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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBB SCHARETG



grilled double pork chop with stone-ground white cheddar grits, southern greens and a roasted Braeburn apple cognac sauce. American, yes, but

subtly international and very third millennium.

I'm usually suspicious of restaurants that bill themselves as "the hottest place in town," but in the case of Bank, the description could be accurate. And things will only get hotter when Vault—a nightclub—opens this spring in the equally vast underground space below Bank. It didn't look like much more than a super-sized basement when I visited, but I trust in the talented vision of Roman and Higashi-Glaser. Richmond night owls can look forward to a completely contemporary club scene with three distinct bars, a dance floor, striking lighting schemes and—ready?—a glass catwalk. "I want people to feel like they've entered a completely new world when they get off the elevator," Roman says of Vault.

JACKSON WARD

Though it's just a few minutes' drive from East Main Street, **Comfort Restaurant** on West Broad Street is worlds away in look and feel. If Bank is a designer cocktail, Comfort is an iced tea served in a Ball jar with a straw. Judging from the popularity of both, Richmond diners like culinary extremes—they want to be both thrilled and, well, comforted. (Don't we all?) It was almost 2 p.m. when I entered the crowded, sun-filled restaurant that occupies the ground floor of a century-old brick building, one of many being transformed these days in a neighborhood that appears to be the SoHo of Richmond: Jackson Ward. This particular stretch of West Broad Street is scattered with art galleries, cool cafés, luxury condos and, as I discovered, several appealing dining and drinking venues.

Now in its fourth year—and getting ready to open a second loca-

Far left, at Popkin Tavern, meatloaf served with mashed potatoes, gravy and green beans. Left, kitchen manager Bradley Thomas, general manager Timothy Kilkeary, server Ron Parker, and Geraldine Springs.

tion in historic Portsmouth—Comfort's return to simple Southern goodness and hospitality has apparently sparked a trend. Fed up with fusion after years of working in other Richmond kitchens, chef-owner Jason Alley created a restaurant that's also

his favorite hangout, and he devised the menu to celebrate local foods and please both locals and visitors alike. With its exposed brick walls, pressed tin ceiling, chalkboard menus and brightly colored local art on the walls, Comfort looks and feels like a local hangout. A stranger in Richmond, I pulled up a stool at the bar hopping with conversation, and within minutes I felt almost like a local myself. This comfortable feeling was intensified when I got my lunch: a divine rabbit pâté with cranberry mostarda, a quintessential roasted half-chicken served with sides of mac 'n' cheese and squash casserole and, to top it off, Comfort's signature dessert: a truly soothing banana cream tart. Alley depends upon seven or eight local farmers

and purveyors (he actually has a rabbit breeder!) to keep things seasonal, and, in addition to Southern classics such as pot roast, fried catfish, meatloaf, and pulled pork barbecue, he shakes things up with daily specials like sturgeon and skate wing.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised when he told me that most everyone working in Comfort's busy kitchen is in a band. Alley himself plays the drums whenever he gets a chance—which mustn't be too often these days, given Comfort's steadily growing, and quite diverse, fan base. "At 5:30, we're packed with business suits," the 33-year-old Alley tells me, "but by 11 it's all tattoos at the bar."

While you're in the neighborhood, be sure to pop into **Popkin Tavern**, a renewed neighborhood landmark located just across the street from Comfort. Jerry Soble ran the 5-story Popkin's Furniture in this gorgeous 1909 building for 40 years. His son, Steve Soble, a Chicago-based restaurateur with serious design talent, succeeded in restoring the building to its former glory—and then some. Open since the summer of 2006, Popkin Tavern restaurant, lounge and billiard hall is 6,000 square feet of pure retro theatrics: Huge vintage photographs of Broad Street, vintage

Below, at Popkin Tavern, Santa Fe steak salad with Romaine lettuce, grilled skirt steak, tomatoes, green onions, black beans, avocado, corn, cheddar cheese and crispy tortillas, all served with avocado ranch dressing.



furniture ads, actual wooden chairs and other well-chosen memorabilia decorate the walls. A side loft lounge above the endless, deco bar boasts original, or convincing copies of, upholstered furniture. A 100-year-old wrought iron elevator is now fitted with a romantic little table for two. And in a corner of Jerry's back office, a green steel safe original to the building still stands—partly because it's too heavy to move! Needless to say, I can see why the Richmond Historic Foundation held its 2006 annual meeting here, and if there weren't so many tempting items on the lunch, dinner and bar menus, I would certainly consider paying an admission fee just to tour the place.

Also new and noteworthy on Broad Street is **Twenty Seven**, an elegant contemporary bistro (sweeping floor-to-ceiling windows, white tablecloths) with French and Italian culinary inspiration that gets such rave reviews, it's now at the top of my list of restaurants to try the next time I'm in Richmond, which will certainly be soon.

CARYTOWN'S CAN CAN

One restaurant that I simply had to experience sooner rather than later is **Can Can Brasserie**, on Cary Street. Before dining here, make sure to pick up a vintage outfit or accessory at one of the street's many boutiques to make the illusion of time travel complete. To enter Can Can is to be instantly transported to Paris at its most flamboyant. The look of this 2-year-old restaurant and café is pure fin-de-siècle, pure Moulin Rouge, pure Toulouse-Lautrec. Instead of dancers in ruffled skirts, however, here at Christopher Ripp's tour-de-force tribute to the food, wine and romance of Paris, it's the diners who kick up their heels in vigorous approval. After visiting so many of Richmond's restored historic gems, it was hard for me to believe that every single feature of Can Can's décor—from the tarnished, gilt-framed mirrors to the subway tiles to the vintage chain-pull toilets in the bathrooms—is as new as the restaurant itself. Especially on a weekend night, when rows of revelers holding flutes of champagne or glasses of Burgundy stand two or three deep at the bar and waiters dressed in black ties and vests deliver platters of cassoulet, coq au vin and moules frites to diners seated at red banquettes, the illusion is a convincing one to say the least.

In these days of fusion and customer-pleasing compromises, it's refreshing to discover that Can Can cuts no corners when it comes

to its French allegiance. A gentleman seated next to me was politely declined when he asked for a Caesar salad (not on the menu) and, to help him understand why, I showed him my exquisite salad of red and golden champagne beets and delicate goat cheese on a bed of fluffy mache lettuce. (He was not convinced, but ordered a bowl of aromatic mussels that he unfortunately didn't offer to share.) In addition to the expansive lunch and dinner menu itself, Can Can's daily specials celebrate a different French region each month. I had to try the plat du jour from Bordeaux—a sinfully good chestnut-crusting venison in an Armagnac black pepper sauce with roasted chestnuts, braised celery and a silky pond of celery root mous-seline. Forget those creative New World pairings. To drink, I needed nothing more than a glass of earthy Bordeaux supérieure from the restaurant's impeccable 100-percent French wine list ... *merveilleux!*

Not wanting to leave this oasis of Parisian elegance in the heart of Richmond, I soaked up the joie de vivre ambience with a cup of tea and a surprisingly subtle apricot soufflé. After such dining decadence, I definitely needed to kick up my own heels and dance it off. But, alas, the Vault was still sealed for the winter, so I settled for a walk up Cary Street, visions of Can Can—and of Richmond's apparent restaurant renaissance—still swirling in my head.

FAN FARE, KUBA KUBA

Though it's certainly not new, eight-year-old **Kuba Kuba** deserves an enthusiastic mention. Located in an old deco pharmacy building on the corner of Park and Lombardy streets in the otherwise resplendently residential Fan district, this family-run Cuban café seems to fit Richmond like a favorite pair of jeans. Like a Cuban version of Comfort, the ambience here is relaxed but lively, the vibe hip but family-friendly, and the food consistently, often surprisingly good. Both neighborhood hangout and dining destination, Kuba Kuba consistently fills its 20-odd tables, handful of booths and row of counter stools with hungry diners of all ages and backgrounds. The scene on the Sunday night of my visit reflected all the diversity of Richmond—young



At Can Can, clockwise from top left: beet salad, the famous 50-foot-long zine bar and grilled lamb chops served over flagolet beans, garlic sausage, roasted red peppers, roasted pearl onions, garlic confit and lamb jus.



couples with babies shared elbow room with senior couples, and college students and groups of 30-something friends happily devoured bowls of black bean or calabaza (coconut-pumpkin) soup, plates of empanadillas, ginger shrimp and Spanish tortillas with chorizo. As popular for brunch as it is for dinner, Kuba Kuba's chef-owner Manny Mendez can apparently do everything from a huevos and Cuban sandwiches to a braised pork shank with roasted shallot demi-glace. And no one seemed to skip Manny's mama's famously moist tres leches cake. I nearly kissed my server when she told me mine was the last slice of the day.

Bank and Vault, 1005 East Main St., (804) 648-3070, Mon-Fri 11 a.m.-2 a.m., Sat 6 p.m.-2 a.m.; *Comfort*, 200 W. Broad

St., (804) 780-0004, lunch 11:30-2:30 Mon-Fri and dinner 5:30-10:30 Mon-Thurs; 5:30-11 Fri-Sat; *Popkin Tavern*, 121 W. Broad St., (804) 343-1909; *Twenty Seven*, 27 West Broad Street, (804) 780-0086, Lunch: 11:30-2 Mon-Fri, Dinner: 5-10 weekdays, 5-11 Fri-Sat; *Can Can Brasserie*, 3120 West Cary St., (804) 358-PARIS (7274), breakfast, lunch, dinner, Mon-Thurs 7 a.m.-1 a.m., Fri-Sat 7 a.m.-2 a.m., Sun 8 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; *Kuba Kuba*, 1601 Park Avenue, (804) 355-8817.