

DINING REVIEW

# Ecco

40 Seventh St., Atlanta, 404-347-9555

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## MEDITERRANEAN.

This is a word that has entered into the American lexicon with full fanfare over the past 10 years. We celebrate Mediterranean style in our fashion, our home furnishings and, of course, the food we eat.



Elissa Eubanks/Staff  
(ENLARGE)  
Salami, smoked prosciutto and creamy robiola (cheese) are all infused with Mediterranean flavors.

I'm just not sure what the heck it means.

Oh sure, I know what it means. But within the boundary of that one word is a seemingly limitless amount of possibility, especially when considering the cuisines it encompasses.

So when a restaurant claims to serve Mediterranean food, my eyebrow arches just a little.

To be fair, the news releases I was inundated with prior to the opening of Ecco boasted the "seasonal, European-inspired" menu from Chef Micah Willix.

As if that description somehow narrows things down.

But trust me, when you dine at Ecco you'll be thinking: "Now that's Italian." It almost feels as if this concept, open since May from Fifth Group, doesn't want to admit to the whole Italian thing. Options open, I guess.

Perhaps *Italian-inspired* is more accurate.

Well-procured meats and cheeses, displayed toward the front of the massive open kitchen and served on a board with fresh bread, are the menu's greatest draw, and worth focusing much of the meal around.

Willix is wise to offer well-made products that are exceedingly fresh and leave it at that, rather than fuss things up with lots of go-withs.

You end up creating your own antipasti of excellently fresh prosciutto, fennel-laced, Tuscan-inspired finocchiona, salty slices of speck, heady soppressata and finely seasoned, air-dried bresaola.

Roll them around cheeses such as elegantly tart Spanish cabrales or top crusty bread with creamy robiola. With a glass of wine (and the cherry-picked wine list is manageably sectioned into "old world" and "new world"), you have a meal.

Perhaps, though, you will want to share handsomely fried tiny scoops of goat cheese, feathery light and deep fried, then nestled into a tiny bowl with rich honey. (On second thought, you may want to hog them all for yourself.)

Sometimes the bruschetta of the day will entice, though here it tends to suffer from too much American influence — busy with an overwrought list of ingredients when all it really needs is to be grilled and brushed with a little olive oil. Bruschetta is one the few places on his menu where Willix forgets to keep it simple.

And there will be dishes to steer clear of: a fried duck with truffle and potato is just the kind of enticement that will disappoint more simply because it sounds so good. In reality it was tasteless, even with (gasp!) truffle. Grilled octopus with paprika and crushed potatoes (his term, not mine) is a messy marriage of protein and starch.

Willix's prior background with Darden Restaurants' Seasons 52 in Florida, a concept that focuses on seasonally inspired produce, serves him well at Ecco. Even when he strikes a false note, the ingredients can be relied upon.

Keeping it simple is what serves Willix best, especially in a dish of hand-cut chitarra (think fat, square spaghetti) with fresh, tiny clams and spicy guanciale (think spicy pancetta, if you can). Coffee panna cotta covered in a creamy zabaglione is a pleasant ending to everything, though the crustiness of a pine nut tart is far more interesting, especially with a dab of sweetly sour buttermilk ice cream melting over it.

Even more seductive is a giant scoop (and I use this word loosely, since the serving is more like the size of a croquet ball) of burnt honey ice milk with gorgonzola. Though the bits of cheese could use some paring down, this is a heavenly union of two heavy-hitting flavors: in one corner, rich caramel; the other — and it comes out fighting — robust tang. Together, they are a knockout.

Which is my sentiment as I leave Ecco one warm evening: Here is a restaurant with a charming, sophisticated setting. A kitchen, while not perfect, that seems to value fresh products above all else. A wine list with deep options. A competent, informed staff.

TKO.



Elissa Eubanks/Staff  
(ENLARGE)  
Here are a couple of ways to blow that diet? Try burnt honey ice milk with gorgonzola or fried goat cheese in honey (below). Such a sweet sensation.



Elissa Eubanks/Staff  
(ENLARGE)  
Here are a couple of ways to blow that diet: burnt honey ice milk with gorgonzola, and fried goat cheese in honey. Such a sweet sensation.



Elissa Eubanks/Staff

### ECCO

**Overall rating:** ★★★★★

**Food:** Uh, like, it's European-, Mediterranean-, Italian-inspired

**Service:** Informed, attentive. The kind of place that creates regulars because of its wait staff.

**Setting:** Originally the spot of the old Atlanta Fencing Club, the room is handsomely decorated with masculine tones of black, red and brown, with granite floors. The room is expansive, with full view of the open kitchen, and there is a welcoming bar.

**Address, telephone:** 40 Seventh St., 404-347-9555

**Price range:** \$\$\$

**Credit cards:** Visa, MasterCard, American Express

**Hours of operation:** Bar opens daily at 4 p.m.; dinner on Sunday from 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Monday through Thursday from 5:30 to 11 p.m. and Friday and Saturday from 5:30 to midnight; late-night bar menu Thursday through Saturday until 1 a.m.

**Reservations:** Accepted

**Best dishes:** Any of the meats and cheeses, fried goat cheese with honey, wood-fired pizza with mushrooms and taleggio, chitarra with house-cured guanciale, oak-roasted branzino with braised fennel and asparagus

**Vegetarian selections:** Mozzarella and tomato pizza, grilled asparagus with marinated tomato salad, linguini with cherry tomatoes, olives and bread crumbs

**Parking:** Complimentary valet

**Wheelchair access:** Yes

**Smoking:** Patio only

**Noise level:** Medium to high

**Patio:** Yes

**Takeout:** Not yet

**Web site:** [www.fifthgroup.com](http://www.fifthgroup.com)

### KEY TO RATINGS

- ★★★★★ **Outstanding:** Sets the standard for fine dining in the region.
- ★★★★ **Excellent:** One of the best in the Atlanta area.
- ★★★ **Very good:** Merits a drive if you're looking for this kind of dining.
- ★★ **Good:** A worthy addition to its neighborhood, but food may be hit or miss.
- ★ **Fair:** The food is more miss than hit.

Restaurants that do not meet these criteria are rated **Poor**.

Pricing code: \$\$\$\$ means above \$35; \$\$\$ means \$20-\$35; \$\$ means \$10-\$20; \$ means \$10 or less. @ means reservations accepted.