

Social Resto Cafe Bar

12 West Peachtree Place, Atlanta

By [Meridith Ford Goldman](#)
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Mother had many maxims. Wash your face every night. Always wear clean underwear. Don't squench your face up in a weird expression because it might get stuck that way. Always leave something on your plate. And of course, beware of men with French accents.

The latter may seem a bit alarmist for four middle-aged moms on a girls' night out, but at Social Resto, near the badlands of downtown (yet just around the corner from the bright lights of FAB and BLT Steak), it's important to bear in mind.

Owners Rheda and Jalil Chikhaoui are from the region of Lyon, France, and the mood at this lively restaurant is that of a small French bistro. French accents abound. And leaving something on your plate is hard to do here. Sorry, Mom.

The two brothers' parents are Tunisian, and the food reflects both cultures — grilled marquez sausage filled with spicy minced lamb and served over lentils share the bill with croquettes de brandade, a deep-fried finger food version of the classic French puree of salt cod and potatoes. They also own Fina Italian Bistro in College Park.

Social's name is a perfect fit, since the experience here is as much about the mood as it is the food. Only since it's gotten colder have I gone and found the front door closed — in warmer months it was always open, a welcome sign for passersby and regular patrons, of which there seem to be many. For a restaurant that's on an out-of-the-way street, this spot gets lots of attention.

Downstairs the tall, long communal tables beckon diners to eat together; upstairs the experience can be more intimate, where tables set with linen and flatware offer a more traditional adventure.

While there are a few duds I don't yearn to have again — namely the chicken liver over toast with raisins and brandy — most of the dishes prove to be as winning as Social's social status.

Shrimp served in a small clay pot proved a favorite more than once, peppery and bright in harissa with salty capers, and nicoise olives with the sharpness of fresh parsley to balance the heat. Braised beef meatballs brought thumbs up all around as well, richly meaty and satisfying, like a spicy Tunisian version of your Mom's meatloaf.

One of the highlights of North African cuisine is the use of the tagine for cooking meats until they are so tenderly braised and stew-like they need to be chewed only on principle. Like paella, the word serves as

the vessel and the dish; a tagine is cooked in a tagine, of course! Social specializes in both, bringing a lamb shank with toasted almonds and dried apricots or Cornish hens with lemons and nicoise olives to the table in a pleasing, homey crock (the bottom of the cone-shaped cooking vessel).

Both are deeply flavored and wonderfully layered with flavor; we ended up dipping bread and finally dumping accompanying cous cous into the broth to finish a meal, making our own little mess of goodness. And yes — the restaurant's pommes frites made for good dipping and general slopping about as well.

Service is very attentive for such a small, unassuming spot; our waiter — charming French accent and all — was always on target, even when he was bearing bad news: There was no more cava rose to serve as an aperitif. A creamy gorgonzola was now the substitute for Roquefort on our meat-and-cheese board. The coppa didn't look as good as the serrano, so we were given more of the latter and none of the former for good measure.

All small details, but handled in such a personal way that it seemed as if we were eating in someone's home, not a tiny French bistro in downtown Atlanta.

Skip dessert, save for the bread pudding, and enjoy another glass of red wine or a very well-made cup of coffee.

It's okay to squench your face into a smile.

Social Resto, 12 West Peachtree Place, Atlanta, 404-525-2246

Overall rating: ★★☆☆☆

Food: French and Tunisian

Service: Lovely

Price range: \$\$

Credit cards: Visa, Mastercard, American Express, Discover

Hours of operation: Open for lunch Monday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner Monday through Saturday from 5:30 to 10:00 p.m.

Best dishes: Harissa shrimp, braised beef meatballs, croquettes de brandade, tagines, grilled marquez

Vegetarian selections: Eggplant "caviar," red beet napoleon, cucumber salad

Children: Yes, for early evening hours

Parking: On-street or nearby lots

Reservations: Yes

Wheelchair access: Yes

Smoking: Outside only

Noise level: Medium high

Patio: Not really

Takeout: Yes

Web site: www.socialintown.com

Pricing code: \$\$\$\$\$ means more than \$75; \$\$\$\$ means \$75 and less; \$\$\$ means \$50 and less; \$\$ means \$25 and less; \$ means \$15 and less. The price code represents a typical full-course meal for one excluding drinks.

Key to AJC ratings

★★★★★ Outstanding

Sets the standard for fine dining in the region.

★★★★☆ Excellent

One of the best in the Atlanta area.

★★★☆☆ Very good

Merits a drive if you're looking for this kind of dining.

★★☆☆☆ Good

A worthy addition to its neighborhood, but food may be hit and miss.

★☆☆☆☆ Fair

Food is more miss than hit.

Restaurants that do not meet these criteria may be rated Poor.

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