

DINING REVIEW

BY WYATT WILLIAMS



Community Smith serves a Sumac Smoked Chicken dish with braised carrot and brown butter streusel. WWW.BECKYSTEINPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

'Modern meatery' does it well

Chef Micah Willix is at the helm for Community Smith.

COMMUNITY SMITH

866 W. Peachtree St., Atlanta

★★★½ (very good)

Oxtail, short rib, spare rib, pork shoulder, lamb shoulder, chicken wing.

Despite what that sounds like, these are not the cuts available right now at your neighborhood butcher. Instead, this is a sampling of the available meats at Community Smith, a polished new restaurant at the base of the Renaissance Atlanta Midtown Hotel that calls itself a "modern meatery."

Even the mushrooms are cooked in bone marrow and taste as if they have been swimming in a pool of beef bones.

Community Smith is a Midtown homecoming of sorts for chef Micah Willix, who earned his reputation in Atlanta at Ecco, just a few blocks over.

Back in 2011, Willix left Ecco to venture out on his own and start Latitude, a small restaurant in Phipps Plaza that aspired to serve a global menu. I remember my one meal at Latitude fondly, but the place was plagued by a number of problems, including that odd mall location and a badly ventilated kitchen that kicked plumes of smoke into the dining room. It closed less than a year after opening.

The menu that Willix has put together at Community Smith is more reserved, focusing on a Southern-ish style of New American cuisine. It has smoked chicken, turnip greens, grilled steelhead trout, roasted cauliflower, romaine and radish salad, and a familiar double-stack cheeseburger that, along with white subway tile, is now required by city restaurant code. (Or so it seems.)

The rest of the menu is fleshed out by meat-centric dishes – pork shoulder simmered in tomatoes, smoked short rib and potatoes, a bavette steak sliced over herbaceous salsa.

All of this is served in a decidedly immodest dining room, a place where lamps dangle from 20-foot high ceilings, booths are wrapped in brown leather, and a polished metal sculpture of a fox is poised as if in mid-run. A cube of industrial-style windows has been added to create a more intimate room within the room, but the place still feels cavernous. On my first

visit, a rack of flatware fell off a shelf and caused the kind of echoing commotion usually reserved for machine guns. They might consider softening up the room.

Unlike the dining room, the menu's best moments are the comforting, casual pleasures. The oxtail toast, served in a tender pile with a pleasantly mild piri piri sauce and a sprinkling of aged gouda, is rich and warming, a small plate that's actually easy to share with a few fork-stabbing friends. The duck pate, likewise served on toast, is balanced to a perfect pitch of rich and bright by a simple, elegant salad of celery leaves and Satsuma supremes. Those bone marrow mushrooms are a dark, umami-bomb pleasure.

Surprisingly, my meals at Community Smith never left me in the comatose meat-sweats that rich dishes like this sometimes cause. The portions here are, I think, carefully reserved, as is Willix's hand with the salt. The porchetta sandwich, a traditional gut bomb if there ever was one, is pleasantly lightened by a layer of sweet chutney and a thin brushstroke of aioli. Pork belly rarely tastes this balanced. Other light dishes, including a grilled filet of steelhead trout and simple, small salads, do a good job balancing out the heavier ones. This is good menu writing.

Still, Community Smith is far from flawless. The smoked chicken I had arrived with limp skin, dry meat, and barely a trace of smoke to justify that condition. The smoked short rib was notably smokier, but drenched in a gravy and mashed potatoes arrangement that nearly obscured the meat's flavor.

I often found myself finding minor quibbles in the dishes at Community Smith, even the ones I liked. Too many dishes arrive drenched in butter. The toast that structures some of the best dishes can arrive soggy.

These complaints are best soothed over by a drink from the bar. The drink program is as familiar as the white subway tiles and double stack cheeseburger, with a handful of classic cocktails, a nice selection of bourbon and wine, and a thoughtful list of beers. Still, there are surprises, like the old fashioned, which the bar here serves up with a bittersweet hint of blood orange

and a single cherry. It's a tasty tipple, gussied up beyond the typical treatment.

The bar, in fact, was the place that I felt most comfortable. Tucked away to the side of that enormous and, it must be said, often empty dining room, the white marble and stools are just the kind of place that might be nice to drop in for a drink and a bite while staying at the hotel next door. If I had a room, I'd do just that.



Community Smith offers a handful of classic cocktails, including the Manhattan, a nice selection of bourbon and wine, and a thoughtful list of beers. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS BY WWW.BECKYSTEINPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

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ABOVE:
Community
Smith has an
upscale and
comfortable
feel in its din-
ing room.

LEFT: Com-
munity
Smith's Steel-
head Trout
is served
with radish,
citronette
and toasted
almond.

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★★★