

CREATIVE LOAFING

First Look: The Federal

More than nostalgia at Shaun Doty and Lance Gummere's intimate new Midtown bistro

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DYNAMIC DUO: The Federal's owners Shaun Doty (left) and Lance Gummere | JOEFF DAVIS

If you're among the fans that chefs Shaun Doty and Lance Gummere have accumulated over many years and countless restaurants, you'll be thrilled to know the dynamic duo has stepped back into the kitchen. If the chefs' names don't ring a bell, and they probably won't if you've only been paying attention to the Atlanta dining scene for the past six years, you still have reason for excitement — the Federal is the type of cozy, contemporary, all-day bistro that Atlanta could use more of. Think an American yin to Bread and Butterfly's French yang and you'll be close.

Doty and Gummere have worked side by side, on and off, for the past 23 years. They run the Bantam + Bidy mini-chain together, but are known more for their turns in the kitchen at Mumbo Jumbo in the early aughts, then MidCity Cuisine, then Shaun's, which was among *Esquire's* best new restaurants in the country in 2006 before closing in 2010.



Doty says that he and Gummere “are truly excited to be in the kitchen,” and embracing this chance to reconnect with diners in a more intimate way than Bantam + Bidy affords. “We’ve worked together over so many years and enjoy the camaraderie,” he told me. “One or both of us will be in the kitchen every night of the week that we’re open.” Sure enough, on a packed Saturday evening just two weeks after their November 15 opening, Doty was making the rounds, smiling and chatting with longtime patrons before darting back into the kitchen. He was clearly in his element.

Located in the completely transformed space formerly occupied by the Midtown Bantam + Bidy, the Federal’s closest forebear is Shaun’s. It’s a similarly intimate bistro, though the Federal’s flickering candles, dark woods, butcher-papered tables, and supple leather banquettes take it a step closer to an old-school steakhouse vibe. Indeed, a selection of steaks takes a prominent position on the dinner menu, and can also be ordered at lunch. All come nicely charred, cooked in sizzling hot cast iron then plated without adornment. Doty says they’ve been “enjoying the pursuit of different beef producers to find the best quality and taste,” and expects the offerings to rotate over time. The current lineup includes a dry-aged Kansas City strip (\$39), a massive porterhouse (\$52), a grass-fed ribeye (\$48), and a hand-cut Iowa filet priced by the ounce (\$5 per). If you are in a steak mood, give serious thought to a side of au poivre or chasseur sauce (\$4 each). The chasseur in particular makes for a luxurious companion, silky and rich from a brandy-spiked red wine reduction studded with wild mushrooms.



IT'S WHAT'S FOR DINNER: 30 day dry aged 14-oz Kansas City strip with chasseur sauce and French onion soup | JOEFF DAVIS

You’d be missing out, though, if you went straight to the Federal’s steaks. Among the appetizers are signature dishes from restaurants past, most notably Doty’s Sardinian flatbread (\$12), tantalizing with



heady herbs and argan oil, and topped with a pile of simple, vinaigrette-kissed salad and slivers of Vella dry jack cheese. A plentiful scoop of chopped chicken liver (\$10), mild and heavy on the hard-boiled egg, comes with toast just hearty enough to stand up to the luxuriant liver, a pile of zingy cornichons on the side to counter the richness.

Not quite as well-known (yet), the Federal's blue crab cake (\$16) and French onion soup (\$10) are also paragons of classic fare. The onion soup gets a hearty boost from tender chunks of beefy oxtail. Frankly, with these enticements, plus a Belgian-style beef tartare with fries (\$14), it's hard to get past the appetizer section. The complimentary bread service, such a rarity these days, makes it even harder. You won't be able to resist the warm, crusty mini-boule served with good butter and sea salt on the side.

The half dozen entrees are similarly rooted in classics — steak frites (yes, more steak, \$22), a towering and beefy half-pound burger stack with fries (\$15), or Doty's famous pork schnitzel, pounded thin and covering the plate (\$24). The Federal lets its Southern roots show in the standout smoked trout with Anson Mills grits (\$22), currently reflecting the winter season with roasted carrots, petite turnips, and bitter greens.



MEDITERRANEAN BEAUTY: Shaun Doty's famous Sardinian flatbread | JOEFF DAVIS

At lunchtime, you'll find most of the same enticing appetizers from dinner, but the menu tilts to sandwiches — notably a sliced-to-order (extra thin) roast pork on a crunchy baguette roll, with optional (mandatory if you ask me) provolone and broccoli rabe (\$14 with a side). Or maybe the fried chicken on Texas toast, or Iowa prosciutto over fresh mozzarella and confit tomato (both \$12), or tenderloin with horseradish cream (\$18). Again, the menu is fairly concise, but every choice begs consideration.



The Federal offers breakfast and coffee all day, brunch on the weekends, and damn good desserts after dinner by Doty (the sticky toffee pudding, \$8, is justifiably famous). Know that parking in the adjacent 1010 Midtown lot is validated up to two hours, but also know that you're likely to linger over dinner, enjoying a glass of wine or cocktail as you finish up that toffee pudding. We went over the two-hour limit and ending up getting charged an additional \$9.

It was worth it.

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