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## French restaurant Allium hits all the right spots

Straightforward cuisine is front and center

*By Will Ayers*  
*THE TENNESSEAN*

### Review

There are a lot of things I liked about eating at <http://www.alliumnashville.com/> Allium, but the best part of a meal there is when the feeling wells up inside you that these folks just *get it*. The cookery is nearly always eye-opening, the sauces especially bold and inventive. Service is casual but polished in all the right places. The wine list is, in a literal sense, adorable: an affordable tour of fine French producers, few bottles above \$50. You can easily have the kind of meal here that stretches late into the night, without meaning to.

And then there's the view. Rather than looking south toward downtown, as you do at Jay Luther and Chris Lowry's other restaurant, <http://www.germantowncafe.com/> Germantown Cafe, you're looking straight west across the river. It's a plum sight after dark, one of the best skyline views in any local dining room. Most seats in the house have a good angle on the vista, and that's presumably why there are absolutely no decorations inside. It tends to steer conversations and eyeballs all in one direction.

That is, until the food arrives, starting with the marvelous crusty rolls, followed by the simple but well-dressed salads that come with every entrée. Not many restaurants of this ilk dole out free salad anymore, but here it's done absolutely right.

The house mustard vinaigrette is especially marvelous, and it embodies the main reason why Allium is so good so much of the time. It presents its marquee ingredient with a winsome boldness and doesn't beat around the bush with superfluous flourishes. In every bite, there's the familiar mustard seed tang, but softened a bit by the vinegar and a stroke of sweetness. Jump ahead to the peppercorn demi-glace on the steak frites: It's shockingly good, boiling over with earthiness and zest. Along with the tender steak, well-charred on the outside edges, it runs away with the show to the point the fries seem underdressed for the party.

I tasted this again in the potato gnocchi with a bacon-pear cream sauce. If there is a dish in this town that better exalts the joys of smoky, fatty pork, let it be named, because I've tasted none finer. The bacon in this case is Benton's, which is wrought by a fell alchemy of smoke and pig in East Tennessee. It's become one of those brand names bandied about on local menus, and for good reason: When our economy is finally licked and our paper money becomes worthless, this bacon is good enough to serve as currency. The tender-as-clouds gnocchi are the perfect vehicle for it, drawing out every facet of its wild glory, while the pear lays down a rumbling, dulcet backdrop, the John Paul Jones to the bacon's Jimmy Page. It made a fork-licking fool out of me.

And Allium certainly has a wine list for these times. It's French through-and-through, and only three bottles cost more than \$50. There are excellent, affordable blends to choose from in spades, and the by-the-glass selection is extensive. When you really get down to it, picking a wine here is fun. That's

how it should be. The servers I talked with were very helpful and well-versed in the restaurant's selection, besides giving off a sharp demeanor in general.

On the appetizer front, the plate of steamed mussels is generous and luxuriant, the broth briny and the shellfish plump. A tart of sweet-but-tart and creamy goat cheese with red onions was also exemplary. I thought the marinated chicken livers suffered from too much vinegar, though.

The kitchen's deft touch with mustard popped up again in a sauce crusted over a filet of salmon over beluga lentils with garlic jus. The fish was cooked to the precise point where the saucy rind had become crunchy, but the flesh just beneath was moist and pink. The muted tones of the lentils were a fine counterpoint.

In the case of the roast duckling, the crispy skin, moist meat and a whispered orange glaze were all treats in their own right, as were the golden mashed potatoes that came in lieu of the usual cauliflower (the kitchen was out that night).

Allium does a grand croque monsieur with shaved, salty ham, knockout slices of brioche, warm gruyere and a silky roux. You're already going for it, so might as well make it a madame; the fried egg is worth the minimal extra cost.

It's wise to hold off on finishing those entrees. Ask for boxes (biodegradable paper-fiber — a thoughtful touch) and lunge right at dessert. Your options change from night to night; I particularly liked the crème brulee, whose thick rind of burnt sugar was roasted a little past the safe medium, unlocking unusually malty, crystalline notes. A tripartite cake of chocolate and pistachio mousse was also delicious, if more understated on the sugar.

Even after the sweets are cleared away, it's hard to leave, with so many memories of a fine meal wafting around. That westward view takes on yet another role, this time as backdrop for reflection, or maybe just a sight to digest by.

You know, there really is something to a skyline through plate glass. That, and those gnocchi.

## Additional Facts

ALLIUM

**Address:** 501 Main St., 242-3522, [www.alliumnashville.com](http://www.alliumnashville.com)

**Hours:** Lunch: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; Brunch: 10:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday.

**Payment:** Major credit cards accepted

**Reservations:** Recommended for peak times

**Alcohol:** Full bar

**Food:** Classic but uncomplicated French

**Cost:** Most entrees under \$20

**Kids' menu:** No

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