

# food & drink

Subtle, complementary flavors highlight Julep's "new Southern cuisine."

by Randall Stamper

**F**rom time to time, I will read an article or hear a conversation lamenting how underutilized and unrealized downtown, the Slip or the Bottom is. Often, the tilt is that it's dangerous or hard to park, and the city should do this and the business owners should do that and somebody else should do the other. I think that is a bunch of hokum. I think it is up to you. Go there. Eat there. Shop there. Take it over. Things will get better. Let me recommend where to start your urban renewal plan.

Amy and Bill Cabaniss, the owners of Cabo's, have done their part by putting together a very fine restaurant on the corner of East Franklin and 18th streets. Julep's dining rooms (nonsmoking upstairs, smoking below) are housed within what's reputedly the oldest commercial building in the city. Built circa 1815, it's a charming place with plenty of people-watching to be done through the etched windows. Inside, the white linens and spotless stemware tastefully complement the exposed beams and brick. The ambience is a harmonious balance between the rustic elements of the building and the panache of fine dining. The food walks the same line.

I was surprised to learn that this is Chef Eric Cohen's first role as a kitchen commander.

A Richmond native, Cohen is finishing culinary school and has cooked at Bacchus and Pomegranate Euro Bistro, as well as in Puerto Rico and Argentina. Here, he and his kitchen turn out what they bill as "new Southern cuisine." The food's familiar roots are rejuvenated by a whole lot of finesse and flair. Grandma's crabmeat appetizer is lit up with wasabi caviar (\$12). Aunt

Esther's fried green tomatoes are updated with a blue corn bread, tamarind cream and smoked jumbo shrimp (\$8). The quinoa-encrusted fried oysters with chilled mint chutney (\$9) blossom with bitterness, brine and a sweet pungency. The summer salad selections

**Chef Eric Cohen takes familiar Southern ingredients and rejuvenates them with finesse. Like the house-smoked pork loin with lavender-honey apple glaze, goat cheese and dried cherry stuffing.**



## Balancing Act

(\$6.50-\$8) feature blackberries, calypso beans, toasted almonds and roasted corn-cilantro vinaigrette. Even in the garden, Cohen and his crew are sure to provide you with plenty of complementary textures and zest. The only shortcoming of the introductions was the cream of avocado soup with lemon grass (\$6), which was too top-heavy with the latter.

The entrees exhibit an admirable degree of restraint. Instead of bombarding the quail (\$18), Cohen simply dusts it with fine panko bread crumbs, fries it and rests it upon a red wine and pear reduction. He lets the bird do the lead singing, confident enough to come in with a beautiful harmony. I hate it when chefs forsake the main component of their creations in order to draw attention to their own exaggerations. I didn't observe any of this on the menu or taste it from the plates I enjoyed at Julep's. The espresso barbecue-

braised rabbit over stone-ground grits (\$21) again paired a juicy and robust piece of game with a subtle, heady sauce. The fish, pork and beef selections exhibited the same balance of craft and restraint.

The service is still finding its legs. It seemed that the servers weren't sure of where to fall between prim and personable. They all did their job, just not in a consistent manner. This will come, though, if they get the chance. That's where you come in.

Julep's has the potential to become one of the premier restaurants in town. I suspect that the biggest obstacle will be the location — not the building, it can't be beat. It's in one of those areas, though, that many people moan and shake their heads about and rarely visit. Julep's can survive and it certainly should, but it's not the city leaders' responsibility. They've got bigger fish to fry.

It's not Bill and Amy Cabaniss' responsibility. They've done the work and even provided parking across the street. It's not Eric Cohen's responsibility. He's cooking his butt off. It's yours. Batter, up. **S**

*Randall Stamper worked in restaurants in Boston, New Orleans and Indiana for seven years and has filled every job from dish washer to general manager. All his visits are anonymous and paid for by Style.*

### Julep's New Southern Cuisine (\$\$\$)

1719-21 E. Franklin St.

377-3968

Lunch: Monday through Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner: Tuesday through Thursday 4:30 p.m.-10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5:30 p.m.-10:30 p.m.