

food  
**reservations**



"Duo of Tartares"



# The Focus Is Food

AMBA is unconventional in location and style, but perfectly attuned to understated, minimalist elegance in the dining experience.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

Intent on creating a splash with his sleek, modern and funky restaurant, AMBA, former Culinard instructor Anthony Marini is doing his best to turn the concept of fine dining firmly on its head. AMBA, an acronym for Anthony Marini Birmingham, Alabama, is a quirky and spirited new restaurant that opened for business on the Southside in August of this year.

A 1992 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and a Philadelphia native, Marini learned his chops under renowned chef Jean-Geroges Vongreichien at the Standard Hotel in West Hollywood, California, as well as other high-profile gigs in New York, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. In 2002, Marini arrived in Birmingham to begin what turned out to be a two-year stint as an instructor at Culinard. His methods were, let's just say, a little out of the ordinary.

"I would do things like take the students to live hog slaughters or I might send them over to prep for Chris Hastings at Hot and Hot Fish Club for an afternoon," Marini says.

Marini has brought that maverick attitude to AMBA, a decidedly 21st Century approach to fine dining. Located on 19th Street South between 4th and 5th Avenues South, AMBA is situated in a mixed-use building near UAB hospital.

AMBA is smack in the middle of an urban area that has seen many ups and downs, but has never seen a fine dining restaurant. In the decade since the building was erected, there have been at least four restaurants ranging from Sneaky Pete's to a sushi bar in the space. However, despite some misgivings and warnings from friends that his idea was too risky, Marini forged ahead with plans to

open AMBA.

"We picked this location purposefully, because I wanted to have a feeling of surprise when you walked in," Marini says. "Several people were worried more about the concept than they were about the location where I was putting the concept. 'Is this type of fine dining going to work in this setting?'"

Marini and his business partner and pastry chef Susan Notter designed the restaurant's interior themselves and adheres to Marini's sense of minimalism. The walls are painted orange—in homage to Marini's favorite hockey team, the Philadelphia Flyers—with only three artistic elements hung. There is a window box showcasing Marini's collection of spoons, a framed black and white sketch of the restaurant's interior and a page from his favorite book, *Power to Burn* the biography of Hollywood agent Mike Ovitz. That's it.

The Spartan look of the restaurant was designed to keep the focus on the food, which is, in all ways, up-front-and-center the minute you walk in the door at AMBA. Less than 15-feet from the front door is the restaurant's kitchen. This isn't a grill station where they may fry a few items for show while the real cooking goes on in the back—this is AMBA's real, working kitchen. As

diners walk in they immediately see a flurry of activity and experience the wonderful smells coming from the kitchen before they are seated. Diners are even allowed to take a short tour of the kitchen if they want.

"We have taken the most boring parts of the transaction—the coffee maker, the team, the espresso, the cash register, the credit card machine—and placed them behind the walls here. You don't see any of that and we have taken the most interesting part of what a restaurant is and brought them right to the tables," Marini says.

"In a fine dining setting you would normally never see a kitchen that open, because there is too much to see that would not be part of a fine

Black truffle risotto



Photos: B. Gustafson



# THE DETAILS ON amba

Address: 401 19th Street South

Phone: 581-9599

Hours: Lunch Mon.-Fri., 11:30-2 p.m.

& Dinner Mon.-Thurs., 5-10; Fri.-Sat., 5:30 to 11

Reservations recommended



dining experience," Marini says. "We're taking the fine dining experience and kind of mixing it with hard-core cooking."

Even the bathrooms are notable at AMBA. To add a little bit more whimsy, Marini pipes in books on tape, the *One-Minute Manager*, Japanese language tapes and other odd selections on the restaurant's bathroom audio system.

AMBA also offers a chef's table, a four- to six-personal table set in the kitchen, and gives adventurous diners an opportunity to be up-close-and-personal with Marini and his staff. Marini offers a 10- to 12-course dinner for guests at the chef's table, but with a catch—diners have no idea what they will be served.

Visitors to AMBA will notice other innovations to the fine dining experience. First, when diners are seated they will notice a place setting with only a single fork. This is for a pre-appetizer course called an *amuse*

*bouche*, which is, essentially, a small gift from the chef. A typical *amuse bouche* can be a piece of smoked salmon with a small cucumber salad and gives diners a chance to enjoy a bite to eat before looking at the menu for the first time.

"We don't give them menus as soon as they come in the door. They come in and they sit down and they have a little bit to eat, then we deliver them the menus and order their drinks," Marini says. "Everything we do we try to do with a very minimalist feel to it. We don't try to make it too fancy. It's a very understated elegance."

The menu reflects Marini's minimalist philosophy as well as his interest in food from all over the world. On the menu at AMBA, diners will find Asian, Italian, French and even Southwestern influences displayed in many selections. For instance, Marini offers a Virginia black bass chowder with a South American flair. The chowder contains Peruvian purple potatoes, tarragon and roasted red peppers in a saffron mussel broth and served in a tiny ceramic urn.

Marini's affinity for Asian styles and flavors comes out in the tuna tar-tar, a popular dish of raw tuna served with wakame and sesame chips in a spicy soy-chili sauce. Sometimes featuring salmon instead of tuna, the tartar has become one of the most requested items on the menu and the recipe is a closely guarded secret.

Marini is also interested in specialty produce and products and does his best to incorporate them into his creations. For instance, he uses a special Italian black truffle for a risotto dish that, in the short time

AMBA has been open, has become the most ordered item on the menu.

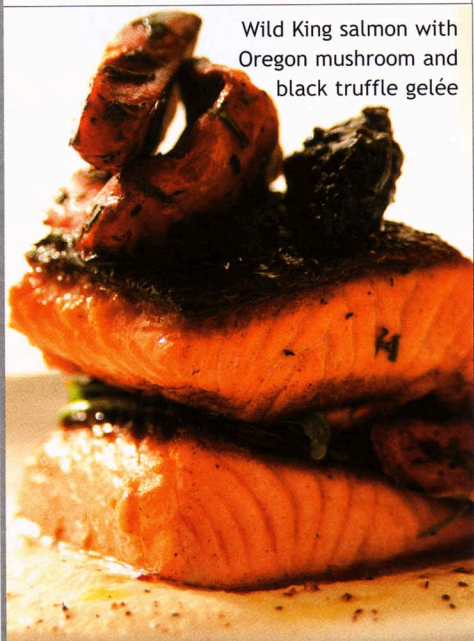
French influences can be seen throughout the menu as well, such as the duck confit which is basically a classic preparation of duck legs that are covered in salt for 36 hours and then cooked in their own fat for eight to 10 hours. "The meat is absolutely falling off the bone and is fantastic," Marini says.

However, in true Marini style, he serves the duck with unconventional sides, including a concoction he refers to as 'West Hollywood Rice-A-Roni,'—essentially white rice with butter, sesame oil and fish sauce.

On the sweet side, Notter's creations include vanilla crème brûlée, a chocolate molten cake with Crème Anglaise and walnut ice cream, and a lemon soufflé cake with hazelnut parfait.

Despite the absence of a bar, AMBA has a complete wine and cocktail service, carrying 16 wines at any time—'16' being Marini's number as a youth hockey player. On the wine list diners will find established labels such as Schug Carneros Chardonnay from California or BR Cohn Silver Label Cabernet Sauvignon, also from California. There are also some less familiar wines on the list, such as 7 Deadly Zins Zinfandel and a groovy sparkling wine called Sofia Coppola Sparkling.

Devised by film director Francis Ford Coppola, Sofia is a dessert champagne served in small pink cans with an accompanying straw. The sight of grown men and women sipping champagne through a straw is perfectly symbolic of the funky and youthful energy at AMBA. **B**



Wild King salmon with  
Oregon mushroom and  
black truffle gelée