

FIG: A Natural Delight

by Mitchell Anderson

A spontaneous trip to Charleston for New Year's Eve presented a problem: where to ring in the new year. How can you possibly find the right setting to say goodbye to 2006 and welcome 2007? Was it even going to be possible to find a seat at a decent restaurant that late in the game?

Since we had never driven the short four and a half hours to Charleston before (now that I have, I don't know what took us so long), we were starting from zero. However, what we discovered is that there is no shortage of Atlantans who have great affection for Charleston and are not afraid to point you in the right direction.

In the 24 hours prior to our departure, I asked about six different people for suggestions on where to go for New Year's Eve. Every single one of them put Restaurant FIG at the top of their list. One of my vendors at MetroFresh (my Atlanta cafe), in fact, said FIG was absolutely the best. And while I have heard since that FIG does not stand for "food is good," I don't believe it.

Everything about the experience, from the first phone call inquiring about New Year's Eve festivities to the midnight champagne toast, was perfect. I called FIG on the Thursday before the reservation was going to be next to impossible. The delightful hostess assured me that a 9:30 table for two wouldn't be a problem and that Chef Mike Lata had created a five course tasting menu for the occasion. I booked it right away – and I think it was



to the art on the walls was just right. I usually don't take special notice of a restaurant's artwork, since I am usually focused on the menu and can't wait to eat, but the art at FIG is worth noting. The pieces look like color washes in sort of a Mark Rothko vein, but

Lata created this amazingly delicate plate. I crave the clean tastes of real food, uncluttered by extraneous and unnecessary extras and Lata delivered in every way.

For the main event, we shared a red wine braised short rib that must have been cooking for three days. I am not usually a fan of slow-cooked meat, but this beef short rib was a gift from the gods. The flavors of the red wine braising liquid infused the meat with a finesse that you usually only dream about.

When rack of lamb is on the menu, I can't resist; it's my favorite "out for dinner" choice. Lata seasoned two perfectly sized lollipops of lamb and served them on sauteed spinach with green olives. I was in culinary heaven. This is the way eating should and can be in this country. Who knew you could go to Charleston and be carried away by perfect food?

Just now, as I write this, I am reminded why I love food. It inspires, it comforts, it challenges. Lata, in my opinion, and apparently in the opinion of many others, has just the right touch to create an evening that lasts in the memory and lingers on the palate. I can't wait to return to Charleston and to FIG to experience the "regular" menu. I am sure it will be the first stop on my next and hopefully frequent visits to Charleston.

FIG is located at 232 Meeting Street in Charleston. For more information, call (843) 805-5900 or visit www.eatfig.com.

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the best decision I made in 2006, because by the time 2007 came along, we had eaten one of the best meals in recent memory.

The Website, www.eatfig.com, promises an unpretentious neighborhood restaurant that emphasizes an affordable regional menu. Not fussy, just good. They totally delivered.

We arrived promptly for our reservation, dressed upscale casual, and immediately felt welcome. The hostess remembered our conversation about dinner and welcomed us like old friends (I am not making this up).

As we were led to our table in the main room, I couldn't help but notice that the lighting was softly glowing over about 30 tables of New Year's Eve revelers. My "source" in Atlanta had mentioned that the restaurant invited you in with a warm decor, like a wash of sunset light on a perfect summer evening. Everything from the table setting

I believe they are photographs of landscapes that have been wonderfully colorized to evoke near and far away places. Either way, I loved them and wanted to bring one home.

We were served a complimentary glass of champagne as we sat and were able to have a pre-midnight toast. Lata's New Year's Eve tasting menu was perfect. A delicate oyster started the meal, which should be the case with every New Year's Eve dinner. For the second course we chose an heirloom beet salad, which was incredible. We also sampled a silky smooth lobster bisque. As promised, the flavors of both the salad and the bisque were pure and not over done – my favorite kind of food. We also couldn't resist the lobster poached in butter served over the softest polenta I have ever tasted.

The serving sizes for the tasting menu were just right with every bite filled with rich, subtle flavors. As a chef myself, I was hungry to learn how