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CHARLOTTE LIVING



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Beefeaters *Rejoice*

MODERN AMERICAN STEAKHOUSE IN UPTOWN'S RITZY NEIGHBORHOOD



WHEN CHEF LAURENT TOURONDEL FIRST OPENED HIS namesake bistro as a steakhouse, it was with the idea of presenting dinners with his adaptation of the traditional American steakhouse concept tweaked with Tourondel's signature style. Tourondel, named 2007 Restaurateur of the Year by *Bon Appétit* magazine, has BLT restaurants around the world, including BLT Market, BLT Prime, BLT Fish and BLT Burger.

His concept for BLT Steak is different than the name might suggest. While high quality beef cooked to perfection is certainly a mainstay, instead of making the focus simply on an oversized portion of steak-on-a-plate served with a host of oh-so-ordinary sides, this more-than-a-steakhouse dining experience integrates the traditional elements of the cozy French bistros of Tourondel's homeland (as do all of his BLT concept restaurants) with a focus on fine American cuisine. Combine that with a top notch dining experience, superb service and high quality ingredients, and the sum of the parts is a winning combination, with a menu that offers prime cuts of beef, freshly caught seafood, scrumptious side dishes and tempting desserts.

CHARLOTTE'S TAKE

With nearly 20 BLT restaurants around the world, many, but not all, located in Ritz-Carlton properties, Tourondel cannot be everywhere, so he relies on talented Chefs de Cuisine in each BLT city who have the culinary capabilities to carry out his vision. In Charlotte that talent belongs to Chef Aksel Theilkuhl. Tourondel wants his restaurants to be chef-driven with a taste of local ingredients, and to that end, gives his chefs like Theilkuhl the flexibility to create their own range of daily blackboard specials as well as showcasing Tourondel's signature items available at every BLT Steak.

BILL OF FARE

Your BLT experience at lunch and dinner will start with a basket of warm giant popovers bubbling with gruyere, brought to the table in place of bread. Along with the popovers comes Tourondel's signature recipe, but rather than make them yourself, just come to BLT to enjoy. At breakfast the popovers are served as a morning sandwich stuffed with ham, poached egg, bacon, gruyere and hollandaise—what a way to start the day!

At dinner, learn the popovers with several appetizers, and you'll be off to a great start. Hard to pick a favorite, but the chicken liver spread is a must, and if you love fresh fish, you won't want to miss the Hamachi plate beautifully served with avocado, pickled ramps or radishes and a honey orange sauce. The tuna is another of Tourondel's signature starters and is geometrically presented as a block dressed with a light but flavorful soy lime dressing. Salads and soup change with the season, but it goes without saying that each one is a work of art on a plate.

Before we get to the main course, a word about BLT's signature sides. Meant to enhance the meal, I could create my own little vegetable plate out of a combination of any three or four. They each come cleverly presented in petite cast-iron Staub casseroles with a lid which makes them even more fun to pass around at the table. Our favorites include the sauté of Hen of the Woods mushrooms, creamy jalapeno mashed potatoes, spicy BBQ corn, grits & gorgonzola and leek and potato hash browns. More standard offerings such as the grilled asparagus, creamed spinach and potato gratin are equally as delicious.

Entrees include a selection of Theilkuhl's blackboard specials which feature a good bit of local product and change from week to week. Favorites of many regular BLT guests are his cassoulet and his rich risottos, most recently made with saffron, rock shrimp and tomato, and finished with a chardonnay broth.

As for entrees, while the name says steak, the spectrum is much broader. Seafood items include an incredibly delicate Dover Sole, flown in fresh daily from Holland; marinated Alaskan black cod; grilled branzini; grilled lobster and a spiced tuna dressed in barbecue sauce with a citrus finish. Theilkuhl's three blackboard entree specials each day round out the offerings.

For those asking "where's the beef?", you've come to the right place.

Not only does BLT steak offer American Wagyu and certified Black Angus beef, but now also certified Japanese Kobe beef—yes the real thing, marbled to a fault with official papers that say it really did just fly in from Japan. The cost for the highest grade of Japanese Kobe is daunting at \$26 per ounce, making an 8-oz. steak top out at over \$200, but if you are up for adventure and a once (or maybe twice) in a lifetime cut of beef—go for it, you'll not find a better dining establishment in which to savor the experience.

Steaks at BLT are served with your choice of

classic sauces from béarnaise to blue cheese. Finishing off the beefier side of things, BLT also offers a double cut rack of lamb, a confit of chicken, a crusted veal chop and a tender duck breast.

Desserts end the meal, and you simply must try one or two. Share with the table, but don't miss the signature crêpe soufflé with passion fruit sauce, the peanut butter chocolate mousse with banana ice cream or the carrot cake with ginger ice cream. BLT Charlotte's own pastry chef, Tammy Harrison, and her team do an outstanding job and are responsible for all of the breads and pastries, all done on site and in house.

While dinner is indeed a treat at BLT, breakfast seems to be the meal that has many Charlotteans talking. The menu includes an 8 oz. strip steak n' eggs, a vegetable frittata with portobello, asparagus, fresh goat cheese and vine ripe tomatoes; and the famed BLT Popover I mentioned earlier. Hearty sides like Apple Wood smoked bacon and thyme roasted potatoes pair perfectly with any breakfast entrée and get you set for your day.

Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, while Charlotte's BLT Steak is located off the lobby of The Ritz Carlton, it should be noted that BLT Steak does not handle the hotel's room service or banquet functions and, much to the frustration of many guests, does not serve drinks or food in the Ritz's lobby bar—all of that is done by the Ritz's food and beverage service which is a separate entity all together.

BLT Steak does offer private dining services in a beautifully appointed room in the restaurant able to accommodate 24 for a seated dinner or a cocktail reception for up to 35. BLT also has its own small bar for guests to linger as they enjoy a cocktail or glass of wine before or after their meal.

Looking for a tasty little way to end your workday? Turn to BLT for the restaurant's new "5 At 5" nightly bar menu, featuring a selection of savory appetizer plates all priced at \$5 from 5-7 p.m. each evening. The assortment includes: Steak Sliders finished with aged cheddar and caramelized onion jam, Long Island duck rilette with green apple salad and crispy grilled sourdough, a fun Kobe all-beef hot dog dressed with Japanese mustard and served on a poppy seed bun, melt-in-your-mouth miniature crabcakes finished with a Meyer lemon aioli and sweet potato fries with a rosemary and blue cheese sauce for dipping. *

BLT Steak is located at 110 N. College Street in The Ritz-Carlton Charlotte and is accessible from the streetside entrance as well as via the hotel lobby. Call 704.972.4380 or visit bltrestaurants.com for reservations or more information.

