

NASHVILLE

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LIFESTYLES

TASTE



The Tin Angel's Grilled Salmon.

HONKY TONK ANGEL: Nashville favorite *Tin Angel* still delivers the goods **URBAN ELEGANCE:** Creating the perfect winter dinner party doesn't require a big house **UNCORKED:** A score of the best locally available wines **THE TOP FIVE:** Top five places for a quiet New Year's Eve (besides home) **CHEF'S SPECIAL:** Bethany Thouin from *The Cocoa Tree*



Spinach Salad
with Fried Egg

Honky Tonk Angel

*Nashville favorite Tin Angel
still delivers the goods*

BY KAY WEST
PHOTOS BY SHERRY CLAGG

IN SEPTEMBER 1981, I HAD JUST
moved to Nashville from New York City

and knew only a handful of people, so I was thrilled when friends invited me to join them for Sunday brunch. Back in New York, I was an avid devotee of the meal. After a long night of drinking and dancing in stimulus-soaked, splashy discos, my friends and I would roll out of bed around 1 p.m. Sunday afternoon and convene at our favorite neighborhood restaurant. We soaked our aching heads in pitchers of Bloody Marys or mimosas, and soothed our unsettled stomachs with cheese omelets and Eggs Benedict.

Having already discovered—with some

concern—that Nashville in '81 did not have a very sophisticated culinary profile, I was delighted to hear that there was a place that served brunch. "Bishop's Corner," Ms. X answered when I asked where. "We need to be there at 11 a.m. so we can get a table before the church people come."

Eleven? Yikes. Since booze had always been as important an element of brunch as breakfast and lunch, I wondered if one could get a Bloody Mary before noon in Nashville. (No.) But most curious to me was the term "church people." It had somehow managed to escape my attention

that in Nashville, probably 75 percent of the population are faithful congregants of a house of worship. The remaining 25 percent are either home-churching with the Sunday paper or getting the first seating for brunch.

Back in 1981, my friends could have invited me to Houston's, T.G.I.Friday's, or Ruby Tuesday, charter members of Nashville's fern bar genre of restaurant. Instead, they chose a place that might ease my homesickness. And they were right. Bishop's Corner had that homey vibe of a true neighborhood restaurant, one that could as easily have been on the corner of 32nd and First as 32nd and West End.

Rick Bolsom, a native New Yorker who preceded me to Nashville by several years, had that same comforting sense of déjà vu when he first walked into Bishop's Pub, as it was called when he lived across the street in the Westboro building in the 1970s. "Before Bishop's got their liquor license, it was a beer and burger joint, with some of the best live music in Nashville," Bolsom remembers. "People like Guy Clark and Rodney Crowell came through there. I felt very at home there. I was a journalist, which meant it was my professional responsibility to spend time there."

In 1987, Bolsom left the non-lucrative field of journalism to jump to the non-lucrative but decidedly more demanding world of restaurant ownership when he and wife Vicki opened Cakewalk (now Zola). Along with F. Scott's and Midtown Café, which opened the same year, Cakewalk pioneered the independently owned, contemporary cuisine restaurant movement in Nashville.

Meanwhile, Bishop's Pub became Bishop's Corner and then 32nd Avenue. Through a series of ownership changes, food, service and the physical condition of the restaurant declined until it closed in 1993. "We heard that it was available," Bolsom recalls. "It was in pretty bad shape, it had not been maintained. But the bones of the building remained, and that space was just near and dear to me. Cakewalk had established itself, and our thought was we just wanted to do something a little more casual to complement that, a place people would drop in and get a bite to eat."

Upon signing the lease, they undertook an extensive renovation (a years-long project) and re-opened as the Tin Angel, a name that carried great personal significance for Bolsom. "The Tin Angel was a neighborhood restaurant in the Village in New York. It



Rick Bolsom

was my local restaurant. It was next door to The Bitter End, so it was a place where musicians hung out to get a drink and something to eat. Naming this restaurant after that was kind of my personal touchstone, a shout-out to what the one in New York meant to me."

If New York's Tin Angel meant a familiar face at the door, a welcoming ambiance, a regular clientele, friendly and informed service, good food freshly prepared with a high regard for its diners' taste and respect for their wallets, then Nashville's Tin Angel is a faithful tribute. The most familiar face is Bolsom's, whose near constant presence is testimony to the importance of on-site ownership. General manager Brooke Anderson has been with him for 13 years, and many of the servers just as long.

Arriving at Tin Angel is as comfortable as walking into an old friend's hug, whether it's your first visit or your 500th. Its cobblestone and wood floors, brick walls, plate glass street-front windows, pressed-tin ceilings, heavy antique English café tables, gleaming wood bar and free-standing fireplace deliver warmth and a sense of permanence, while custom-designed steel gates anchoring the bricked archways between the dining rooms and the Bolsoms' own collection of eye-popping art—much of it local—put a contemporary and whimsical

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Defining neighborhood dining in Nashville, the Tin Angel mixes new menu items with longstanding favorites.

spin on the solid-as-a-rock foundation. Thanks to its long history in a dense residential neighborhood and highly visible location, attracting customers wasn't the daunting issue that confronts many brand-new establishments.

Not that there weren't some bumps in the road. Ironically for a restaurateur who has always had his finger on the tip of his customers' taste buds, a major miscalculation was the menu.

The original concept was a modern, nutritionally aware meat-and-three. The idea fell flatter than a fried corn cake. As it turned out, Nashvillians happen to *like* their meat-and-three plates overcooked, over-salted and over-greased, thank you very

much. And why in the world would they pay \$16 for a plate they could get for half the price at an old-fashioned meat-and-three?

"It simply didn't work, so then we had to re-group and figure out what would work," Bolsom remembers.

And thus, Plan B: a seasonally evolving repertoire grounded in healthy cooking techniques, quality, fresh ingredients, simple presentations and satisfying (though not overwhelming) portion sizes. Deb Paquette, who was then in her sixth year at Cakewalk, consulted with the Bolsoms, but since then, the responsibility for its revisions, inventions and caretaking has passed with remarkable consistency from chef to chef. For the past nine years, Donald Main has

been the man, giving the Tin Angel standards their due, while creating new dishes that hew to the restaurant's culinary philosophy.

The current menu masters that balance with skill and grace. Greatest Hits that regulars request again and again include the traditional Caesar salad with rosemary croutons; the Chesapeake Bay-style crab cakes, which rely chiefly on crab meat; Nashville's most mainstreamed globally-flavored salad, The Med, with its grilled shrimp, chick peas, fennel, roasted red peppers, orzo pasta, pumpkin seeds and feta cheese; Angel Louie, a study of simplicity in a bowl of linguine tossed with tomatoes, garlic, basil, olive oil and Parmesan cheese; and the unexpectedly iconic Chicken Schnitzel. "If we even change this up even a little, I literally get notes and emails from customers telling me to let them know when we change it back, and they'll be back," Bolsom says.

As cutting-edge as most independent restaurants want to be, an even stronger desire is to keep their dining room full, their staff employed and their customers happy, so, much like Bruce Springsteen knows he'll eventually have to play "Born To Run," Bolsom accepts that there are certain items on the menu that are untouchable. Conceding that point—and insisting that attention still be paid to execution—allows his kitchen the freedom to be fresh and creative on the rest of the menu.

Guests who come to the Tin Angel from out of the cold winter weather will quickly warm up to the terrific spinach salad with crispy slices of fingerling potatoes, dried apples and thick chunks of smoky bacon, all centered with a fried egg that, when pierced with a knife, oozes warm yellow yoke onto the fresh spinach leaves, marrying with the red wine bacon vinaigrette. I hereby declare this the winner of Best New Salad, if there is such a category. Sweet catfish filets get an overcoat of shredded potato and fresh horseradish before a buttery sauté, and are then laid gently atop a pallet of braised red and green cabbage. French bistro classic steak frites is a beefy shingle of juicy grilled hanger steak—four out of five butchers' favorite cuts—buried beneath a tower of crispy shoestring fries. All-American translations are a grilled NY strip dripping butter served with creamed spinach and potatoes, and the country club classic beef tenderloin with bleu cheese. Chef Main is a

New Englander who grew up cooking lots of seafood, a habit he maintains in landlocked Nashville, albeit with a different aquarium. Current maritime entrees include risotto with calamari and shrimp; pan-seared rainbow trout; and grilled salmon filet, wearing a tangy cap of pickled fennel and red onion along with flash-fried arugula, perched on toothsome orbs of pearly hazelnut cous cous.

Many dinner apps, salads and entrees also make an appearance on the lunch menu, supplemented by quesadillas, sandwiches and three types of burger. The brunch tradition is still at the top of its game, played on Sundays from 11 a.m.-3 p.m., early enough to beat the church people, late enough to catch the last Titans possession.

In the 15 years since Vicki and Rick Bolsom opened their little neighborhood restaurant, the West End corridor has become littered with Walgreens, fast food outlets and chain restaurants, all making the corporate grab for your consumer dollars. In 2008, as we carefully navigate a rapidly changing world, we crave the familiar face, the warming fire, the reassuring hug. In these trying economic times, we seek not just value for our dollar, but respect for the hours we put in to earn that dollar and reward for the choice we make in parting with it. "People need to give themselves a good reason to go out to eat," Bolsom declares. "They should be able to go somewhere for a respite from the daily grind, where they find good food in a good environment at a good price, and at the end of the meal, feel good about their choice."

Tin Angel is just such a choice, the kind of place that, like a dear friend, is there for you in good times and bad. It is not only a neighborhood restaurant that any neighborhood would welcome, it transcends the term "neighborhood restaurant" by creating, within its cozy and comforting walls, a neighborhood of its own.

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