

# **FRESH, SEASONAL AND INSPIRED Bustling little eatery celebrates the art of good food [FOOD STUDIO B, 5511 U.S. 280 East Suite109, 965-3682. ]**

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The motto for Food Studio B, "where nature meets the kitchen," was inspired by the birth of a child. When owner Sean Butler became a father two years ago, he started looking real hard at the food his family was eating.

Butler trained at the Natural Gourmet Institute in New York in the 1990s (and before that in his grandmother's kitchen), and he says organic and naturally raised foods have always been his style. Eventually, he decided to leave his position as executive chef for Blue Cross and Blue Shield and open his own place. The "Food Studio" part of the name is a nod to the artistic nature of what he and his team do with food. The "B" comes from his main inspiration: his son Brayden.

Food Studio B, in business now for about three months, has a strong commitment to things that are fresh, seasonal, and hormone and pesticide free. The eatery's purveyors are a Who's Who of naturally raised, sustainable and organic methods: Painted Hills beef, Destiny Produce, Higher Ground Roasters and Choice organic teas. They get Duroc pork from Vande Rose Farms in Iowa, bacon from Eden Farms, and chickens and turkeys from Tanglewood Farms. Closer to home, the eggs come from Averiette Branch Farm in Sylacauga, and they offer lovely lettuces from Snow's Bend Farm in Tuscaloosa. They try to buy locally as much as possible; indeed, sitting at the chef's counter one day, waiting for my food, I overheard a conversation in which Edwin Marty at Jones Valley Urban Farm figured in most prominently. What's more, Food Studio B is a green facility, recycling some 99 percent of the trash and encouraging patrons to do the same. Butler turns the lights on only after I walk in and sit down. They have a "truck day" here: Friday is when the produce truck arrives with the organic goodies.

Food Studio B offers a small eat-in cafe area; there's a chef's counter overlooking the kitchen and a couple of tables overlooking Highway 280. They do a brisk personal and corporate catering business, and they work with local physicians to produce calorie-specific meals for patients. Also, they provide "home meal replacement" with entire menus of microwavable meals planned for a growing number of families who want someone else to do the cooking - occasionally or on a regular basis.

Specials change from day to day. The idea is to call Food Studio B early in the morning, they tell you what's fresh and you build a meal from there. Offerings might include house-made turkey meatballs with organic linguini in a spicy tomato-vodka sauce or a Kobe beef burger with Point Reyes blue cheese and a relish of applewood smoked bacon. (This burger, which we sampled on one visit, was delicious and quite large; the fresh, juicy patty had the marks and nice, smoky flavor of the grill.) In addition to cooking according to what's fresh, inspiration is a day-to-day thing. I visited on Cinco de Mayo with the intention of picking up dinner. Once I smelled what had been cooking, I stayed and enjoyed a lunch of beer-braised pork belly tacos at the chef's counter, which was strewn with cookbooks.

It was an unexpected celebration.

The juicy meat, sinfully rich with a subtle flavor of beer, was sauteed with fresh red and orange bell peppers and sweet onions and then wrapped in green-onion tortillas. Two tacos, much more than I could comfortably eat, came with a side of white beans sauteed, while I watched, with tomatoes, peppers, onions and cilantro. Butler added three homemade salsas - a smooth puree of roasted tomatoes, jalapenos and onions; another with ancho peppers and some rich drippings from the pork; and a fresh, chunky pico de gallo. My meal came on a lovely, rustic Tena Payne platter.

My plan that day was to see how well this food travels and to get a dinner to go so we could celebrate my husband's birthday at home. This proved to be a delicious way to multitask.

A grilled chicken andouille po' boy (\$8.29) was a delicious mix of spice and sweetness. Sausage halves were layered with caramelized onions, spicy pickles and a mayonnaise-based "creolaise" spread on a toasted sourdough baguette. This came with a salad of pasta tossed with corn, black beans, avocado, tomatoes and onions: as pretty as it was tasty.

We sampled the grilled wild salmon salad (\$8.59) and loved it. A nice, thick piece of salmon was cooked just enough that we finished it when we heated it up at home. We placed the fish atop a huge mound of fresh spinach with asparagus cut on the bias; shaved carrots; sauteed mushrooms that tasted of black pepper; red and yellow sweet bell peppers; large pieces of cucumber; and lightly cooked, still-crispy green beans. A spicy sesame-ginger dressing added the perfect touch.

The black and blue salad (\$8.09) was absolutely delightful. This was a mix of lean, tender strips of grilled Painted Hills beef; caramelized onions so sweet they could have been dessert; sauteed mushrooms; red peppers; and the best mix of fresh, baby greens we've ever eaten. The arugula was superb, and we loved the tasty, pretty bunches of pea shoots with their buds and tendrils. This salad featured a nicely balanced balsamic vinaigrette.

On another visit on a recent Friday, I sat at the chef's counter and watched as they prepared my to-go lunch order.

A chili-encrusted, all natural pork tenderloin wrap (\$8.29) was just delicious. The tender, slightly spicy pork, sauteed with green salsa, came wrapped in honey-wheat flatbread with creamy pepper jack cheese, organic greens and a smidge of green chili guacamole.

The chicken salad (\$8.29) also was a hit. This is a dense, meaty concoction of poached white-meat chicken mixed with honeyed pecans, bits of tasty Braeburn apples, sun-dried cranberries and shaved celery. We got a healthy helping atop fresh, mixed greens with a side of mixed fruit (melons, strawberries, apples and grapes). The chicken salad also comes as a sandwich.

Other sandwiches include a BBQ turkey Reuben panini with turkey, kraut, Swiss cheese and spicy remoulade pressed between rustic rye bread. The cheese steak is made with Painted Hills beef, caramelized onions, roasted creminis and peppers and Tillamook aged cheddar on toasted sourdough.

I'm conflicted on the one issue I have with Food Studio B. On one hand, I enjoyed watching the chefs in action: Butler on his cell phone running from counter to cold storage talking about how "rocking" the arugula is; pastry chef Genny Bryant whisking some sweet, egg-filled concoction over the cook top; or operations director Neil Childress taking his turn at the stove sauteing my lunch while I watch and then packing my to-go order with thought and care. The downside? This is a working kitchen, and where's there's fire there's also sometimes smoke.

Also, the tables seem too far from the action, but the chef's counter can get rather small very quickly if you're seated next to someone who's loud or rude or who plops her suitcase-size handbag on the counter next to your meal. Between that and the piles of cookbooks, a couple of bank bags and various papers, the counter where we ate was pretty cluttered.

Maybe next time I'll just go with a group of friends; I know they will thank me for taking them there. Or perhaps I'll simply get my food to go again. I know now that Food Studio B does that beautifully.

Susan Swagler is a freelance restaurant reviewer for The Birmingham News.