

JUNE

DINING

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Perfect Combo

Comfort food with a gourmet twist is served up at 24 Diner. One of its most popular dishes is the chicken and waffles, which strikes just the right sweet-and-savory balance. Page 158



Up Late, Upscale

CHEF-INSPIRED COMFORT FOOD THAT TAKES DINER CUISINE TO A NEW LEVEL

BY LAURA KELSO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESSA ESCOBEDO BARBA

Every city worth its foodie chops needs a diner, a place where you can order breakfast and down strong black coffee 24 hours a day. And yes, Austin already has a few haunts fitting that bill. But where can you sip espresso while savoring a spinach, roasted cherry tomato and goat cheese frittata at 1 a.m.? For the past six months, appreciative diners have been doing just that at the aptly named 24 Diner.

The restaurant sits at Austin's ground zero, the busy intersection of Sixth and Lamar, in the former home of Waterloo Ice House. Bounded on two sides by windows, it has a bright, airy feel and a clean, modern interior. Bare lightbulbs hang from the vaulted ceiling, all the better to see in the wee hours. "When we first saw this location, it screamed 24-hour restaurant," says Billy Caruso, one of the diner's co-founders.

The eatery's *raison d'être*? "Chef-inspired comfort food whenever you want it." That tagline sums up 24's menu, a mix of American basics, many of which have been turned up a notch or two, verging on the tragically hip.

This is not to say that the fare isn't hearty and solid, sometimes even transcendent; it's just not what your grandmother might have cooked. Take 24's charred bitters, a salad that derives its name from the radicchio that has been charred in cast iron before being tossed with arugula, pine nuts, seared



Charred bitters



Executive Chef Andrew Curren

mushrooms and Gorgonzola. The salad is enveloped in a rich shallot dressing, more redolent of haute cuisine than 4 a.m. grub.

Then there are the burgers and sandwiches. The burgers are ground in-house from 100 percent all-natural brisket, which Executive Chef Andrew Curren

says offers exceptionally "moist and flavorful" results. The applewood-smoked bacon Gorgonzola burger is just one in an all-star lineup that includes a patty melt on sourdough toast with Gruyère cheese and caramelized onions, and a roasted mushroom burger served with goat cheese, arugula and a lemon vinaigrette.

With ground brisket this stellar, it's hard to imagine how the veggie burger could compete. But this vegan version holds its own, with its noteworthy composition of grated beets, lentils, rice and mushrooms. A roasted tomato on top lends a smokiness to the whole endeavor, while flaxseed meal and pumpkin seeds ensure it's brimming with protein.

Even the normally mundane chicken sandwich gets the gourmet treatment; flavorful pulled chicken breast is tucked into a baguette, slathered with goat cheese and anointed with avocado, arugula and a roasted tomato vinaigrette.



Applewood-smoked
bacon Gorgonzola burger




Before you cry foul that this is not diner cuisine, consider 24's chicken and waffles, one of the eatery's most popular around-the-clock menu items. Thick, deep-pocket waffles are iron-pressed to order, while real maple syrup imparts a spike of sweetness to the crispy, boneless fried chicken, which itself has been marinated in buttermilk and hot sauce for 24 hours. The acclaimed Roscoe's House of Chicken 'n Waffles in Los Angeles has got nothing on 24 Diner.

Like most round-the-clock haunts, 24 is not in the business of helping customers count calories. Portions are hearty, generous and often difficult to resist. A case in point: 24's French fries. What's their secret? "We just do fries right," says Caruso. "We cut Burbank potatoes, soak them in cold water for 24 hours, blanch them, dry them for 12 hours, then fry them to order in a zero percent trans-fat canola oil and season with kosher salt." Other sides such as mashed sweet potatoes and macaroni and cheese are equally Herculean in size, though arguably less addictive.

And what better way to complement your carbs and salt than with a milkshake? Chocolate and vanilla flavors seem positively humdrum next to roasted banana and brown sugar, peanut butter and chocolate, or even the diner's strawberry shake made from sweet local Oak Hill Farms strawberries and Glenview Farms vanilla ice cream.

In scale and in spirit, 24 Diner recalls an ambitious "farm-to-table" cafe, an angle that the owners should consider touting more vigorously. Who knew that more than half of the diner's produce is currently sourced from farmers, ranchers and food artisans within a 150-mile radius? "The fact that we're seasonal and local in focus is not just a hoax," says Curren. "We're really trying to support these farmers, even during the winter months."

Caruso, like Curren, studied his craft at the Culinary Institute of America. After their studies, both men spent time traveling the world and exploring global cuisines. Curren cut his teeth in New York City at Tabla (under restaurant great Danny Meyer), then went on to become the chef de cuisine at Barbuto.

"Our travels and diverse food experiences are what have given us the desire to share our ideas with Austin," says Caruso. "We're trying to stay true to the concept of seasonality," adds Curren. "It's that anticipation of what comes next that keeps things interesting." 

CRITIC'S PICKS

DRINK: Roasted banana and brown sugar milkshake

APPETIZER: French fries

ENTREE: Chicken and waffles

DESSERT: Seasonal pie

THE FACTS

CUISINE: Farm-to-table diner cuisine

PROPRIETORS: Executive Chef Andrew Curren and Chef Billy Caruso

AMBIANCE: Casual, bright, airy

PRICES: \$9.95 to \$16.95

HOURS: Open around the clock

PARKING: Lot in front

ADDRESS: 600 N. Lamar Blvd.

PHONE: 472-5400

WEB: 24diner.com