

Eat Beat: The Council of Independent Restaurants of America

By Dana Kopp Frankli
[The Tennessean](#)

If you're a person who loves food, you generally love lots of different kinds of food. The more variety, the better.

That's one reason why the growing presence of chain restaurants can be worrisome.

Don't get me wrong: I'm all for chains that produce quality food, as the best ones do. But I'd hate to see the chains squeeze out the locals.

By their nature, chain restaurants tend toward uniformity. They find a formula that works and they stick with it. They also tend to focus on the most popular flavors, which often translates to boring.

Innovation more typically comes from independent restaurants. They also understand what locals want. And independent restaurant people tend to possess a passion that comes from having one's entire livelihood wrapped up in what comes out of one kitchen every day.

Locally owned restaurants also are good for the economy, but economics tend to put them at a disadvantage. Chain restaurants, like chain stores, buy in bulk and use that leverage to extract lower prices from their suppliers, allowing them to undercut the competition.

Seeing this, independent restaurants throughout the country are starting to band together. The Council of Independent Restaurants of America is a national group founded in 1999 "to protect and nurture the independent entrepreneurial restaurants around the country." It has chapters in 19 cities.

Nashville now has its own chapter. They call themselves the Nashville Originals. Members of the group's board include Rick Bolsom (Tin Angel), Jeremy Barlow (tayst), Anita Hartel (Mambu), Tom Loventhal (Noshville) and Gep Nelson (Yellow Porch, Wild Iris and Flying Horse).

One of the goals is to create a united marketing effort to "heighten the visibility of local restaurants and help make people aware of their importance in the cultural and economic life of our city," as the Nashville group says in a news release.

The group also hopes to increase the buying power of its members so they can better compete with the chains economically.

"If we don't work together, we're going to get steamrolled like other industries have," Bolsom says, pointing to the dwindling numbers of independent hardware stores in the face of chain-store competition.

Bolsom, who, in addition to owning Tin Angel, is a partner in chef-owned restaurants Zola, Mirror and Red Wagon, says he thinks restaurants are less vulnerable to national competition than other industries. "There's an attachment people have to their local restaurants. Food is really important to a lot of people." Independents can deliver "creativity, freshness and quality, focusing on local tastes and local ingredients," he says.

The chapter still is forming, Bolsom says, but the Originals expect to start with a membership of 25-30 restaurants.

We foodies, who follow our favorite restaurants like baseball teams, will be interested to see who joins up.

Tin Angel Spreads Wings

Speaking of Bolsom, the restaurateur's been busy lately. In addition to launching the Nashville Originals, he's expanded Tin Angel, his longtime restaurant on West End.

When the space next door opened up recently, Tin Angel set its sights on creating a second dining room. The new space, which seats 38, also works for private parties, something for which general manager Brooke Anderson has been pushing. (Competition from the massive banquet space at newly opened Maggiano's a block away probably factors in as well.)

Meanwhile, Tin Angel continues to serve its popular Sunday brunch, along with tasty lunch five days a week and dinner every night but Sunday.

Tin Angel is at 3201 West End Ave. 298-3444. Hours: 11am-10pm Mon-Thu; 11am-11pm Fri; 5-11pm Sat; 11am-3pm Sun.