

Allium breathes life into East Nashville's 5th & Main development

By Carrington Fox

published: February 05, 2009

Photo: Eric England



Photo: Eric England



Photo: Eric England



Photo: Eric England

Chris Lowry and Jay Luther bring a consistent point of view to their restaurants. At both their flagship Germantown Café and their fledgling Allium, that point of view is about a mile from downtown with a glimpse of the Capitol. After debuting to great acclaim five years ago with Germantown Café, due north of the state seat, the team has swung the compass east to launch Allium in the new 5th & Main mixed-use development across the Cumberland. Mirroring that eastern trajectory, Luther and Lowry also shifted the culinary influence from America to France, while attempting to create a neighborhood-restaurant feel and price point similar to what made their original endeavor a dining landmark.

Like Germantown Café, Allium boasts a sweeping view of downtown, a menu of manageable length and a shamelessly cheese-draped crock of hearty French onion soup. Also like its predecessor, Allium is a restaurant run by pros, with deliberately crafted food delivered by well-trained and courteous staff. Housed in an architectural showcase that integrates stone, glass, leather, concrete, wood and metal into an ambitious design, it's a local independent effort that you want to see succeed. But since Allium opened during the dreary holiday lull of a historic economic downturn, in a new residential development still more than 95 percent vacant, it remains to be seen whether Luther and Lowry's second venture will engender the same affection as their first.

Already there is a lot to like about Allium, which takes its title from the family of aromatic plants—including garlic and onions—that forms the foundation for much of French cuisine. First of all, the room is stunning, flanked on two sides by floor-to-ceiling views, wrapped around a monumental bar of sleek pulverized quartz and illuminated by a constellation of delicate fluorescent lights. It is very much a see-and-be-seen layout, where attorneys from Nashville's white-shoe law firms stride between tables at lunch to share greetings and a mutual astonishment that East Nashville is—can you believe it?—so close to downtown.

The succinct lunch menu offers a modestly priced array of salads, sandwiches and heartier meals with an unpretentious hint of Francophilia. Chef Luther had us at croque monsieur—a



Details:

CROQUE
MONSIEUR WITH
FRIES \$10 FRENCH
ONION SOUP AND
SALAD \$9
STEAK FRITES
WITH SALAD \$18
ROASTED
CHICKEN \$17
GNOCCHI with
BACON-PEAR
CREAM \$6

Subject(s):

[ALLIUM](#), [501 Main Street](#),
[242-3522](#)

traditional ham-and-cheese sandwich lathered with mornay sauce. A croque madame is also available, which adds a fried egg to the sandwich. Luther packs his croques with Black Forest ham and gruyère between thick slices of sweet brioche from Provence Breads & Café. (Luther bakes his own chocolate-chip brioche for the French toast at Sunday brunch.) While all the components were tasty in and of themselves, the combined sandwich was dry, and we left a pile of lightly grilled crusts on the plate.

Steak frites delivered perhaps the best value and most satisfying meal, with slices of *saignant* beef in a rich peppercorn demi-glace and a pile of perfectly crisp fries for \$14.

We also enjoyed the oven-roasted pork loin with mashed potatoes and wilted spinach. (Someone at our table objected to the strength of the garlic flavor in the potatoes, a gripe that was far from unanimous and a comment that would surely amuse Lowry. One appeal of choosing the name Allium, he says, was that so often restaurant guests ask a server if a meal can be made without garlic or onions because they dislike the pungent aromatics; the graceful scallion of Allium's logo hangs like a herbaceous skull and cross bones for such finicky customers.)

The warm trout salad could just as easily go under the entrée listings, as the pan-seared plank of tender fish was an ample meal. The fish floated on an inky bed of beluga lentils, which added texture to the medley of spinach and walnuts and whose resemblance to caviar created an intriguing pun with the trout.

In dutiful French style, Allium offers an omelet of the day. Ours was loaded with bacon and cheddar, but the egg itself was flat and rubbery, leaving us to scrape out the savory innards.

Several items do double duty on the lunch and dinner menu, including the goat cheese-and-red onion tart filled with creamy chèvre and nearly molten caramelized onions; the mustard-crusting salmon with lentils and garlic jus; and the shrimp-avocado pasta. The last of these made us shudder at the thought of cool avocado over warm pasta, but, to our surprise, the dish took on a comforting creamy texture as the warmed avocado bits "buttered" the al dente black-pepper linguine.

At lunch the shrimp-avocado pasta costs \$14, while at dinner it's \$17. The lunch portion of mustard-crusting salmon is \$14, and it's \$19 at dinner.

While the higher dinner prices include a salad, such cost differentials inevitably made us cast a more critical eye—or palate, as it were—on the evening meal. In the case of pork Milanese, for example, the breaded pounded chop with a side of mushy mac-and-cheese was pale and dry, accented by an incongruous drizzle of basil-infused olive oil that added little to the presentation beyond a much-needed dash of color. The \$17 meal was less interesting than

the \$9 pork loin on the lunch menu, and it circled our table virtually uneaten.

Our most expensive disappointment was the \$29 orange duckling. Two joints of roasted duck were positioned over a bed of roasted cauliflower with gruyère, vaguely resembling a half-submerged mallard with his tail in the air. The crisp golden skin melted unctuously across the tongue with a hint of citrus, but the meat was overcooked and gray with little on the plate to break up the monotony. The highlight of the meal was the tender roasted cauliflower accented by sharp molten cheese. (When the majority of the duck went back to the kitchen uneaten, our server returned very graciously to ask if there had been a problem with the preparation. In its defense, the meal was exactly what the menu promised. It was our mistake to expect duck *breast* more reminiscent of medium-rare steak. Even so, next time we'll opt for the \$17 roast chicken, which sounds promising if it arrives with the same golden crisp skin.)

Similarly, the scallops Parisienne were exactly what the menu said—and more: Unexpectedly large and tender scallops were baked in a bath of bubbling parmesan cream and surrounded by house-made potato chips for dipping. The scallops were delicately prepared so they barely required chewing, and the cheese sauce was comforting and rich, prompting one member of our group to ask, "It's good for what it is, but do you *do* that to scallops?"

The positive implication of that question is that Luther & Co. can really cook and that a little tweaking is all that's required to deliver a more consistent experience. The starters menu offers strong evidence that such adjustment is well within reach. Had we stuck with the appetizers at dinner, we would likely have had a more satisfying experience. Gnocchi with bacon-pear cream sauce was a decadent medley of pillowy pasta from local Al Fresco pasta shop and Benton's bacon lolling about in a subtly fruit-tinged sauce, which left us daubing our plates with bread to get the last traces of salty cream. Escargots wrapped in a golden-brown pouch of flaky pastry, with a garlicky blend of cream cheese, ricotta, gruyère and mozzarella, made an elegant overture with a familiar French tone. The mascarpone-parmesan polenta cake was remarkable for its creamy-smooth texture and its delicate marriage of sweet cheese with garlic-infused chunky Roma tomato sauce.

We'll go back to Allium. It's the kind of restaurant we like, where the staff is nice, the kitchen can cook, and there's a comfortingly human element in the operation, constantly striving to improve the restaurant. Luther says he's moving some items around on the menu, adding some vegetarian options and saving up his duck fat for deep-frying the frites. We await with bated breath his next experimental cheesecake à la the controversial one-time banana-curry combo at Germantown. We also look forward to local artwork arriving soon on the austere grey-green walls, and a little sunshine will improve the ambiance during the day. Warm weather will herald the opening of two patios, and if all goes according to plan, the residences upstairs will supply a critical mass of urban dwellers to share Lowry and Luther's endearing point of view.

Allium serves lunch and dinner Tuesday through Friday, dinner on Saturday and brunch on Sunday.

Email cfox@nashvillescene.com, or call 615-844-9408.