

Downtown

Restaurant Guide for Downtown.

Aquavina

This beautiful seafood restaurant overlooks The Green, giving it one of the best patios in town. Inside, the look is both warm and cool, with undulating artwork all around. Owner Stefan Latorre has given talented chef Jason Pound freedom to create, which works out well for us. 435 S. Tryon St. (704-377-9911) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), FSB, P, R.

Arpa

One might call Arpa "starter fine dining." What was once an all-tapas menu with Spanish influence has morphed into a more traditional appetizer/entrée menu, although it still boasts plenty of small plates. The young and hip love the 1970s-inspired décor (check out the cool woven wallpaper on the left wall) and the large, comfortable, lounge-ish bar area. The wine list is extensive and accessible. 129 W. Trade St. (704-372-7792) \$\$\$, D (Mon-Sat), FSB, P, R.

Blue

Alex Myrick's Blue has settled into a groove. The interior, full of rich colors and artful touches, is undeniably beautiful. The front and back of the house run, for the most part, like clockwork. And Executive Chef Gene Briggs turns out a Mediterranean-inspired menu that has no weak points. Fifth and College, in the Hearst Tower. (704-927-2583) \$\$\$, D (Mon-Sat), FSB, P.

Capital Grille

A classic steak house chain, complete with a large bar for sipping martinis and seeing and being seen and a dining room that exudes elegance and power. The steaks, as expected, are excellent, and the wine list, as required, is deep. Big deals go down in the private rooms. 201 N. Tryon St. (704-348-1400) \$\$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (nightly), FSB, R.

Coco Osteria

The more casual sibling to the nearby Luce, Coco is a great bet for a simple-but-solid Tuscan meal. The kitchen uses the same ingredients as Luce, so you know everything's fresh and house-made. A well-edited wine list and cozy space round out the experience. 214 N. Tryon St. (704-344-8878) \$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), BW, P.

Ember Grille

This gem sparkles inside the Westin Hotel, with its excellent prix-fixe menu made up of American creations with a Southern tinge. Pulsing light panels back up the bar, and the Westin's signature modern luxury decor is represented by custom wood flooring, plush seating, and a soaring view of downtown. 601 S. College St., inside the Westin. (704-335-2064) \$\$\$, BF, L, D, FSB, P. Open daily.

Latorre's

The creative, Latin American-inspired cuisine in this hip urban setting is excellent and unlike any other restaurant in the city. The upstairs tables make way for Latin dancing on Friday and Saturday nights. 118 W. 5th St. (704-377-4448) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), FSB. Closed Sun.

LaVecchia's Seafood Grill

Owner Nick LaVecchia is back in the kitchen, trying to recapture the magic. It seems to be working. Crowds are once again flocking to the still-hip-looking spot. The seafood-and-steak menu leans toward the traditional, with a Southern bent, but that can be a good thing—as it is here. Beautiful people still populate the bar, and now there's a jazz trio on Friday and Saturday evenings. 225 E. 6th St., inside Seventh Street Station. (704-370-6776) \$\$\$, D (Mon-Sat), P, FSB.

Luce

Augusto Conté, also of Toscana, has gone downtown in grand style. Luce is a beautiful, intimate, luxurious restaurant with simple but innovative Italian cuisine. 214 N. Tryon St. in Hearst Plaza. (704-344-9222) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), FSB, R.

McCormick & Schmick's

This seafood chain has its fish flown in daily, allowing it to change the menu every day. You'll find a horde of seafood dishes here, from the mundane to the sublime. Inside, lots of dark wood and mirrors lend an Irish-pub feel. 200 S. Tryon St. (704-377-0201) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D, FSB, R.

The McNinch House

Reservations are required at the McNinch House. You can expect to be treated like royalty during this unique five-course meal (you choose your entrée, but everything else, including the wine, is chosen for you). Charlotte's premier special-occasion restaurant. 511 N. Church St. (704-332-6159) \$\$\$\$, D, FSB, R.

Mert's Heart and Soul

James Bazzelle's pride and joy features down-home Southern cooking, with a dash of Low Country, in a downtown-feeling place. 214 N. College St. (704-342-4222) \$, BR (Sat) L (daily), D (daily), BW. Open late Fri-Sat.

Mimosa Grill

Chef Tom Condron's nouveau Southern menu changes seasonally, but it always features an excellent filet mignon, wonderful seafood, and interesting grits concoctions. The bar is a popular after-work gathering spot. 301 S. Tryon St. (704-343-0700) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (nightly), FSB, P.

Monticello

A little jewel in the historic Dunhill Hotel, Monticello pays homage to its Jeffersonian namesake with a focus on the classics. The wine list includes a page of featured wines by the glass; Spanish wines from Eric Solomon Selections have had a turn. High Tea Fri-Sun. 235 N. Tryon St. (704-342-1193) \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$, BF, L, D, FSB, P, R.

Morton's, The Steakhouse

Morton's is still the model for most steak houses. It's been tweaked a bit with the times—adding more seafood, for one—and it still nails the important parts: steaks, service, wine, and classic martinis. 227 W. Trade St., in the Carillon building. (704-333-2602) \$\$\$, D, FSB, R.

Ruth's Chris

With the opening of location number two, downtown denizens who like their steaks huge, juicy, and sizzled in butter no longer have to travel to SouthPark. This Ruth's Chris brings power dining to South Tryon Street—not to mention some fine New Orleans-style barbecued shrimp. 222 S. Tryon St. (704-338-9444) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (nightly), FSB, R.

Savannah Red

Don't expect the typical hotel fare at this posh nook inside the Marriott City Center. Amidst fiery décor, the menu pays homage to and challenges Southern cuisine with dishes such as Memphis-style pork chops with collards and grits and Krispy Kreme bread pudding. Carve out time for a glass in the wine bar beforehand. 100 W. Trade St. in the Marriott City Center. (704-333-9000) \$\$\$, D (Mon-Sat), FSB, R.

Sonoma Modern American

Pierre Bader and Executive Chef Tim Groody's flagship oozes modern cool, with ebony tables, blue and green tiles, and a lounge-y bar area. Groody's contemporary American menu, which changes seasonally, is heavy on organic ingredients and pure flavors. The wine list is a delightful romp. 100 N. Tryon St., in Founders Hall. (704-332-1132) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), FSB, R.

NEW LISTING**Taverna 100**

Pierre Bader explores his Mediterranean roots with this one. With Tim Groody in the kitchen, you know the exploration is bound to be fruitful. Various lamb offerings and small plates such as crab tabbouleh set Taverna apart from Sonoma and Town (Bader and Groody's other places), while rotisserie meats and smashed potatoes will keep everyone happy. The look inside is warm and loungey, and the staff will get you to the neighboring Blumenthal on time. 100 N. Tryon St. (704-344-0515) \$\$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), FSB, R.

Town

This urbane eatery was the second restaurant opened by the dynamic duo of Pierre Bader and Tim Groody. The menu is very simple: You make your own meal from categories such as fish and shellfish, meat, salads, vegetables, and mushrooms. Order as much or as little as you like. Stay a while or eat and run. Just have drinks (at a very cool bar). At Town, you make your own experience, and you feel very cool doing it. 710 West Trade St. (704-379-7555) \$\$, L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sat), FSB.

Zink

At this American-style bistro, elegant, old-world architectural remnants from the previous occupant blend (mostly) with elements of "American cool"—including silent movies flickering on a screen that drapes the back of the dining room. The menu mixes stylized comfort food with lots of small plates and, yes, sushi. A hip patio overlooks the uptown action. Complimentary valet parking available. 201 N. Tryon St. (704-444-9001) \$\$\$, BR (Sun), L (Mon-Fri), D (Mon-Sun), FSB, P. Open late.