

# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

## Living



### Spice: Meat, desserts are best

BECKY STEIN / Special  
"Thai jewels" is basically a groovy soup of mochi-mad textures over coconut ice.

**DINING** / SPICE MARKET, 188 14th Street N.E. ★★★

## Magic is scarce at outpost of Asian street food smash

By **MERIDITH FORD**  
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Venture past Chelsea into the Meatpacking District of lower Manhattan and the area becomes, in opposition to its blue-collar beginnings, a playland of restaurants and bars for people who carry wallets full of disposable income and look good doing it. At least for the weekend, anyway.

It seems an odd area for a French chef who garnered a reputation as one of New York's most subtly

### ONLINE

Have you been to Spice Market? Tell Meridith about it at [www.ajc.com/tabletalk](http://www.ajc.com/tabletalk).

sophisticated to have opened a midscale restaurant specializing in Asian street food. Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Jean Georges is one of a hatful of restaurants in New York that have earned three Michelin stars.

So when Spice Market opened in New York in 2004, it fit the bill

for the next big thing, and it was. A sweeping landscape of weathered room inside an old warehouse, the enormous space, decorated to the hilt with rich, textured fabrics, oversized Chinese lanterns dropping from one floor to the next and an atmosphere that stretched its world bazaar theme from one end of Asia to the next, was just the tip of the pappadum cracker.

The menu was (and is) a fun mix of small and large, sweet and spicy, hot and cold and all oddly approachable. Cocktails were (and

are) clever concoctions that complement the food but stand on their own. And everything could be had for less than the average night out in the city that never sleeps.

When Spice Market's chef-creator Jean-Georges Vongerichten began to look for ways to expand his culinary empire that already included nearly 20 restaurant concepts that spanned the globe, he came South. Atlanta is the first

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outpost for Spice Market (though it's doubtful it will be the last).

Opened this past March in the W Atlanta-Midtown, the restaurant is part of an ongoing partnership the superchef has created with Starwood Hotels, and it's rumored he will open another restaurant — an entirely new concept — inside the W Atlanta-Buckhead as soon as the inks dry on the deal.

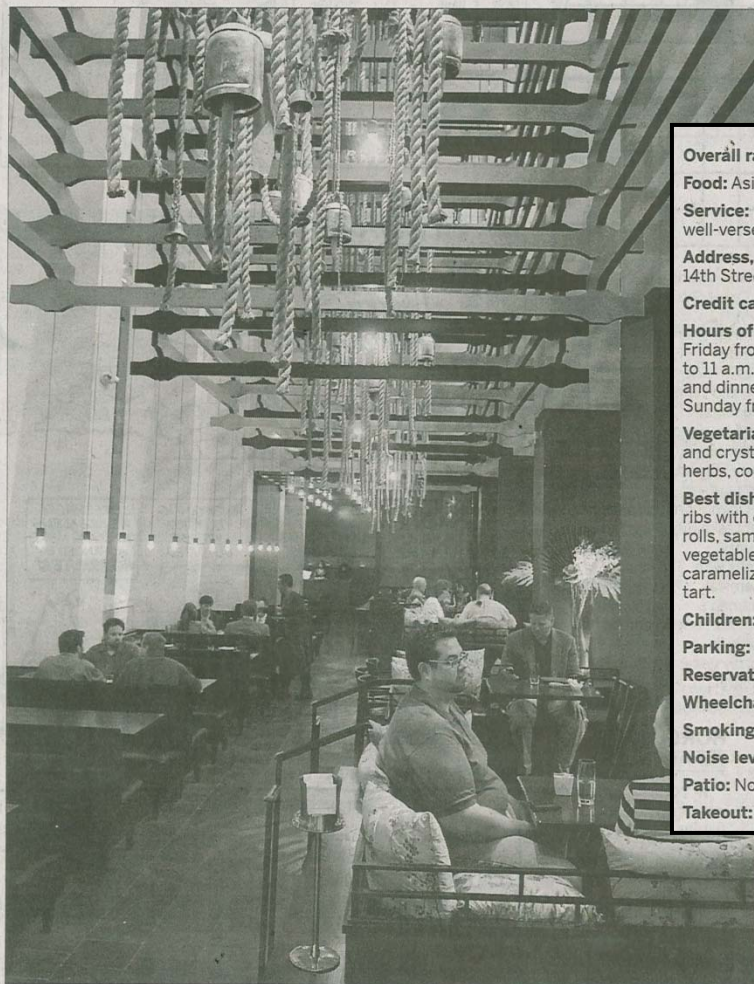
Placing Spice Market's larger-than-life concept inside a modern hotel lobby is a little like forcing the genie into her bottle. Enormous wooden boxes drop from the ceiling encasing ropes of bells that hang over raised banquettes toward the center of the open room. Oriental silks pattern pillows line the seats, and an open view of the emerging skyline of 14<sup>th</sup> Street is a sweeping backdrop as the sun sets. Yet all the mysterious magic unleashed in New York is missing here, and for all its bells and whistles, Spice Market looks exactly like what it is — a restaurant inside a hotel.

The menu is practically identical to the original, an array of playful appetizers and smallish entrees meant to be shared. Though they span much of Southeast Asia, most of the dishes bring Vietnam, Thailand and India to the table, starting with the crispest pappadam, bright with peppery spice and served with a ragout curried with tomato and spices. Brought to the table with cocktails, the crackers are madly addictive.

First tastes were not overly impressive: a strong showing of appetizers like beef satay with mildly pickled veggies (pork satay is on the menu at present, and every bit as good), shrimp tod mun pla and incredibly seasoned samosas with a bright cilantro yogurt saved the meal.

Cumbersomely large chicken wings were somehow lost in spicy breading, and entrees of halibut with ginger, scallions and tarragon and cod with an overly sweet Malaysian chili were a bit of a yawn.

On a menu loaded happily with fish, it was fish that dis-



All the bells and wooden boxes can't disguise that you're in a hotel restaurant. Onion-and-chili crusted short ribs with egg noodles (above, right) are soft and luscious enough to eat with a spoon.

appointed most.

Vongerichten handpicked Spice Market's chef, Ian Winslade, formerly of Posh and Bluepointe, and flew him to New York for a rigorous bench test. He executes the menu every bit as well as his New York counterpart.

Correction: He executes it better. After a slightly bumpy start, he's proving that his pork vindaloo is more tender, rich with the spicy flavors of its Goan beginnings. Short ribs are delicate enough to be eaten with a spoon, and layered with a barbecue of spice and onion laced with chile flavor over flat noodles and served in a lusciously large

bowl for sharing. Duck comes curried in a rich, heated sauce laced with coconut reminiscent of a massamum curry.

Desserts were designed by pastry chef Pichet Ong, who has since launched a very successful restaurant of his own, P\*ong.

They are perhaps the most well-conceived of anything on the menu, and I would happily return to Spice Market for dessert alone.

A hodgepodge of flavors and textures are the highlight of the restaurant's signature dessert, called "Thai jewels." It's basically a groovy soup of mochi-mad textures over coconut ice.

The chocolate-and-Vietnamese coffee tart tastes like a smooth mouthful of chocolate-flavored sweetened condensed milk.

After its opening, Spice Market was already suffering a fate that many high-concept restaurants do in Atlanta — the crowds come, they see, they conquer with a cocktail and move on.

But I would hate for Winslade's work here to get lost in all the flashy social hyperbole. He hasn't cooked this well since his days at Bluepointe, when that Buckhead Life restaurant was to Atlanta what Spice Market is now — the latest thing.

**Overall rating:** ★★★

**Food:** Asian street food, plus a little more

**Service:** Most of the servers are exceptionally good and well-versed on menu items.

**Address, telephone:** Inside the W Atlanta-Midtown, 188 14th Street N.E., 404-549-5450. Price range: \$\$ - \$\$\$

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

**Hours of operation:** Open for breakfast Monday through Friday from 7 to 10:30 a.m., Saturday and Sunday from 7 to 11 a.m. Open for lunch daily from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and dinner Monday through Saturday from 5 to 11 p.m. and Sunday from 5 to 10 p.m.

**Vegetarian Dishes:** Mango salad with cherry tomatoes and crystallized ginger, noodles with silken tofu, garlic and herbs, coconut sticky rice steamed in a banana leaf.

**Best dishes:** Pork vindaloo, onion-and-chili crusted short ribs with egg noodles, red curried duck, Vietnamese spring rolls, samosas with cilantro yogurt, pork satay with pickled vegetables, "Thai jewels" dessert, Ovaltine kulfi with caramelized bananas, chocolate-and-Vietnamese coffee tart.

**Children:** For lunch or early evening hours

**Parking:** Hotel valet or inside Colony Square

**Reservations:** Yes

**Wheelchair access:** Yes

**Smoking:** No smoking

**Noise level:** Medium

**Patio:** No

**Takeout:** Yes



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