

Local flavor

Kent Rathbun puts Texas-grown products
to work in his Blue Plate Kitchen

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The lights go out, then flicker; the dining room slowly fills with smoke. It's a power outage. The stoves are working, the wood fire keeps burning, but the kitchen fans and vents don't work, nor do many of the lights. It could be a disaster for a busy restaurant, but at Rathbun's Blue Plate Kitchen on a recent weeknight, the staff manages to keep the high-style Texas comfort food and jazzy drinks coming.

The cooks continue to cook. The people keep eating and yakking and drinking. It's actually pretty funny that no one seems to be leaving, despite the fact that our eyes are starting to burn. But that wood-smoked rotisserie prime rib is so good! No matter that it doesn't taste smoked; it will, if the room gets any smokier.

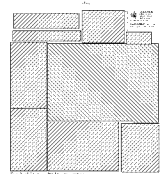
Clearly, the cooks can stand the heat (kudos to chef Roger Kaplan), and the

waitstaff serves admirably and with good humor.

Before all that, and on a previous visit, Blue Plate's dining room had fun, vibrant, smoke-free energy. The half that's on the bar side feels like an upscale roadhouse, with two flat-screen TVs and fairly loud 1970s music, Beatles and Bowie and ZZ Top. (Sitting in one of the booths seems to help conversation.) The other side is a more traditional dining room, polished and chic yet casual, a little quieter, looking onto an open kitchen.

Wood-roasted cheesy bread takes the edge off as you look over the menu. Served on a long, wooden board, it's a giant, flat, focaccia-like deal, loaded with rosemary-scented melty ricotta.

Smoked shrimp biscuits and gravy was a standout starter. The small, lightly smoked rock shrimp, sauced with gravy and spooned over a biscuit studded with tasso and roasted corn, had a lovely flavor. Chicken-fried Texas quail with



corn-chipotle spoon bread was fine too, and ooh-wee, that corn has a pedigree: It's Brazos Valley heirloom corn. That goes along with the concept: a focus on regional purveyors and Texas-grown products. A sweet sauce, meanwhile, didn't do much for the quail.

I was so excited about the Young's Farm "butter wedge," with custom-made cottage cheese from the Mozzarella Company and green goddess dressing. The butter lettuce was tender and delicate, but the whole thing added up to bland. A big bowl of warm spinach-bacon salad better satisfied the urge for something green; sherry vinegar gave a good zing to the dressing, and fried oysters masqueraded as croutons.

Not surprisingly, there's a blue-plate special every day. Grilled redfish one night came lightly spiced, served over a mess of nicely spicy collard greens, terrific.

My friends and I passed up the "DP" mopped rotisserie chicken with Dr Pepper barbecue sauce in favor of Gramma Minnie's fried chicken, a crisp-crust, flavorful (if a bit salty) bird with black pepper-maple gravy.

The Niman Ranch beef rib pot roast that night was tender and delicious, but the roasted root-vegetable pan sauce fell flat; the vegetables were roasted till all the life had been sucked out of them, and the chewy little beet bites were bizarre. The dish was much better on the night of the smoke.

Not so the intriguing Blue Plate "meatblock." Prime, schmime; this was a dense mass of salty beef.

And oh, Kent Rathbun. How can you have opened a Southern restaurant and not nailed the sides? Runny Gouda mac 'n' cheese, made with tiny tubular pasta, was a major disappointment. Inspic braised cabbage that came with all the mains one night depressed me. "Burnt end" black beans were undercooked, and too bad, because the idea of cooking them with the end of the smoked prime rib and other meats is so smart. Oh, well. At least the garlic mashed potatoes were right on. One night they came in an adorable little enamel cast-iron pot; another night they came on the plates with all the mains.

The desserts are of the sticky and sweet school of pastry. But I liked the wood-roasted apple crisp with butterscotch-brandied caramel for two that comes in a cast-iron skillet. The deconstructed s'more, with chocolate ganache and house-made torched marshmallows, made me smile, even as I cried from the smoke.

When it came time to pay the check, the server told us dinner was on the house because of the smoke. Wow. Did they do that for every table, I asked. "Well, a few," said the server. "I think they comped table 61."

This made me nervous. And suspicious. Why would they comp us, and not everyone who was bothered, which would have been everyone? Was I recognized? The service was excellent, but I had watched as our server took extra care of all the tables around us. I calculated what would have been 20 percent of our bill, and left that. A few days later, I called the restaurant's publicist and paid for our dinner using a credit card on the phone.

Oh, affordable is the other part of the concept, and there Rathbun succeeds. Of course, these are not real diner prices (this is a chic dining room, after all). But that pot roast is pretty reasonable at \$19, and the fried chicken's a deal at \$16. (At \$27, the rotisserie prime rib is the most expensive dish.) The smallish, well-chosen, eclectic wine list is divided into price points: \$25, \$35, \$55 and \$75, with plenty of wines that work well with the food.

Rathbun couldn't have chosen a better time to open a fun place with good food at this price level, even managing to sing in the trendy key of locavore. It's no wonder it's packed every night.

Rathbun's Blue Plate Kitchen ★★★

Price: \$\$\$ (lunch appetizers and salads \$8 to \$16, sandwiches \$12, "lean" entrees \$12 to \$20, dinner appetizers and salads \$7 to \$16, entrees \$16 to \$27, desserts \$7 to \$9)

Service: Smooth and professional

Ambience: The bar side of the dining room feels like an upscale roadhouse, with fairly loud music; the other side is polished, chic and casual.

Location: 6130 Luther Lane;

214-890-1103; www.kentrathbun.com/blueplate/dallas

Hours: Lunch Sunday-Friday 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner Sunday 5 to 9 p.m., Monday-Thursday 5 to 10 p.m., Friday-Saturday 5 to 11 p.m.

Credit cards: All major

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Smoking area: No

Alcohol: Full bar

RATINGS LEGEND

★★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★★ Excellent ★★★ Very good
★★ Good ★ Fair No stars Poor



CARTER ROSE/Special Contributor



Left: Wood-smoked rotisserie prime rib

LOUIS DeLUCA/
Staff Photographer