

DINING REVIEW

4th & Swift

621 North Ave. N.E., Atlanta

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For a town boasting an inordinate amount of loft space, a big bait and switch comes with the realization that unfinished floors and an exposed ceiling doesn't make a space a loft.

The old Southern Dairies building behind City Hall East (which used to be Sears and Roebuck) does, however, boast the real thing, and it's prime real estate for a restaurant — the B Building has sweeping space, loaded with room and character, and it's big enough for a bulldozer.

Add a burgeoning neighborhood trying to make a comeback and a chef with a popular Atlanta pedigree and a restaurant is born: 4th & Swift.

Jay Swift made his mark on Atlanta's dining scene as the executive chef of one of the city's most beloved Southern enclaves, South City Kitchen on Crescent Avenue, where he worked for eight years. Fried green tomatoes stacked with remoulade and goat cheese sound familiar? South City Kitchen invented it. Swift moved on to Smokejack, then Rainwater in Alpharetta, a suburban destination that closed recently after several years of popularity.

In the dairy's old engine room, Swift has created amid concrete beams and exposed brick a restaurant as open and interesting as the breadth of its space. He offers a farm-to-table concept with a tiered menu that starts with seasonal daily specials such as a chanterelle mushroom and garlic tart in a light, sweet maple-shallot dressing and moves to small plates of local heirloom tomato salad served with tangy, super creamy Vermont feta, olive oil and a sprinkling of pink Himalayan salt. Nothing is affected; everything is fresh, simply prepared and arrives happily at the table from a young, eager staff ready to please. It's hard to ask more of a restaurant.

The colossal space has been divided into two areas — the bar and the dining room — by a chocolate-colored banquette; another bank of seats lines a far wall where exposed brick has been drenched in white. The effect is luminous, and most of the tables in the dining room offer a peek at the large kitchen toward the back of the space.

It's ridiculous to tout signature dishes of a restaurant that opened in mid-June, but Swift's "three little pigs" is destined for that fate: a generous slice of pork loin alongside mild, German-style house-made pork sausage and a fat, juicy, succulent strip of pork belly, the three blissfully joined by a helping of rich, creamy, old-fashioned macaroni and cheese. First prize, hands down.

First runner up? Daintily seasoned braised lamb shoulder layered with sheets of house-made pasta and mushrooms with buttery-flavored ricotta cheese.

I've never been a fan of the heavy, obvious offerings that South City Kitchen serves in all-too-generous portions. So 4th & Swift proves that everyone needs his or her own spot — here, this chef has taken on a muted guise. Swift's seemingly sudden gentle touch with seasonings — especially salt — could make him the subtlest chef in the city. And what a blessing that is when it comes to summery corn soup, where cream and corn collide in a bowl of velvety wonder, without ever getting heavy or overwrought, bedecked with a crispy fried oyster.

Even a dish of Amish chicken, which could so easily prove heavy and autumnal, fares lightly with a sweet maple au jus instead of heavier demi glace. Rounded out with a warm bread salad to serve as a stuffing of sorts, the dish reminded me that summer won't last forever. What joy the seasons bring to the kitchen.

Charcuterie like speck and prosciutto can be had with offerings of cheeses such as cana de cabra (a mild Spanish cheese made of goat's milk) and coupled with a hearty mustard and house-baked pretzel bread, or things could get started with very dill pickles, lightly fried and served with deviled eggs.

Swift's short wine list is well selected and easy to navigate, and the beers offered prove that 4th & Swift takes those who prefer hops to grapes seriously.

For dessert, a moist blueberry crumb cake crowned with lemon sorbet makes a strong showing against profiteroles filled with vanilla ice cream and drizzled with a cognac-laced chocolate sauce. I'd be hard-pressed to choose a winner. So I enjoyed both.

Rarely does a restaurant open with as little fanfare as 4th & Swift — in June, it seemed it was suddenly just here, nestled into its large space — the only conspicuous thing about it — as if it had always been: A born natural.