

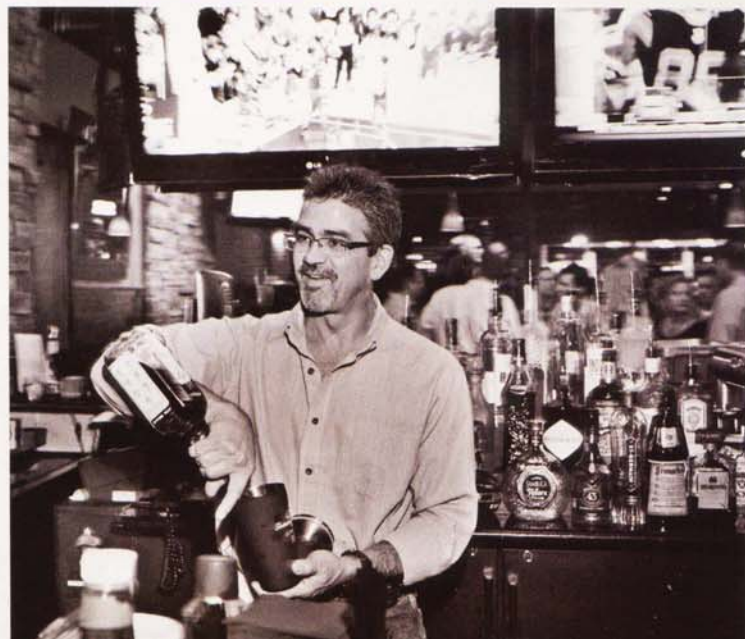
Shore Thing

The latest tenant of a Geist strip mall brings a sophisticated menu of American specialties to a charming eatery.

BY TERRY KIRTS

AS A RULE, suburban strip-mall eateries aren't known for being innovators in fashion-forward decor or cutting-edge cuisine. Too often, they're stop-off points to grab a pint or some stick-to-your-ribs grub when you don't want to drive into the city. Something about the spacious storefront at 11705 Fox Road, nestled as it is among the tree-lined curves of Geist Reservoir and sporting sky-high ceilings and a rustic stone fireplace in the bar, always seemed to require a more substantial establishment, and while a string of eateries have tried to capitalize on the space's charm, it wasn't until I entered Michael's Southshore, the latest tenant, that I felt a destination restaurant had arrived.

From the artful script logo to mammoth red lampshades bathing the dining room in a warm glow to a well-chosen menu of surprisingly creative yet approachable American favorites, here is a place for which city folk might actually drive out to the suburbs. Somewhere





Grilled pizzas on the appetizer list, smoked chicken corn chowder, and rum-glazed Bundt cake drizzled with mixed-berry compote give the menu at Michael's Southshore an elegantly sedate tone, in keeping with the Geist-area restaurant itself.



between a spiffy spot to catch the game and a bona fide foodie draw, this is a rarity in its neighborhood, with true promise to be more than a flash in the pan.

More than any of its forebears, Michael's settles in nicely in its Geist Reservoir environs. Earthy wood and tile flooring with just enough warm carpeting in the dining room, as well as opaque glass dividers etched with windswept grasses, provide a neutral backdrop to your meal. Judiciously placed TV monitors don't blare, nor is the place so loud you can't enjoy your conversation.

Waitstaff can sometimes hover, however, asking first instead of just refilling water. Few restaurants could achieve perfection in the first few months, though minor glitches did betray the kitchen's finesse. A meaty lamb shank showed clear signs of slow cooking, but its seasoning left it flat, despite tasty thyme-scented polenta and a mushroom-tomato ragu; short ribs offered richer flavor but were chewy and didn't have the melting tenderness of the best versions. Most dissonant was a dish of farfalle with shrimp and Hungarian



peppers. Limp, overcooked pasta packed a bitter heat from red chiles, while the shrimp and sauteed kale wore almost no spice or other flavorings.

For its ambition and all the other gems the place delivered, we forgave these missteps. Having honed his skills as director of operations at the downtown Marriott, as well as

Grilled pizzas with shallots caramelized in local honey or with Thai chicken and peanut sauce were equally light and crisp. Smoked chicken corn chowder resisted the typical cream and bacon and actually tasted like the corn and vegetables it's made of. Roasted-tomato bisque had the intense tomato flavor of the best pasta sauce.

Owner Michael Moros has put a lot of forethought and good taste into his restaurant renovation.

sitting on the Chef's Academy advisory board, owner Michael Moros has put a lot of forethought and good taste into his restaurant renovation. Appetizers double as substantial bar noshes, but they can make for nice dinner preludes, too, especially pan-fried mozzarella balls with none of the grease or heft.



Above right: Diver scallops are simply sauced with brown butter and pancetta. **Above:** Pan-fried mozzarella balls take the standard appetizer to a higher plane.

Sandwiches include a Cuban served with all of the Swiss cheese, pickles, and tender pork you'd expect. "Southshore" fries came crisp and hot; an apple-jicama slaw offered a cooling light touch of lacy cabbage. A grilled hanger steak special was deliciously straightforward, with a swift kick of tangy rhubarb jam. By far the highlight of all our meals were meaty diver scallops perfectly seared to a light caramel and served over that same polenta with asiago cheese. A brown butter sauce spiked with pancetta added an elegant decadence kept nicely in check by a shaved fennel "slaw."

Similar consideration went into Michael's drinks and desserts. Plenty of potable vintages ring in under \$30, including a spicy "2 Up" Australian shiraz and an exemplary, well-structured Sonoma Cellar No. 8 pinot noir. Specialty drinks may rhyme too often with "martini" but keep their sweetness in bounds. Mainly forgoing gooey, chocolate-drenched desserts, Michael's offers a delicious pumpkin cheesecake with a tart sour-cream topping and berries that play well with the pumpkin's light spice. A rum-glazed Bundt cake was more rum-soaked, though not to excess, with an accompanying "mojito" berry compote that was tasty but didn't exactly recall the drink.

The restraint of the desserts is the kind of detail that will have us returning to this ambitious, thoughtful restaurant for many good meals to come. ●



MICHAEL'S SOUTHSHORE

11705 Fox Rd., 723-3808,
michaelsouthshore.com

HOURS Mon.-Thurs. 4-10:30 p.m.;
Fri. 4-11:30 p.m.; Sat. 11:30 a.m.-
11:30 p.m.; Sun. 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.

BECAUSE YOU'RE SPECIAL

The tasty, fresh offerings of Michael's kitchen will be enough excuse to come back every day. But in case you need another reason, Michael's offers daily drink specials including Wine Wednesdays, when the bar takes \$2 off any wine by the glass.

BEERS FROM NEAR

Many of the ingredients in your dinner will come from Indiana, like the pork in that Hoosier tenderloin, so wash it all down with a tasty brew from nearby as well. Craft beers on tap or by bottle include Three Floyds' Pride & Joy, Upland's Bad Elmer's Porter, and Barley Island's BarFly IPA.

BY LAND OR SEA

Michael's really is just a stone's throw from the south shore of Geist Reservoir, but it's also a mere five miles east of Castleton. Michael's is near the intersection of Fox and Oaklandon roads, easily accessible from 82nd Street or Fall Creek Road.