

ARKANSAS TIMES

Modern look, classic dishes at The Avenue

You'll find elevated comfort food there.

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- BEAUTIFUL AND DELICIOUS: The Confit Duck Leg, with braised lentils, candied beets and an orange-blossom demi-glace.

Hot Springs is a mixed bag. There are some restaurants, joints, dives and old hotels that have that classic Garden and Gun-type of feel. Quaint, old-school Southern style at its rickety, out-of-date best. There are also the nightmarish tourist-trap souvenir shops where you can get a tie-dyed bikini and a pack of Marlboro 100s all in one go. It's because of this dichotomy that we tend to greet upstart restaurants in the Spa City with a healthy dose of skepticism. We wondered which category The Avenue, a new eatery on the bottom floor of the Waters Hotel, would fall into: a unique contribution to a developing food scene or a trap set for tourists? Stepping through the door, you see it's the former.

The Avenue is sleek, clean and well lit. A wall of windows lined with barstools looks out onto Central Avenue, a perfect perch for people-watching. The marble bar is underlit with blue LEDs. Modern light fixtures let you know you're somewhere brand new and framed black-and-white photos positioned along the walls let you know you're also sipping cocktails in a place with some history.

The Butternut Latkes (\$6) seemed like a good start, and we were not disappointed. Instead of potatoes, shredded butternut squash takes center stage. The three thin pancakes are fried to a crisp golden brown. They're topped with a patch of melted gouda and surrounded with a spiced pear puree. The squash's natural sweetness shines through, offset by the rich, smoky cheese on top. There's a nice grilled crunch to it, too. The puree, with a touch of nutmeg, deepens the flavor of the dish.

The Brussels Salad (\$8) was next. Sauteed Brussels sprout leaves were tossed in a tangy white balsamic vinaigrette and served warm. Dried cranberries, toasted pecans and freshly grated Parmesan cheese are presented in an artful stroke across the plate (but do mix them up). It's a dish that shows a chef's understanding of flavor and texture with ingredients that aren't too fussy: crunchy pecans, tart and chewy cranberries, wilted but firm greens. If you took just one ingredient away, the dish would not have been the same. Be aware that this portion is quite small. Stingy eaters will want one all to themselves.



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- PEAR AND CRANBERRY COBBLER: The perfect cold-weather dessert.

Our server had more than earned our trust with her appetizer recommendations so we went with her two favorite entrees as well. The Confited Duck Leg (\$26) was a vision, beautifully presented and just as well executed. A hearty duck leg, cooked in its own fat, sat atop a mound of braised lentils surrounded by candied beets, and was topped with an orange blossom demi-glace and micro greens. The duck nearly bested a plate we had in Paris just weeks before. Seriously. The dish is a perfect example of elevated comfort food. Rich and satisfying. The duck's crisp, salty skin covered beautiful chunks of tender meat. The lentils were cooked to a perfect al dente. The beets provided a nice earthy note. And the orange demi-glace married everything together.

The Pan-Fried Halibut (\$28) proved just as tasty. Normally, the menu offers flounder, but we weren't disappointed by the substitution. The halibut was coated ever-so-lightly in Parmesan breadcrumbs, which gave the tender (yet firm) fish a heavenly light crunch. It was served with grilled broccolini and blistered cherry tomatoes, and topped with a nice beurre blanc. Broccolini is one of our favorite sides and at The Avenue it was perfectly cooked. The tart little tomatoes helped cut through some of the richness. Overall, it was a very balanced plate of food and one we'll order again.

We're usually a sucker for anything chocolate, but we passed up the black forest cake to go with the recommended pear and cranberry cobbler (\$10). This is a perfect cold-weather dessert. Warm pears and plump cranberries sit in a sauce that's got to contain a healthy dose of maple syrup and orange. We picked up a hint of cloves and cinnamon, too. It's served with a not-very-sweet biscuit (which is just fine by us) and a dollop of homemade whipped cream. We hope this special becomes a regular offering.

Being Little Rockers, we don't often consider Hot Springs when thinking about what to do on a Friday night, but The Avenue is definitely worth the drive and the extra time investment, especially for a date night or a special occasion.

The Avenue

340 Central Ave. (The Waters Hotel)

Hot Springs

501-625-3850

thewatershs.com/the-avenue-restaurant

Quick Bite The Avenue features a long list of custom cocktails. The Waters Martini (\$8) is made with Effen cucumber vodka, lime and cucumber simple syrup, and a lavender

liqueur. Beyond being extremely tasty and refreshing, it's beautiful: a subdued electric blue, served in a martini glass, with a bright orange flower for a garnish.

The Buffalo Negra (\$8) is a rather tart concoction, featuring Basil Hayden bourbon, fresh basil, a brown sugar cube, balsamic syrup, and a splash of ginger beer. The overall effect is of a simple bourbon and coke, but better. The fragrance of fresh basil is nice on the nose.

Hours

4 p.m. to 10 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday.

Other Info

Full bar, credit cards accepted.