

DALLAS

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NOVEMBER 2008 \$5.95





Ellerbe Fine Foods

RATING: ★★★★★

1501 W. Magnolia Ave.,
Fort Worth, 817.926.3663,
ellerbefinefoods.com

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
★★ = good, above average;
★★★ = very good, well above norm;
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary
in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple
visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall
reaction to food, ambience and service.

HOURS Tues-Thurs, 11AM-2PM,
5:30PM-9PM
Fri: 11AM-2PM,
5:30PM-10PM
Sat: 5:30PM-10PM

WHAT TO EAT: *If it's in season, order it. Don't pass up anything on the menu that includes a cheese made by a local cheese maker, especially Latte Da's feta, Deborah's goat cheese or Brazos Valley's blue.*

WHO GOES: *Restaurant groupies, locavores, farmers, the nuts-and-granola crowd, even reluctant spouses (who will usually find a steak or a chicken breast—free range, of course—that won't scare them off). Ellerbe is hot; make a reservation or risk a long wait for a table on the busiest nights.*

WHAT TO WEAR: *Leave the baubles and pearls at home. Yes, you can wear leather or a three-piece suit, but people are going to stare. And be forewarned: No valet means sensible shoes—or a driver.*

The Cowtown Local

Simple, seasonal and worth the trip! A FW newcomer is the hottest stop on the slow-food track

| By Michael Hiller | Photography by Cyndi Long |

To like Ellerbe Fine Foods, a new chambered nautilus of a restaurant on Fort Worth's west side, you don't really need to know that the starched aprons displayed on a wall as if they were gallery art once belonged to the chef's grandmother, but you'll wonder about them. Nor is it vital to know that Ellerbe takes its name from the Shreveport, Louisiana, street that the chef's grandparents lived on, but you'll wonder about that, too. Or that Ellerbe's chef, Molly McCook, and her business partner, Richard King, have been friends since childhood. But these are good questions to ponder. Their answers are strong hints that Ellerbe reveres slower times, thoughtful cooking and carefully selected ingredients.

Its simplicity is reflected in the menu, too, which is free of molecular madness and fusion clashes. Ellerbe walks the local-seasonal tightrope, teetering between farm and table. Occasionally, a dish or two might fall off, but it doesn't diminish Ellerbe's overarching style.

The big picture is the little picture here—see it in the quality of peaches (perfectly ripe, both sweet and tart), corn (a squeaky fresh ear), feta cheese (firm yet impossibly creamy and briny, from Flower Mound's Latte Da Dairy),

even pats of butter and table salt (Plugra and pink Himalayan).

Natural light washes the restaurant's interior of painted brick, exposed wooden rafters and glossy white beaded board. It spills in from big plate glass windows and through a large skylight. The dining space feels right. Its clean lines, wooden chairs, and white tablecloths covered with a square of craft paper feel unpretentious, welcoming even. It's straightforward, honest, soulful. Housed in what was once a dilapidated 1920s service station, Ellerbe is not simply another refueling station where quantity is more prized than quality. In this urban-makeover-happy crook of Magnolia Avenue, Ellerbe Fine Foods projects enough sophistication and swagger to be the nexus of a fun night out. A meal here will leave you and your wallet feeling pleasantly satisfied.

Fruits and vegetables seem to be Ellerbe's wheelhouse. Ingredients are often listed with their provenance: Littlejohn Farms peppers, Scott Farms eggplant, Mexia peaches. You could almost taste

SEA CHANGE P.E.I. mussels and littleneck clams, with a farmers market vegetable stew, cannellini beans, orecchiette and pistou. *Top right:* Bread service.

late August's heat and the intense summer sun in the homegrown tomato salad, which was on the menu last month. The tomatoes didn't need to lean on the crispy cornmeal hushpuppy croutons or the knobs of creamy Brazos Valley blue cheese to carry the load. Ellerbe dresses its salads with a judicious hand; it certainly doesn't take the position that a potent vinaigrette or a cold buttermilk dressing is needed to cover any blemish, rescue any flaw. Try the roasted halibut or the sautéed black cod on maque choux and crawfish, and admire that Ellerbe pays attention to the humblest of ingredients—how that fresh corn plays against the crisp exterior of the fish and its mild, flaky interior; how its sweetness accentuates the salinity and meatiness of the crawfish tails; how it seems to singlehandedly tie

together the disparate mix of onions, garlic, peppers and tomatoes in the maque choux.

I doubt that Deborah's Farmstead chèvre has ever tasted as good as when Ellerbe crumbles it with chunks of cantaloupe and watermelon, then tosses it with sheets of salty prosciutto, a handful of arugula and a judicious splash of balsamic vinaigrette.

Ellerbe doesn't demonstrate quite as much finesse when it cooks from the pantry as when it cooks from the farm. Beside an exceptional veal picatta sat a slightly gummy risotto. Undercooked cannellini beans anchored the soupy base of an otherwise terrific fillet of grilled sablefish. Still, I wouldn't hesitate to order either dish again. But because the focus is seasonal, something better will probably replace them anyway.

Ellerbe's menu is confined to a single page. So is the wine list—a fairly priced collection that favors small producers and includes a few unfamiliar names. Listed on it are gems like the 2007 Ramian Estate's Grenache rose from Napa (\$28 bottle, \$8 glass), and the 2005 Amalie Robert Pinot Noir from Oregon's Willamette Valley (\$65), perfect for a patio sunset in autumn's cooler weather. There are about a dozen wines by the glass—

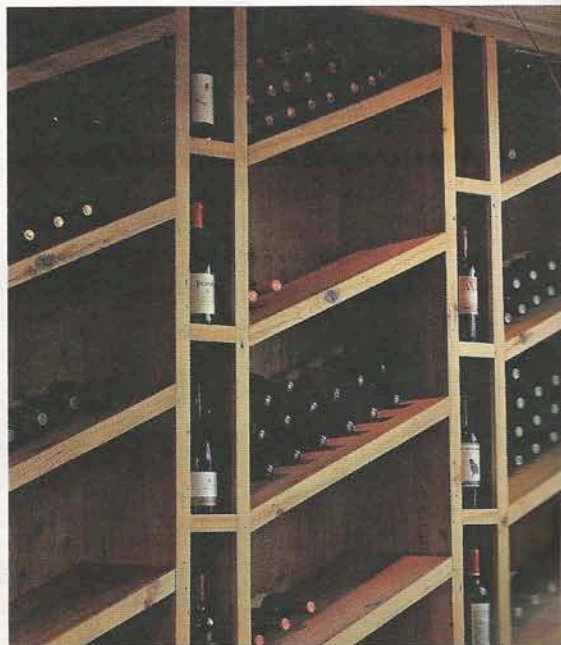
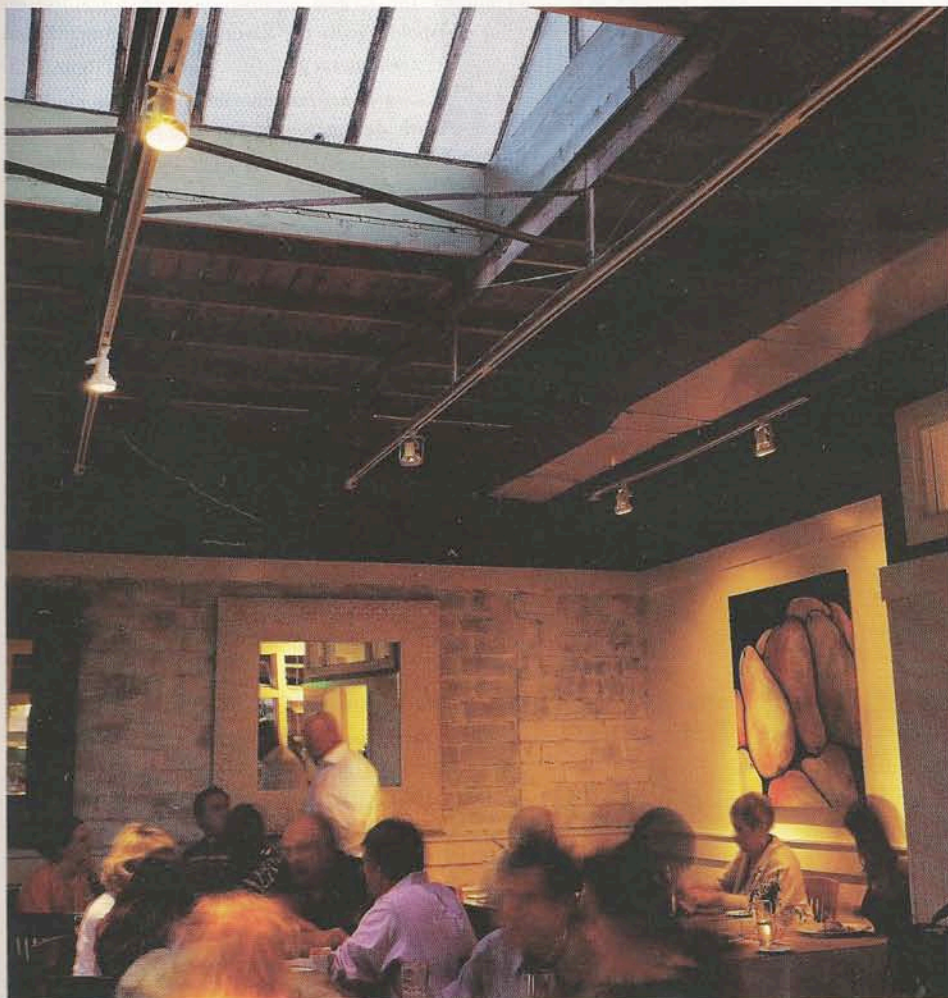
nearly as many as there are items on the dinner menu.

Service is usually efficient and the staff informative, but at times the operation felt disjointed. On one visit, empty plates needed clearing, water glasses needed refilling, and it seems unthinkable in this hobbled economy that anyone considering the purchase of a wine selling by both the glass and the bottle should be refused a taste first, if requested. (Our waiter first told us he was not permitted to provide samples, but then brought one anyway.)

Ellerbe does not serve mixed drinks or spirits, but you can bring your own wine (there's a \$20 corkage fee) and park your own car (there's no valet), which seems like a fair trade to me. If you visit on one of Ellerbe's best nights, when the kitchen is firing on all cylinders, you should finish dinner with a pot of French press coffee and the custardy Maw Maw's Bread Pudding, which sings in notes of cinnamon and butter and cream.

There are few better ways to dine west of downtown Dallas than to venture to Ellerbe, a half hour away. Ellerbe deserves all the early recognition it has received. A meal here is worth the drive and worth the calories. Isn't that all you really need to know? ■

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FILL 'ER UP!
Clockwise from far left: Sophisticated bottom fare has replaced automobile service in Ellerbe's dining room, once a filling station. Wine cellar. Sugar Queen and Magnolia Figs salad with Mozzarella Co. Bismarck shaved prosciutto and balsamic reduction.