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February 24, 2002

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STYLE / RESTAURANTS

**Worth Looking For**

■ G. Garvin's is hard to spot, but the newly opened place is packed.

By S. IRENE VIRBILA, Times Staff Writer

Some restaurants glide quietly into town, without a barrage of publicity or lavish dinners for investors. The chef/owner just goes into the kitchen and starts cooking.

That's what Gerry B. Garvin did, and three months after opening G. Garvin's amid the funky charm of West 3rd Street, he's filling the place regularly--even if he still doesn't have a lighted sign out front. The façade of his smart 40-seat restaurant is so dark I have trouble finding it, even on a third visit. (It's between Berri's Pizza and Zen Grill, four blocks east of the Beverly Center.) It's also small--too much so on some nights, particularly weekends.

As for now, the inviting dining room is lined with tall-backed banquettes covered in suede the color of chestnut honey. The wall sconces--candles backed with polished steel and fronted with magnifying glasses--cast a soft, interesting light. On the tables, tea lights flicker in cracked-glass holders, and bouquets of miniature calla lilies add notes of rust and orange. With the dark wood bistro chairs and crisp white linens, it's a surprisingly sophisticated look for such a congenial neighborhood spot.

I'm convinced every diner who's happened onto this easygoing little restaurant is spreading the word. Some guests I took to Garvin's two or three times have been back on their own already. Everybody in the place seems to know Garvin from other restaurants. He did a stint as executive chef at Morton's. He was chef at the late Kass Bah on Melrose Avenue, and was opening chef at Keyshawn Johnson's Reign in Beverly Hills, one of the few celebrity haunts where people were there more for the food than the scene.

Garvin grew up in Atlanta, where he was accepted into a Ritz-Carlton summer program as a teen. Instead of going to cooking school, he worked his way through the Ritz-Carlton organization and, in 1988, came out to California to open the restaurant in the then-new Ritz-Carlton in Palm Springs.

**Photos**



Chef Gerry B. Garvin  
(WILLIAM AIDASSON)

**Video**

G. Garvin's: Real Player  
(Vandewege/Virbila)  
Feb 22, 2002

G. Garvin's: QuickTime  
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**Photos**



Local sophistication  
(WILLIAM AIDASSON)

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Although trained in French cuisine, he can cook Southern in a style that's both soulful and contemporary. At Reign, I loved his perfect fried chicken, subtle smothered pork chops and fiery black-eyed peas. With his namesake restaurant, though, Garvin is taking another direction. The only vaguely Southern item on the menu is "too tender" baby back ribs, which, surprisingly, are offered as an appetizer. Though they're missing the deep wood-smoke flavor of ribs cooked in a real pit, it's all too easy to nibble these dainty ribs down to the bone, sucking in every bit of that dark, sweet, vinegary sauce that clings to the meat like melted chocolate.

What about that fried chicken? Everybody asks me that, he groans. He doesn't want to do it every night, but he may well offer Southern Sundays, with fried chicken and ribs and all the fixings. Just not quite yet. Right now Sunday is his only night off.

G. Garvin's small menu is best described as California eclectic. Though many of the dishes are familiar, each has a twist. His carpaccio, for example, is pounded filet, warmed and topped with spinach and matchsticks of fried wonton skins in a soy ginger sauce. His tuna tartare lets the taste of the impeccably fresh fish shine through. The light dressing is perfumed with sesame oil and ginger. Salmon tartare's fattiness is set off with a dollop of intensely briny black caviar.

Along with those ribs, he offers three sautéed Sonoma lamb chops as an appetizer. They're beautiful, rosy pink at the center, with a beguiling lamb flavor. Shrimp is briefly sautéed to this side of transparent and served in a sauce that packs a kick of tequila and hot pepper. Half moons of pasta stuffed with goat cheese, chicken and *shiitake* mushrooms are cloaked in a lovely Chardonnay sauce brightened with tomato. Few Italian restaurants achieve a pasta dough this supple. It's a beautifully light, graceful dish.

When he turns his hand to salads, the results are lively and delicious. He dresses leaves of arugula, that sharp, irresistible green, in extra virgin olive oil piquant with Meyer lemon and shallots. Sheaves of romaine hearts are napped in a fine Caesar dressing.

My only disappointment is that for someone so obviously skilled, Garvin seems to be playing it too safe. The menu hasn't changed a hair since he's opened, except for the occasional specials. I wish he'd take a few more chances, but perhaps that will come with time. The wine list, too, could use more depth. But the service is always personable and professional.

I'd order the roasted Colorado rack of lamb or the grilled bone-in rib-eye steak any day over the sautéed Atlantic salmon, which, despite a white wine sauce with baby artichokes, is a bit dull. Sometimes Garvin varies the chops with a green peppercorn sauce instead of the usual Port reduction, which, by the way, is never too sweet or gelatinous. The roasted half chicken is quite good, too. Spurting juice, it's lightly scented with rosemary and garlic, and accompanied by a medley of potatoes. Vegetables are invariably nicely done, whether it's freshly puréed potatoes, sautéed *haricots verts* or a garnish of fried onion rings.

On a quiet weekday night after 8, Garvin is already out of his chef's whites--dressed in a pullover, pencil stuck behind his ear, doing paperwork--when more diners arrive. Soon he's bopping between the dining room and the kitchen, carrying out plates and, for our table, presenting the desserts as he dusts powdered sugar from his hands.

There's a demure warm apple tart, a swirl of thinly sliced Granny Smith apples on a short pastry crust with a buttery caramel sauce and a ball of vanilla ice cream.

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Banana mousse cake is more like a banana pudding crowned with sliced caramelized bananas. Try the ice cream sundae, too, which is three chocolate chip cookies layered with vanilla ice cream and a house-made chocolate sauce.

G. Garvin's is off to a promising start for such a young restaurant. Catch it before it becomes impossible to get a reservation.

### **G. Garvin's**

8420 W. 3rd St.

Los Angeles

(323) 655-3888

Cuisine: California

Rating: \*\*

**AMBIENCE:** Sophisticated yet easygoing little restaurant with three-seat bar, suede banquettes and no lighted sign out front.

**SERVICE:** Warm and professional.

**BEST DISHES:** Sauteed lamb chops, "too tender" baby back ribs, sauteed tequila shrimp, arugula salad, roasted chicken, grilled bone-in rib-eye, roasted rack of lamb, banana mousse cake, warm apple tart, ice cream sundae. Appetizers, \$12 to \$17. Main courses, \$18 to \$24. Corkage, \$15.

**WINE PICKS:** 2000 Alain Graillot Crozes Hermitage Blanc, France; 1999 Hitching Post Pinot Noir, Santa Maria.

**FACTS:** Dinner Monday through Saturday. Valet parking. Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality. \*\*\*\*\*: Outstanding on every level. \*\*\*: Excellent. \*\*: Very good. \*: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory.

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