

ATHENS, GA.

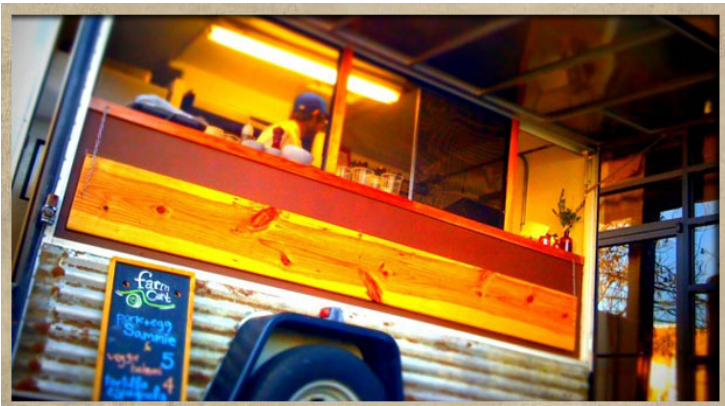
Farm 255 and The National Score Culinary Touchdowns in this College Town

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“It doesn’t *look* like a hotel,” says my friend Dale as we nearly drive past [The Hotel Indigo](#) (*below*) in Athens, Georgia.

In fact, its architecture reminds me of a covered bridge, with its steep pitched roof and long, narrow shape. Yet this modest-looking hotel has quite a pedigree: it’s the first Gold LEED-certified hotel in InterContinental Hotel Group’s portfolio of 4,500 properties scattered throughout the world.



Athens, of course, is home to the University of Georgia’s *Bull Dawgs* and the B-52s, both of which are referenced onsite: canines (and their owners) get their own Happy Hour and framed posters of local musicians hang in the rooms, which have a vaguely 70s retro vibe with a color scheme of soothing greens, blues, gold and tangerine. The Madison Bar offers a

grapefruit cosmopolitan which is pleasantly puckery. The in-room coffee is from local roaster Jittery's Joe's and, along with the homespun *Foxfire* volume, is the chic Guide to Athens, a little black book for this town that successfully marries the traditional with the cheeky.

Over the past decade, Atlantans (like this food writer) have hungrily watched as Athens came into its own as a culinary destination, thanks in large part to Chef Hugh Acheson, who put Five and Dime on the national culinary map. But my focus this weekend is on dinner at [Farm 255](#), of which I have heard great things. Athens foodies are a fierce lot; they give football fans a run for their money—and an excuse to skip tailgating for a table at this unpretentious eatery. (See my earlier review of [The Four Coursemen](#) <http://www.johnmariani.com/archive/2010/101128/index.html>).

The folks behind Farm 255 are the founders and farmers of Full Moon Farms, a five-acre organic/biodynamic farm in nearby Watkinsville; they also run Moonshine Meats, a livestock operation that raises cows, pigs and chickens. A restaurant is a logical extension of their agricultural efforts. They also run a mobile Farm Cafe (*below*).



The rustic, unpretentious space—anchored by an open kitchen—is immediately welcoming. There's great lighting and the exposed duct work, iron trusses and wooden beams give it a European feel. In my dealings, Athenians seem to share an appealing nonchalance that is in stark contrast to the toadying of too many big-city enterprises. Stellar ingredients and knowledgeable service exudes a quiet

confidence. You don't feel the effort, but the results are evident. The cocktail list shows creativity. I order a pistachio Manhattan made with Maker's Mark, Dumante pistachio liqueur and Carpano Antica Formula vermouth, which is smooth and satisfying. Good thing: the menu is mouth-watering.

“This is a safe place to be experimental,” says our server, with an air that manages to be both breezy and informed, hip and kind, as she refills our water glasses and places homemade yeast rolls on the table. We start with pork trotters, which I wouldn't order just anywhere, but here they look like mini crab cakes, which makes them more palatable to Dale, who's suddenly become a bit timid, recoiling slightly as they are presented. But after his first hesitant bite, his body language changes. Breaded in panko, they are velvety inside and pleasantly textured. In a word: delicious.

The butcher board is easily a full meal for two, a “mighty plenty” as Dale declares, and an excellent introduction to the kitchen--and a hell of a value at \$18. Besides chicken liver mousse, (seasonal) apple sausage, pastrami and champagne pâté, there are local apple slices, hard-boiled eggs, pickled radishes and red cabbage sauerkraut. Something was rendered slightly sweet by the addition of Christmas spices, but I don't recall if it was the pâté or mousse.

I've lived for nearly 20 years in Georgia and never seen clams from this coastal hamlet, so I am excited to order mussels and Sapelo Island clams. They prove irresistible: big and sweet, while the house-smoked andouille sausage provides a dose of heat. We dip grilled bread into the broth, swimming with leeks. The only slight misstep of the evening was the fried oyster salad, the Apalachicola beauties slightly over-breaded, obscuring their briny perfume. Braised pork shoulder delivered big, in-your-face flavor, the pork cooked with a hint of cinnamon and the *polenta* creamy and robust. A side broccoli rabe added to the dish's earthy character.



We ended the evening with hands-down, the best ever pecan pie either of us has ever tasted. Rather than the cloying, syrupy versions most restaurants (or mothers) offer, this one was dense with nut meat, almost black in color. It was modest-looking—one might even say, sweetly homely—and topped with vanilla whipped cream. From the first bite, it revealed itself to be sweet and salty and crumbly—all in the same forkful. A divine ending to a near-perfect meal.

The following morning, before we head back for Atlanta, we pay homage to Atcheson with brunch at [The National](#), (*left*) a bustling, casual place serving Mediterranean- inspired food, where colorful laminated oilcloths and fresh flowers top the tables. We start with Bloody Marys goosed with Guinness. "Egg in a hole" is a tweak on the classic "toad in a hole," a tiny local duck egg nestled in Pullman toast, topped with frisée and radish salad and a sliver of Berkshire pork belly for lusciousness. The spiced-right lamb pita comes with crisp-fried *patatas brava* and dollops of tomato jam and horseradish. Dale lived in Portugal and praises the silver-dollar sized custard cakes with cinnamon whipped cream. But it's the parsnip cake that is truly revelatory: off-sweet, with the winter root vegetable grated into it for texture, partnered with cranberries for tartness and eggnog sauce for richness.

Farm 255 is open nightly; starters from \$3-12; entrees from \$14-25; and desserts, \$6; hours: Tues-Thur: 5:00-10:30 p.m.; Fri-Sat: 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Sun: 11 a.m. – 2 p.m. and 5:30-9:30 p.m.

The National is open daily for lunch and dinner; small plates from \$3-6; big plates from \$9-13; desserts: \$8.