

creative loafing

"DRESSED IN THE FINEST COURTROOM PAJAMAS"

chef's table

MANAGING GRACE

“I’m a restaurant brat. My family owns and operates restaurants in Rochester, New York,” says Barbara di James, managing partner of Grace 17.20, which has garnered great reviews for its simple, quality-driven food. She holds a degree from the Culinary Institute of America and has worked at Sia’s, the Blue Ridge Grill and the Buckhead Life Group. And she’s got a “brat” of her own: Her 6-year-old son likes foie gras and, according to Mom, “makes a mean martini and can crack open a bottle of wine.”

Creative Loafing: Grace 17.20 is in a shopping center in Norcross. Why are so many upscale Atlanta restaurants in malls?

Di James: I hate to hear us described as a fine dining restaurant. That sounds like it’s a special destination only for special occasions. Having a nice restaurant in a shopping plaza brings it down a level, makes it accessible to the masses. People come in from the spa in sweat clothes. And there are no parking issues.

What would I be surprised to know about Norcross?

Our clientele appreciates nicer food and ambiance, but it’s tiresome to drive to Buckhead. The town of Norcross is very quaint, kind of like Virginia-Highland when it was up and coming. A lot of people who live here are much more sophisticated than what they are given credit for. And they have the financial means. It’s certainly the right demographic.

What’s always in your fridge at home?

Vermont butter at all times; sometimes I just eat it by itself. And 2 percent milk; I drink more milk than anybody I know! And hothouse cucumbers, and Marzetti’s blue cheese dressing. I’m addicted to it.

Is there anything you ban in your fridge at home or work?

I hate frozen vegetables. But I do keep Popsicles.

Every review has mentioned your red hair. Is it real?

Back in the day it was. I imagine if I let it go, it would be white! Good, bad or indifferent, I send my press clippings to my dad. He says, ‘Red, if you didn’t have that hair, people probably wouldn’t write about you.’

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— SUZANNE WRIGHT

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Barbara di James

