

dining HOPE S. PHILBRICK

See spot come

Local entrepreneur unleashes English-style pub, the Spotted Dog, in welcoming Midtown location

LET'S GET SOMETHING OUT IN THE open: I adore pubs. I like how American versions try to be English or Irish — which is funny when you think about it because, generally speaking, food in the U.K. stinks.

I am also fond of how pubs tempt belief that real life could be like TV. If you frequent one, people actually will know your name. I enjoy how a pub is one of the few places outside a library where a framed picture of Shakespeare doesn't seem out

of place. I like the sweating pint glasses, the thick wooden tables and the cozy booths.

I tell you all this because I was predisposed to like the Spotted Dog. It did not disappoint.

The Spotted Dog, which opened in March, is Derek Lawford's sixth pub in the Atlanta area. It's located in the old North Avenue fire station and named to honor the Dalmatians traditionally associated with such buildings.

The expansive space is decorated with white brick, dark woods, plush burgundy upholstery, antique fire extinguishers converted into lamps, and a tile floor so elaborate that it makes my knees hurt in sympathy of the installers.

The result is masculine and rich with a mood more like visiting a wealthy superior than a common peer. This can be forgiven easily enough, because the important characteristics of "friendly" and "welcoming" are not compromised.

On some occasions, parking may be an issue, since the only official space is a



The English pub vibe with an American focus on food quality makes the Spotted Dog a winner.

paid lot next door. But on a recent Tuesday evening, free parallel parking is available a block away.

ABOUT HALF THE TABLES IN THE dining room and on the front patio are filled with a typical Midtown mix. Once seated, the server arrives promptly to deliver menus. There are around 20 beer offerings, a short list for a pub, but all the expected options like Guinness, Newcastle, Fullers ESB and Bass appear at around \$5 each.

Tempted by several upscale offerings, I settle on pub standards. The kitchen is accommodating.

To suit my preferences, the blue cheese

chips appetizer (\$6.75) is prepared without bacon. This British reinterpretation of nachos features homemade potato chips drizzled with blue cheese sauce and sprinkled with Stilton crumbles and scallions. A great accompaniment to dark beer, these treats are potentially addictive though blatantly unhealthy.

Shepherd's Pie (\$11.50) is technically made with lamb. Since this features beef, it would properly be named Cottage Pie. But what matters most is that this casserole delivers a double layer of satisfaction: meat and vegetables in a flavorful gravy topped with mashed potatoes. It's a hug from Mother England in a bowl.

Fish and chips (\$11) impress with two thick fish filets and a heap of French-fries. It's deep-fried to perfection, crisp outside and tender inside. Sadly, the over-spiced tarter sauce delivers a bitter shock.

The tasty Brit Burger (\$10) is topped with fried onions, Stilton cheese, bacon, lettuce and tomato. Cut in half, it easily feeds two.

CHOCOLATE TORTE (\$6) ARRIVES WITH a scoop of vanilla ice cream atop warm cake and dollops of raspberry sauce and crème anglaise swirled along the side. It's a bit too fancy for pub fare, perhaps, but a sweet end to a hearty meal.

All in all, the Spotted Dog provides an authentic pub experience that doesn't compromise on quality food. It's not fine dining, but it is good — and a heck of a lot more convenient than jetting overseas.

i FOOD FILE

The Spotted Dog

30 North Ave.

404-347-7337

www.dereklawfordpubs.com

Food: ★★☆☆☆

Service: ★★☆☆☆

Comfort & Aesthetics: ★★★★★

Value: ★★☆☆☆

Scene: ★★☆☆☆