

PACES 88

ATLANTA

St. Regis Hotel, 88 West
Paces Ferry Road
404-563-7910
paces88.com

You've always got to be careful feeling too impressed by posh hotel dining rooms. Skittish managers tend to be so terrified by less-than-stellar receipts that they'll panic, shut a place down, revamp it, then contract a celebrity chef to stick his name on the door and drop by twice a year to collect his check.

I hope the St. Regis management (which put less-than-packed Alain Ducasse-run restaurants in its New York City and D. C. hotels) knows just how wonderful Paces 88 is. Its culinary team melds French-American and southern culinary traditions into seamless cuisine that befits both the hotel's deluxe trappings and Atlanta's eminence as a southern city. The ideas of chef Mark Alba and executive chef Jonathan Jerusalmi are the opposite of trendy: fat sea scallops with a garlicky crawfish brandade, pea ragout, and balsamic butter; five-onion soup of exceptional sweetness bubbling with Gruyère; a combination of soft, fatted duck confit, sweet white shrimp, wild-mushroom grits, and a cabernet reduction. It's all served in an elegant dining room—grand arches, chandeliers, plenty of marble, walls of wines, natural light—with service that's warm and comfortable, never pretentious. The friendliness of the place pairs well with a kitchen that carries off crab-shack fare with the same finesse as classic French cuisine.



THE ESQUIRE RESTAURANT HALL OF FAME

ALFRED PORTALE, CHEF

Great chefs are starting to resemble good right fielders: As soon as they gain a following, they're off to a bigger restaurant in a trendier neighborhood, trying to make a name for themselves before one day ending up in Las Vegas (or on the Yankees). This is not Alfred Portale's game. Since 1985, Portale has been manning the kitchen at the consistently excellent Gotham Bar and Grill in Manhattan, turning out food that is astonishing in both its flavor and its ability to satisfy—roasted lobster from Maine, crisp vegetables from the farmer's market up the street, a legendary moist chocolate cake. He opened a Gotham Steak in Miami last year, where he goes when he needs some sun, but for most of the past quarter century, he's been on East Twelfth Street, winning multiple stars and prestigious James Beard Awards like clockwork and, more important, making and constantly reinventing the kind of bold American cuisine he helped define.

MEYER ON PORTALE:

"Especially nowadays, Alfred is the rare chef who has been willing and able to focus his immense gifts on one dining room. In many respects, it's harder to sustain a great institution than it is to create a new one from scratch, and he has more than sustained Gotham."

DANNY MEYER, RESTAURATEUR

You can teach a person how to stuff a quail. You can instruct waiters on professionalism. But the art of hospitality—that's much harder to teach. From the night New York's Union Square Cafe opened in 1985, hospitality has been its most inef-fable advantage, as essential to its success as anything on the imaginative menu (including the lobster shepherd's pie). Its source: Danny Meyer. He once wrote that while hospitality can make up for a misfire from the kitchen, no amount of fine cuisine can overcome rude or—worse—apathetic service. At Union Square Cafe and the parade of places Meyer has opened since—including the warm, elegant Gramercy Tavern; Blue Smoke, a barbecue haven; Shake Shack, his burger destination; and Eleven Madison Park, which recently won four stars from *The New York Times*, one of only six restaurants to do so—Meyer has crafted a hospitality system that virtually guarantees a great experience without ever feeling formulaic.

PORTALE ON MEYER:

"When Union Square Cafe opened, fine dining usually included a lot of attitude from the waiter and at the front door. You were a VIP or you weren't. Danny changed that. He created an excellent environment for the people who work for him—they're respected. And, in turn, you develop a strong, loyal clientele."