

THE ATLANTAN

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**FOOD
DRINK
REVIEW**

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Left to right: Original Sea Bass in Parchment Paper and Ludo's® Smoother King Pao Lollipop.

STRAITS TALK *Could a Singaporean restaurant backed by a famous rapper really be this good? The idea is just Ludacris*

Full disclosure: I am a huge and unabashed fan of Chris "Ludacris" Bridges—there's just something about the smooth, stylish, smart-mouthed rapper that does it for me. Last year at Lenox Square I followed the 30-year-old Grammy-winning musician and actor around a fundraiser for The Ludacris Foundation until I gathered enough courage to actually speak out a few sentences about having our picture taken together. Then, upon realizing my eyes were closed in said picture, I had some eyeballs photoshopped on my face in desperation so I could send the shot to friends and family. The eyes wound up being way too wide for the sockets and made me look like a crazy lady—which clearly I am—but if you stand 10 feet away and squint you can't tell a difference.

All of which is to say you'd think the news of a Bridges-backed restaurant venture in Atlanta would thrill a fan like me to no end, but when I first heard the rumor my beloved Luda had bought the space previously occupied by Spice in Midtown, I was concerned. Celebrity restaurants are almost always more sizzle than steak—for every Robert De Niro, there are 10 Kenny Rogers who turned their credibility to crap just to sell a few rotisserie chickens—and I couldn't stand the thought of a Ludaburger or worse. But Bridges is actually quite the shrewd businessman despite his bad-ass rapper persona, and the man who made

his name braying about Bling and babes is now the landlord and co-owner of a Singaporean restaurant called Straits.

And you'd almost never know it.

Besides the picture of Bridges and chef/co-owner Chris Yeo on the restaurant's Web site, and the accompanying music—which is a Muzak-like version of the authentic "Welcome to Atlanta" by Jermaine Dupri featuring Ludacris—there's nary a hint of any sort of star power behind Straits. No framed gold records on the walls, no T-shirt shop, no bibbowl full of business cards at the hostess stand for the "Win-A-Lunch-With-Luda" contest. Straits stands on its own as one of the best new restaurants in an increasingly flooded market, and I dare anyone who spends six seconds with a plate of King Pao lollipops to tell me otherwise.

Straits' Atlanta location is the Southern sibling of Yeo's three other California locations—San Francisco, Burlingame and San Jose/Saratosa Row—and is named for the Straits of Malacca, the waterway between Malaysia and Singapore. The cuisine is a combination of Thai, Indonesian, Chinese, Malaysian, Indian and Nonya cooking styles, which means the menu spans everything from sashimi to satay and wontons to watermelon salad, but somehow stays streamlined instead of suffering from a culinary identity crisis. This is largely thanks to



Straits chef de cuisine Tony Wang Ophios and executive chef Jackie Ng.

careful direction from Yeo, the most adorable man, who walks around the restaurant in his trademark black Kangol hat with a glass of red wine in one hand and the other stroking his chin beard, watching both diners and their food with an eagle eye and a smile.

But back to the lollipops. Every time I order Chinese food, this is exactly what I want it to taste like. Rich, moist and reddish-brown with a baked-on spicy sauce, the drumsticks come thick-side-down in a bed of crushed peanuts and just happen to be Bridges' favorite thing on the menu. They are definitely delicious, but I'm partial to the roti prata, buttery and faintly flaky griddled Indian flatbread with the most insane delicious yellow curry dipping sauce. Seriously, they could bring me a gallon of this stuff, and I'd still scrape up the last smidges of sauce with my finger. And there's more. Gorgeous raw oysters that still smell of the ocean, fresh tuna tartar with perfect wasabi aioli, and crisp phyllo samosas slightly shiny with oil and filled with peas, potatoes and hearty curry spice. The only thing I'd skip was the satay, and that's only because of the age-old problem of separating meat from stick without flinging it across the room.

Then there's the sea bass. Oh the sea bass! I'm not one for flagrant hyperbole, but this is the best fish I've ever had. And when you go there and eat it, it'll be the best fish you've ever had. And we then can start our own little Straits Sea Bass Fan Club where all we'll do is sit around and talk about the unbelievably savory broth at the bottom of the parchment box: the fish is baked in, whether or not those were little pomegranate seeds floating among the shiitakes and how we'd fail miserably if we tried to recreate it at home. I also adored the chili crab, oxtail redang and lamb with minted peas, as they were all equally layered with flavor and

STRAITS, 85 JEFFER STREET, 0471222 OR WWW.STRAITSRESTAURANTS.COM. WHAT TO WEAR: MEN WEAR NOTHING EVERYTHING-FOR-HIM. SHEETS WITH PATRIOTIC BELLS TO JEANS AND TURTLE T-S. SO FINE! GET UP BACK YOUR PEAS. ANOTHER CUB. WILL I SEE LUDACRISP PREPARING ME IN FLAT IR AND ON THE WEST COAST DRIVING MY PSYCHE. A MORE ACCURATE OF A PERSI CARP. IF PRESS THE. BEST DRESSER CALLS THE ATL HOME. WE HAD MANY ISSUES TO FIGURE OUT CHECK BY HIS INVESTOR. WHAT TO REMEMBER: SEA BASS, LAMB TARTAR SAMBA, AND THE ROTI PRATA. ORDER PLACING. WHEN TO GO: MONDAY WEDNESDAY 5 PM TO MONDAY. THURSDAY SATURDAY 5 PM TO 1 A.M.; SUNDAY BRUNCH FROM 11 A.M. TO 3 PM. **RATING: ★★★**

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above average; 4 = excellent, among the best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on each reviewer's findings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.



Luda and Ludacris.



It's a new level for all-night ball tables.

masterfully executed, but if I go back 100 times, it'll be for 100 orders of sea bass—with a side of the ultra-lazy lady finger samita.

Among the incredible but equally charming elements of Straits is the chilled-out atmosphere (courtesy of a million-dollar renovation by Johnson Sordio) featuring deep purple walls with rich ruby curtains and a mood and music mix of red orbs above the bar. The upper level has table and lounge dining options, as well as a 12-seat room for private events, while the downstairs is the main dining area with bar lounge and outside patio facing Joozbar, a hot place to have a cool cocktail like Straits' lemongrass mojito, lychee-tini or—I am not kidding—the \$50 billionaire's margarita on the rocks with a side shot of Florida Blanco tequila and 150-year-old Grand Marnier. That's \$50. For one drink. With no crazy straw or anything.

I can imagine a few of these will be sipped and sloshed around the Opium Lounge, a private downstairs den with hostesses, bottle service and a private entry in the back for people who put the V in VIP. This is also the place I would hypothetically hang out and hope Ludacris might show up so we could play a few tracks from his CDs *Word of Moad* or *Chick-a-Block* and have ourselves a little yap-o-e, then celebrate my victory with English toffees-topped roasted pineapple bread pudding for everybody and pictures of me and Luda hugging it out. With our eyes open. **■**

THEN THERE'S THE SEA BASS. OH THE SEA BASS! I'M NOT ONE FOR FLAGRANT HYPERBOLE, BUT THIS IS THE BEST FISH I'VE EVER HAD... I ALSO ADORED THE CHILI CRAB, OXTAIL REDANG AND LAMB WITH MINTED PEAS...