

Ashbell's

Where the food has true grit.

Soul food is the food of my childhood. For me, cornbread, slow-roasted pork and collard greens are synonymous with Sunday dinners at my grandmother's house in Texas. It conjures up images of sitting on the porch swing on a hot afternoon, chasing horned toads into the honeysuckle and catching lightning bugs in a jar. But few Londoners have these associations, and therefore it is entirely possible that this new Notting Hill eatery is one of the most exotic restaurants in town. After all, to most people in London, Moroccan tagines are more familiar than grits and gumbo.

The small ground-floor dining room is nicely used (if a little gaudy), with long banquettes strewn with soft cushions, sparkling candles and gold batik wall-coverings. The friendly staff lured us into trying the house watermelon Martini, made with watermelon purée and 'moonshine' (which tastes suspiciously like a combination of vodka and bourbon). It was sweet and syrupy with a slight bitter undertone, but nice nonetheless.

The bread basket contained moist squares of cornbread, warm Southern biscuits (like scones without sugar) and a little jar of sweet-tart apple butter. We'd just devoured these, when our starter of sage sausage arrived in the shape of little patties, perfectly flavoured and impossibly fresh.

For mains, we chose from offerings including Carolina seafood gumbo and fried tilapia, finally settling on the smoked duck breast and the grilled pork belly. The duck – so tender it had the consistency of butter – was perfectly complemented by creamy grits (made from ground corn, similar to polenta) and rich, dark gravy. The pork was similar in consistency and flavour to pork loin, and was marinated in

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Grand Marnier and served with stewed apples and sweet potato – a flawless combination – with a shared side order of tasty collard greens (much like spring greens).

The desserts were the only off-note. There were no light options, which you need after such hearty fare. We went for the peach cobbler – stewed peaches with a scone-like crust, but the peaches had been flavoured with too much ginger, which overpowered the fruit.

The main problem McElveen will face is the sheer unfamiliarity of his approach to Southern regional cooking. In one recent review, the critic all but laughed at it, calling it 'five-star prison food' – an ignorant condemnation of a region of the US, and one that does little to challenge racial stereotypes, as the roots of soul food (one facet of Southern regional cooking) are largely in the black community. But I believe Londoners are smarter than that particular critic, and a sophisticated lot, to boot. And with time, such a talented chef and such simple, good food will surely win them over. *Christi Daugherty*

Ashbell's 29 All Saints Rd, W11 1HE
(020 7221 8585) Ladbroke Grove/
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Time Out

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CONSUME

FOOD & DRINK