

danielgeorge

Fine dining in the neighborhood by Loyd McIntosh



Key Lime semifreddo with white chocolate sauce and strawberry coulis

there have been many important collaborations throughout Western history, Lennon and McCartney, Orville and Wilbur Wright, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, just to name a few. A good collaboration will likely produce results if and when the people involved put aside their own need for sole recognition and acknowledgment for the greater common good. That spirit of collaboration is at the heart of danielgeorge, a quaint and stylish eatery in the heart of Mountain Brook Village.

Owned and operated by a pair of friends who grew up in similar circumstances in Mountain Brook, George McMillan III and Daniel Briggs have been collaborating nicely for almost six years. The pair of Mountain Brook natives arrived to the point in their lives where they wanted to run their own restaurant a little bit differently than most restaurateurs.

Instead of spending years toiling away in the kitchens of every hot spot in town working their way from line cook to sous chef, the culinary duo's last jobs before opening danielgeorge in August 2000 were as personal chefs. While it was a career choice that offered a cer-

reservations

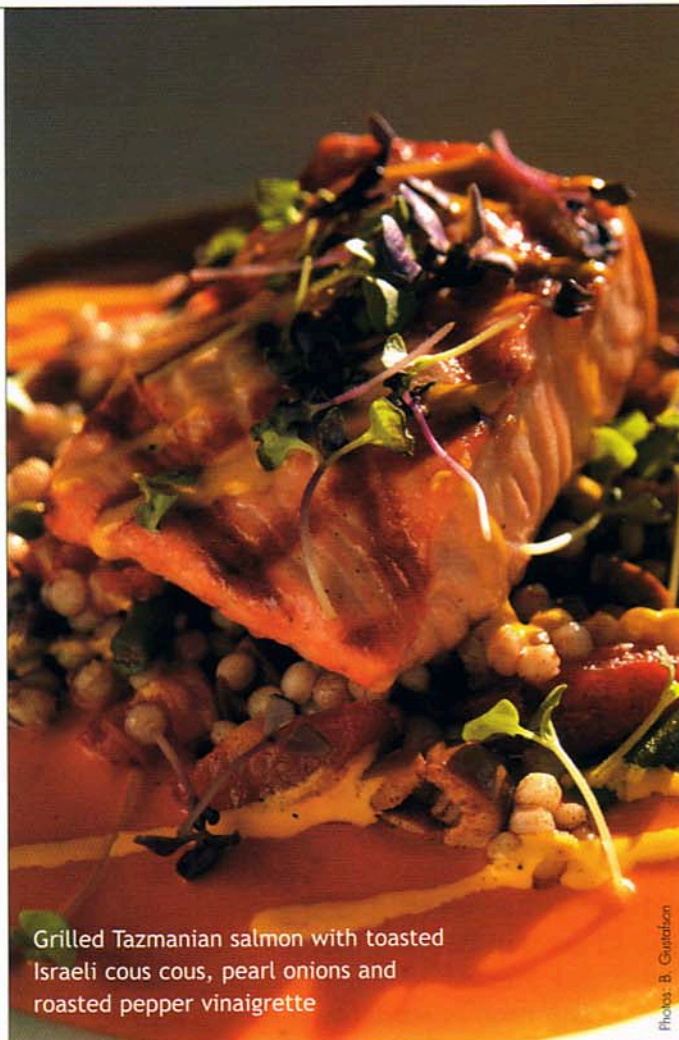
tain level of “high pay and low stress” according to the tongue in cheek McMillan, the experience as personal chefs gave them the freedom to be creative and to acquire a different take on the world of food and customer service.

“It was really fun. We really got to do things that we may not have been able to try working in a restaurant,” McMillan says. “Being a personal chef help hone our skills as far as personal service.”

According to Briggs, working as a personal chef “atomizes the situation and boils it down into one little burst of taking care of a family or an individual. That’s the expression that we wanted to bring forth into danielgeorge—we try to make every table a family.”

One of the primary goals of danielgeorge was to bring dining at a restaurant to as close a personal experience as possible, a goal that is at least partially achieved by the physical dimensions of the restaurant itself. Nestled on the backside of Culver Road in Mountain Brook village, danielgeorge feels small and intimate, despite being made up of three distinct dining rooms. McMillan and Briggs enlisted the help of interior designer Granger Carr to create an elegant but unpretentious tone.

“We looked at lots of different spaces and then I came in here to have dinner one night hearing about it—and the first second I walked in I knew this was exactly where we should locate,” Briggs says. “It has small rooms instead of one big vast



Grilled Tazmanian salmon with toasted Israeli cous cous, pearl onions and roasted pepper vinaigrette

Photo: B. Gaudin

space. It has a comfortable homey feel to it. It looked totally different, but physically it was perfect for what we wanted to do.

“Instead of having a chaotic environment, we tried to condense things. Instead of having lots of small paintings we went for a few big paintings. Instead of having flowers on the table we chose to focus the attention on one big flower arrangement. It’s a stripped down feel so that we could focus on the food,” Briggs adds.

The mood of the restaurant is very relaxed and laid back but avoids giving in to some of the trends in the restaurant business today. For instance, diners won’t here any of

that goofy smooth jazz that seems to permeate many restaurants trying to manufacture ambiance. During a recent visit, diners could hear the second half of Roxy Music’s *Avalon* album, the Soul Survivors “Expressway to Your Heart,” and J.J. Jackson’s “It’s Alright” all while waiting on their appetizers. The music selection alone is worthy of note and reason enough to pop in for dinner.

“This could be a 100 seat restaurant if we wanted it to, but we don’t want to. We like the idea of people being able to have intimate conversations and not being crowded into a room,” McMillan says. “The three dining rooms enabled us to be able to manipulate the space how we wanted to.”

Since opening their doors in August 2000, Briggs and McMillan admit they have come a long way. Initially envisioned as a modern, upscale fine dining restaurant, the restaurant has settled into a comfortable and familiar neighborhood spot that has struck a good balance between outside-the-box thinking and time-honored cooking.

“We started as a fine dining restaurant and we’ve evolved into a neighborhood restaurant,” he adds. “I think we’re still fine dining and we have the best food in Birmingham, but the restaurant really has a neighborhood feel to it. We know most of our customers on a first name basis; so it’s been a wonderful transition from private chef to owning a restaurant, because we’re coming into it pretty programmed for service.”

“We really tried to wow people in



Crispy duck confit

danielgeorge

Phone: 871-3266

Dinner only Tues.-Sat.

Bar opens at 4:30 p.m.

Reservations recommended

www.danielgeorgerestaurant.com

the details


dish, such as Heron out of Napa Valley or a DuMol Russian River for an even more novel approach to danielgeorge's snapper.

One of danielgeorge's most loved appetizers is their lump blue crab cake. A corn-meal based dish, the crab cakes are accompanied by fennel and

Seschwan pepper corns that have been toasted in a dry pan and the ground into a powder. The spice mixture is sprinkled on a fresh filet of tuna and seared in a hot iron skillet.

Next, a portion of lo mein noodles are blanched then tossed in sesame oil and chili flakes before being dipped in hot vegetable oil, forming a crisp Asian-influenced noodle cake. Depending on availability, the staff at danielgeorge will grill a half bok choy or eggplant and plate the dish with a chili sauce that combines soy sauce, hoisin sauce, scallions, ginger, and rice wine vinegar for an aromatic finish to a finely balanced creation.

A recent addition to the menu is the rich and hearty pork scallopini with Hungarian russet potatoes, a perfect example of a seasonal dish best suited for colder weather. For this dish, russet potatoes are coated with salt, pepper and Hungarian paprika then sautéed in a little bit of butter and finished with sour cream and a little bit of pork stock, giving the potatoes a nice creaminess to go along with the paprika.

Next, the pork is seared and slice of Brierre cheese is put on top before it's put under the broiler for color and to melt the cheese. Next, three to four cloves of roasted garlic are added to a pork broth reduction which is made from the bones of the pork loin. The scallopini is garnished with the roasted garlic and the pork stock reduction is placed around the base of the plate. Finally, fresh spinach is sautéed in butter and nutmeg for a perfect touch of winter green. Add a bottle or glass of Tim Adams Shiraz from Australia for great meal at danielgeorge. 

the beginning. For me, everything had to be center of the plate and architectural and things they've never heard of with wordy expressions," Briggs adds. "It's so great to see what we've made of it now because we've realize some of the best accepted dishes that we have are traditional dishes."

However, traditional never means dull or unimaginative at danielgeorge. For instance, when available, diners will find pan seared Gulf red snapper on the menu, certainly a familiar cut of fish at many Birmingham area restaurants. During the fall and winter, Briggs and McMillan will wed the fish with a hash of artichokes and sweet potatoes, along with grilled radicchio lettuce for a unconventional twist on a decidedly conventional Gulf Coast catch. Briggs suggests sampling a bottle or glass of Pinot Noir with this

grilled onion relish and lemon chive beurre blanc sauce that bring balance and interest to the dish. The crab cake itself is tender and meaty with generous amounts of lump blue crab throughout. Combined with a spicy Chardonnay such as a glass of Scarpantoni from Australian wine maker McLaren Vale, the crab cake provides an impressive start to your meal. A zesty white wine offered regularly on the danielgeorge wine menu, this chardonnay is a perfect balance for the tartness of the lemon sauce and the sweetness of the crab.

The selection of entrées at danielgeorge features many original takes on seafood from the Gulf, such as the coriander crusted ahi tuna. Influenced heavily by the flavors and styles of Southeast Asia, Briggs starts with a spice blend of fennel seeds, coriander, black pepper and