over the years, regularly includes this dish on the menu because it is one of his favorites to prepare and is a perfect example of the philosophy at G.

"This particular dish is Japanese inspired. The essence of Japanese food is that is fresh and simple. And it is just ultimately simple, not in an easy sense of the word, but in concept. This is a three-component dish. We take the salmon and wrap it in Thai rice paper. We sear that off and pop it in the oven so that it is nice and crisp on the outside," Slate said. "Then, we use the Japanese buckwheat udon noodles and, in Japanese cuisine, dashi is the broth that they use for everything. It forms the basis of most of their soups. It's got a mushroom flavor and aroma, but it is completely clear. It looks like tea."

The result is a salmon dish unlike any you are likely to encounter in Birmingham. The fish is crisp on the outside and perfect temperature inside and the soup-like broth adds an element of familiarity even as your taste buds are exploring new



ground. The flavors are exciting and comfortable at the same time.

Another defining characteristic of the offerings at G is Slate's reliance on organic products. Not only does Slate use locally grown organic vegetables as much as possible, but he uses organic meats as well. He utilizes free-range chicken in his pan roasted chicken with grilled vegetable cous cous and minted almond yogurt, and even organically grown beef which you will find featured in the char-grilled prime New York Strip with rosemary roasted fingerling potatoes, grilled fennel and cabernet essence.

"Organic products really do make a difference in the flavor, because the organic growers tend to pay more attention to the varieties and they grow them more for flavor than for the fact that they will hold up on a train from California to New York," Slate said. "The varieties are more delicate and have truer flavors. For me it's all about flavor and with organics I just think you get better flavor."

Being trained in the classical French tradition means that Slate believes wine is central to the enjoyment of food. The wine list at G, which Slate himself has selected, reflects that philosophy.


"Every wine on this list is picked because it's good with food. We've priced our wine a little bit differently than most restaurants. We're a lower price point and that's because we believe that wine is an integral part of the dining experience and we really want to put that to the forefront of this restaurant. My ideal is for there to be a bottle of wine on every table," Slate said. "It doesn't have anything to do with sales. It comes from my belief that wine is food and that our wine list matches food very, very well."

Slate advises his diners at G to select a wine based specifically for its contrasting quality to a particular dish, or for its comparable quality.

For example, to accompany the crispy pecan crusted oysters - caught off the Forgotten Coast in Apalachicola, Florida - with Creole butter sauce, Slate suggests two Sauvignon Blancs. He suggests either a 2001

Delaporte Sancerre, from the Loire Valley, or a 2001 Groth from California, but for very different reasons.

"The Delaporte Sancerre is very crisp and citrusy. For this wine, you should think of lemon and seafood. This is a very lemony, citrusy, kind of wine and goes very well with that seafood dish," Slate said. "The other one would be the Groth from California. It's the same grape, same vintage, but completely different style. It has more tree fruit, apples, and pears and the like, than the citrusy Sancerre, so what you're doing is matching the texture of the wine with the texture with the oysters. It's a comparison match, instead of a contrasting match. It's a buttery, creamy Sauvignon Blanc matched with the buttery creamy sauce with the oysters and the creaminess of the oysters themselves."

The dessert menu, as the dinner menu, changes regularly based on seasons and available ingredients. If you're a chocolate-lover than you should definitely not pass up on the chocolate pyramid with cardamom whipped crème. Or, for a more modern flair on a Southern favorite, the lemon meringue tart may just be a perfect ending to a unique downtown experience at G. 

Pan Seared Duck Breast with Potato Leek Gratin and Blackberry Zinfandel Reduction.



## THE DETAILS:

**G**

DISTINCTIVE DOWNTOWN  
DINING

PHONE: 323-1820  
ADDRESS: 1820 4TH AVENUE  
NORTH (ONE FEDERAL  
PLACE BUILDING)

HOURS: LUNCH—MON.-FRI.  
11 A.M.-2 P.M.; DINNER  
BEGINS AT 5 P.M., TUES.-  
SAT.

RESERVATIONS  
PREFERRED

SMOKE FREE