

RESTAURANT WISH LIST

Five places we'd love to see open in Atlanta



An 8 oz. filet from Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse, with creamed spinach and Pontalba potatoes, flash-fried Louisiana oysters and béarnaise sauce.

COURTESY OF DICKIE BRENNAN'S STEAKHOUSE

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

The restaurant scene is what I love best about living in Atlanta. Our available dining options encompass a range of ethnic diversity, varied price points and nearly any dress code—and there are so many restaurants (plus new ones opening all the time) that even in 10 years, I haven't been able to try them all.

Still, I'll periodically discover some gem of a place while traveling that wholly captures my taste buds and my heart. I crave return visits, but it's not exactly convenient or cost-effective to fly across the U.S. for a meal.

This isn't just a list of favorite finds—that would be a lot longer. These are restaurants that I believe could succeed in Atlanta because they would bring something unique to the local dining scene. So consider this part love letter, part business proposal. Hey, it's worth a shot.

DICKIE BRENNAN'S STEAKHOUSE, BOURBON HOUSE AND PALACE CAFÉ

It is my personal belief that steakhouses are the most overrated, over-priced restaurants in America. And so it means a whole heck of a lot when I say that halfway through a multi-course dinner at Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse in New Orleans, I found myself thinking, "This guy needs to open a restaurant in Atlanta." Each subsequent bite only seemed to offer further proof. Brennan's fabulous steakhouse is far superior to any of ours. His two other equally impressive restaurants, Bourbon House and Palace Café, showcase contemporary Creole cuisine and don't compare to anything in Atlanta. All three are destinations worth savoring.

Part of a famed New Orleans restaurant family, Dickie Brennan has extensive restaurant industry experience. Before opening his own restaurant, he worked under Chef Paul Prudhomme at Commander's Palace and cooked at some of the most famous restaurants in Paris and at Delmonico's restaurant in Mexico City. Currently, he serves on the boards of the James Beard Foundation and the Southern Food & Beverage Museum. In other words, this guy knows food. His menus give classic dishes a modern edge. What's more, each restaurant offers a unique, comfortably elegant environment where energy doesn't come across only as loud noise. Each delivers impeccable service, divine wine-pairing suggestions and skilled chefs working magic with top-quality local ingredients.

Some dishes created at Dickie Brennan's restaurants—like crabmeat cheesecake, andouille-crusted fish, catfish pecan and white chocolate bread pudding—are routinely copied in Atlanta. But why should we settle for an imitator when the original is way better?

IN-N-OUT BURGER

Love at first bite. What makes an In-N-Out burger superior? I wish I knew. The individual elements aren't uncommon: grilled meat patty, soft bun, dill pickles, crisp lettuce and fresh tomato. There's also Thousand Island dressing, but this restaurant hasn't cornered the market on that particular "special sauce." There's no obvious explanation for why this burger tastes better than any other—it just does.

The menu is simple: Choose a hamburger,

cheeseburger or Double-Double—that's two meat patties with two slices of cheese. Add fries, or not. (I highly recommend that you do.) Drink options include all the usual suspects, plus shakes so thick they're easiest to eat with a spoon. "Secret" menu items are available to those in the know: For example, an "animal-style" burger is slathered with mustard before it's grilled.



In-N-Out Burger

COURTESY OF IN-N-OUT BURGER

All menu items are made fresh to order using the highest-quality ingredients, as has been standard practice since Harry and Esther Snyder founded In-N-Out Burger in 1948. This means the company inspects and grinds 100 percent pure beef into patties, hand-leaves lettuce, cuts French fries one potato at a time, and bakes buns using an old-fashioned, slow-rising sponge dough recipe. Trust me, the effort shines through in each bite. Atlanta has

WORTH THE TRIP

Until we can persuade these restaurateurs to move to Atlanta, we'll have to be content to visit them on their home turf. Here's where to find them:

■ Bourbon House Seafood & Oyster Bar

144 Bourbon St.
New Orleans, La.
504-522-0111
www.bourbonhouse.com

■ Charlie The Butcher's Kitchen

1065 Wehrle Drive at Cayuga—1 mile from the Buffalo airport
Buffalo, N.Y.
716-633-8330
www.charliethebutcher.com

■ Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse

706 Iberville St.
New Orleans, La.
504-522-2467
www.dickiebrennanssteakhouse.com

■ In-N-Out Burger

Multiple locations in California, Nevada, Utah and Arizona
800-786-1000
www.in-n-out.com

■ Palace Café

605 Canal St.
New Orleans, La.
504-523-1661
www.palacecafe.com

a number of burger joints, but not one comes close to the addictive flavor and quality of In-N-Out Burger.

CHARLIE THE BUTCHER'S KITCHEN

Buffalo made hot chicken wings famous, but the folks in western New York have managed to keep their better native dish mainly to themselves: beef on weck. For nearly 100 years, this succulent sandwich has been readily available at delis, diners, restaurants and taverns in Buffalo, but drive an hour in any direction and you'll be hard-pressed to find one, or even someone who knows what you're talking about. What the heck is "beef on weck"? It's a tender roast beef sandwich topped with horseradish and served on a kummelweck roll.

The kummelweck (or, more fondly, "weck") begins life as a plain, hard kaiser roll. But topped with a seductive mix of pretzel salt and caraway seeds and baked a bit longer, it becomes something more titillating and satisfying. According to Buffalo food lore, the kummelweck was invented by a German tavern owner as a way to get his patrons to order more beer. It's a heavenly pairing.

In the name of research, I've chomped down quite a bit of beef on weck, and I believe Charlie the Butcher's Kitchen prepares it best. Charlie slow-roasts choice grade top-round overnight. Thin slices of juicy meat are piled high inside a warm bun, then topped with a generous dollop of horseradish. The cut top half of the bun is dipped into au jus before it's settled into place. The result exceeds the taste and quality of any roast beef sandwich in Atlanta. **SP**