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RUSTY SPOON SHINES AS A  
NEW DOWNTOWN GASTROPUB  
By Joseph Hayes

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# CITY DINING



## SAVORY 'SPOON' | 68

The Rusty Spoon, the new restaurant at 55 West, is a winner, using a bounty of fresh ingredients from local farms. Among the delights: the Lake Meadow salad (above) boasting a soft-boiled egg atop chicken livers, escarole and spinach.

RUSTY SPOON

ROY'S

LUMA'S WINE EXPERT

RECOMMENDED EATING

Rusty Spoon owner/chef Kathleen Blake says she doesn't cook anything fancy, but her dishes still manage to impress.

[REVIEW]

# A Shiny Spoon

There are no signs of rust on Kathleen Blake's new gastropub on Church Street. **By Joseph Hayes**

## THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE ABOUT

The Rusty Spoon is the aroma. The smell of roasting and braising meat hits you before you reach the front door, a siren call that would make it difficult to change your mind and not go in the new restaurant at the base of the 55 West condo tower on Church Street.

When asked what they're up to in the kitchen that creates those aromas, Kathleen Blake says, "We're cooking, fast and furious."

The very busy Blake came to Orlando from top restaurants in Philadelphia and San Francisco to run the kitchen at Primo at the JW Marriott Orlando, Grande Lakes, where she cooked some extraordinary meals. Blake, 46, is now chef/owner at The Rusty Spoon and at Pine 22, the design-your-own-burger place

on Pine Street. She's also the executive chef at Urban Flats Flatbread & Wine Co. on South Orange Avenue. "Right now I'm at Rusty Spoon 100 percent of the time," she says.

She sources local ingredients whenever possible, like hydroponically grown produce from Waterkist Farm in Sanford, pork from Palmetto Creek Farms in Avon Park, and eggs and chicken from Ocoee's Lake Meadow Naturals (which I profiled in our September 2009 issue). Items are in and out of supply so rapidly that the menu changes every week.

"My food isn't really fancy," Blake says. "Basically, they're riffs on classic European and American dishes."

Like a big novel or a well-sequenced jazz album, there is a rhythm to a meal at The Rusty Spoon, a storyline that starts out simple and gets



The Dirty South stew, far left, and lamb sandwich are among Rusty Spoon's better menu items.

progressively richer and more complex. You think you might recognize some of the characters along the way, and yet they manage to surprise you.

Take the lowly onion ring. The menu calls them "Rusty O-Rings" (\$6). Soaked in buttermilk, battered and quick-fried in very hot oil, these are Vidalia onion segments so sweet that it's hard to decide if the generous shower of sea salt is the perfect touch, or if a dredge of powdered sugar, ala beignets, would be better. I'm going to go back and ask them to try it.

Charred squid steak and octopus (\$13) is something approaching a Greek take on salad Niçoise: broad romano beans cooked just until they snap, thumb-sized new potatoes, peppery arugula, all complementing some of the ten-

#### THE RUSTY SPOON

**ADDRESS** 55 W. Church St., Orlando

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**WEB** [therustyspoon.com](http://therustyspoon.com)

**ENTREES** \$9-\$26

derest bits of octopus and squid I've ever had. It's dressed in an exquisite vinaigrette made with what tastes like a very expensive Balsamic vinegar, which sits in a small oak cask in the kitchen like an Italian treasure.

The Lake Meadow salad (\$9), a homage to Dale Volkert's chicken and egg farm, places an opal-like soft boiled egg atop pan-fried chicken livers and tender, buttery escarole and young spinach leaves. When you slice into the egg it runs caressingly

down the mound of leaves and mingles with the warm bacon dressing, creating a different delectable taste with every bite.

Rusty Spoon is labeled a gastropub, and a pub, gastro or otherwise, wouldn't be complete without sandwiches. The "Handheld" section of the menu offers several. The lamb sandwich (\$12) features tender, lean meat from Jamison Farm in the Appalachian foothills of Pennsylvania, used by the finest restaurants in the country. The slow-braised lamb is piled on a toasted Moroccan flatroll and topped with sweet and sour *agrodolce* sauce and salty house-made ricotta salata. Slow down and savor this work of art.

Southern cooking plays heavily into the main course choices; my order of the Dirty South stew

(\$21) matched rock shrimp (a bit overcooked), local yellowtail snapper (so fresh it practically swam to the table) and tender tiny clams from the Indian River just north of Titusville with a very savory shrimp court-bouillon sauce that begged for sopping. Ask for more bread.

The end of this particular story is a simple choice: a trio of house-made puddings (no) or palm-sized, fresh fruit compote-filled donuts (heavens, yes; each dessert \$7).

The restaurant's tables wrap around an active and noisy bar (it's a huge, high space) with quieter booths near the kitchen, facing a marvelous brick wall hung with pictures from local farms. The bare Edison bulbs hanging in bunches from the ceiling are a nice, steampunk touch.

The output from local farms is traditionally light during the hot summer months, and Blake says she's looking forward to the fall bounty. It will be very interesting to see what new adventures she turns out. □