Redbird  ★★★★★

1198 Howell Mill Rd.
Lunch Mon-Sat 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.
Brunch Sun 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.
Dinner Mon-Thu 5-10; Fri & Sat 5-11
Reservations accepted (404-900-5172)
Credit cards: All major $$

The exceptional synergy between the chef and the owners of this new restaurant replacing the much more formal, fine-dining Bacchanalia in the Star Provisions building allows for Zeb Stevenson’s voice finally to be heard loud and clear. Just as they did in the first iteration of the original Watershed, in downtown Decatur, Ross Jones and her now wife Susan Owens have hit the perfect note of informality and originality.

Stevenson, whom they have nurtured since they brought him to the Watershed reboot in Buckhead, has stepped out of the shadows: instead of trying to keep the flame of the South burning, he finally cooks the way he likes to eat. Goodbye, fried chicken; hello, healthy vegetable-forward cookery!

Redbird doesn’t hit you over the head with virtuous concerns, yet the majority of the dishes are vegetarian and/or gluten-free. There is some meat (but no pork) on a menu where seafood, freshly baked bread, and unique desserts are bound to make you happy. With the help of Christian Perez, last seen at City Pharmacy in Covington, the kitchen does exceptionally beautiful and seasonal work.

There are hardly any restaurants in Atlanta where lunch is as good as dinner. You can trust both menus (there is some overlap) at Redbird. What should you order? It would be a pity to miss as beautiful a plate as the sliced roasted beets with a scattering of endive, blue cheese, and sourdough crumbles with a fresh-green basil oil; the chicken liver mousse with black bread and muscadine jelly; the crushed fingerling potato tostones with almond mole; the herbed chickpea flatbread in the style of a thick, fragrant pancake; the magnificent blackened redfish on salad greens; the slow-cooked chicken legs with olives; and, above all, desserts such as a delirious crushed pecan ice halo halo with a riot of shaved coconut, mango, pineapple, candied summer squash, pomegranate seeds, and tapioca pearls.

Not everything is perfect all the time: the bland cacio e pepe fritters, the uninspiring fish en papillote opened before it reaches your table, the grayish strawberry custard with meringue may not showcase the chef’s talent as much as, for example, his trout with green onion relish or his mom’s sugar cream pie, but nothing is a waste of time or money. A variety of sauces and condiments ranging from Lebanese toum and sweet onion hollandaise to mushroom ketchup and sizzling
scallions can be ordered on the side as if you were in a steakhouse.

The dining room designed by Smith Hanes is no longer as posh or secluded as it once was, but it feels lively and fun. It has a more organic feel with a new fully open kitchen, an intimate, colorful chef counter, and a comfortable traditional bar with a smashing view of the city. Quirky, deliciously unusual Italian and French wines poured at the right temperature, serviceable cocktails, and friendliness all around support Redbird’s making a great case for modern cookery without pretense.

COMING SOON: NAGOMIYA, a fourth Japanese restaurant for Takashi Otsuka, of WAGAYA and CHIROL, on W. Peachtree in Midtown; Oscar Santiago’s EL BURRO POLLO, in Midtown’s Collective at Coca food hall; Howard Hsu and sister Anita Hsu’s AMAR BIEN, on Marietta Blvd., on the Westside; a brick-and-mortar location in the former NECTAR on Clairmont Rd. near Emory for mobile Cuban sandwich shop BUENA GENTE; a location of HUDSON GRILLE in the soon to close FRONT PAGE NEWS in Little Five Points; a second location of REFUGIO COFFEE replacing CONDESA COFFEE in Sweet Auburn in the Atlanta Daily World building; a Decatur location of PONKO CHICKEN, on Church St.; Nanh Le and Skip Engelbrecht’s BELLSMOUTH CAFE and 3 HEART COFFEE ROASTERY in Kirkwood’s upcoming Pratt Pullman District; a second location of Sandeep Kohary’s TABLA, in the center of Buckhead; HEMINGWAY, a Cuban stall out of Tampa, in Krog Street Market; a permanent location of Billy Kramer’s NFA BURGER, in a gas station on Chamblee Dunwoody Road; FRENCHIE’S ROYAL HOUSE OF FRITES AND MEATS, in Forsyth County’s Halcyon Food Hall.

Forza Storico ★★★
1198 Howell Mill Rd.
Dinner Mon-Sat 5-10 (bar stays open until 11 on weekends)
Reservations accepted (404-464-8096)
Credit cards: All major $$

Ever since Michael Patrick started showing up at farmers’ markets in Atlanta in 2009, we have been devoted to his expertise as a pasta savant with deep knowledge of Italy’s most traditional craft. When he opened Storico Fresco—first in an awkward location, then in a better one, both in Buckhead—we have loved and patronized a restaurant that truly feels like an impeccably Italian combination of the old and the new. His former training as a sommelier shines in the wine list, and there is hardly a better place in Atlanta to enjoy the foods of Italy. His vending spots at local farmers’ markets are heavily patronized big favorites.

Why, then, torture us with a new and barely different iteration of his priorities in a context that much of the original clientele, us included, will find super annoying? We almost never complain about the noise in restaurants, and there are many louder dining rooms than the one of the new Forza Storico opened in the previous swank location of Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison’s Little Bach in the White Provisions complex, yet the music pouring out of a gutted space previously known for being quietly posh is the kind of pounding sound one may expect on Miami Beach’s Ocean Drive or another haunt of the restless young. The patrons sitting at tiny wooden tables surrounded by hard, uncomfortable chairs look mostly like the kind of Buckhead people who aren’t amused by the chaotic vibe of a wildly crowded dining room where the bar is in the middle and the