

An Angel Gets Its Wings

The weather outside is frightful, but Tin Angel's fire is delightful

By Carrington Fox

For years, when someone asked for a recommendation of a restaurant with a fireplace, Tin Angel sprang to mind. The flickering flames in the vestibule of Vicki and Rick Bolsom's brick-walled eatery have long made the quaint former drugstore a favorite destination for a dreary day or a wintry evening. Along the way, the fireplace—one of only a handful in town—just might have upstaged the culinary experience as a reason to visit the West End landmark.

But in two recent trips to the 15-year-old restaurant, we came to realize that, as inviting as the fire may be, it is the menu of creative and seasonal cuisine that makes Tin Angel glow. While the restaurant may still be the best spot with a fireplace, the title is too-faint praise for an establishment that has emerged as one of the city's most charming dining traditions.

Who's to say if Tin Angel was always this good and we just took it for granted, if the current winter menu is a particularly robust one, or if the Bolsoms and their longtime staff have finally hit an excellent stride? Our lunch and dinner visits during the holiday season in a discouraging economy left us with the feeling that this was a place that knew its food, knew its customers, and enjoyed both.

Fridays before Christmas are infamous for long lunches and lazy workdays, and on a Friday in early December, Tin Angel appeared to swell with seasonal joy—with poinsettias and white lights accompanying the year-round angel accents, and diners stopping among tables to exchange holiday chitchat and, in several cases, to kvetch about how far away they had to park. (Located at the corner of West End and 32nd avenues, where no-parking signs spring from the sidewalk like dandelions, Tin Angel offers valet service. Still, a brisk walk on a cool day makes the fireplace just that much more inviting.)

The refreshingly succinct lunch menu still bears a few old favorites, including Angel Louie (pasta with basil, tomatoes, garlic and olive oil) and the Med salad (grilled shrimp, green beans, fennel, chick peas, roasted peppers and onions, orzo, pumpkin seeds and feta over mixed greens).

We grabbed the last serving of étouffée, which would have been worth fighting over. Available only at lunch, the large bowl was loaded with large shrimp, coral curls of crawfish, Tabasco-laced chicken breast and smoky sausage in a rich roux over rice.

Pork-and-fennel sausage made in-house was the centerpiece for a hearty meal that married salty olives, sweet sausage and crisp broccoli rabe in a deep red marinara. The thick sauce and deep flavors clung to every long ring-

let of al dente fusilli, keeping the giant bowl of food from getting boring.

While there is some overlap between lunch and dinner, the evening menu leaves behind the sandwiches, burgers and quesadillas, the appetizer list doubles, and chef Donald Main's

goat cheese was a similarly successful marriage of warm and cold elements, accented by peppery arugula, fennel and strawberries in an orange-ginger dressing.

If there was one disappointment in our meal, it was when our server reported that

resourcefulness on the spot as he sought a reasonable proxy for pâté.

Four out of four dinner entrées were spectacular. Most notable was the catfish pomme de terre—plump buttery filets in a crust of shredded potato and horseradish. The lightly crisped exterior gave way to a soft core, like a hash brown. Served over a medley of braised red and green cabbages, with hints of apple cider and mustard, the sumptuous meal layered sweet and savory flavors that never overwhelmed the delicate fish.

The hearty, wine-stained seaside risotto stood out for its generous bounty of tender calamari and plump shrimp over creamy rice. Dotted with vibrant green peas that broke the brown palette, the dish gracefully layered surf and turf by infusing the delicate seafood with salt from chewy hunks of pancetta.

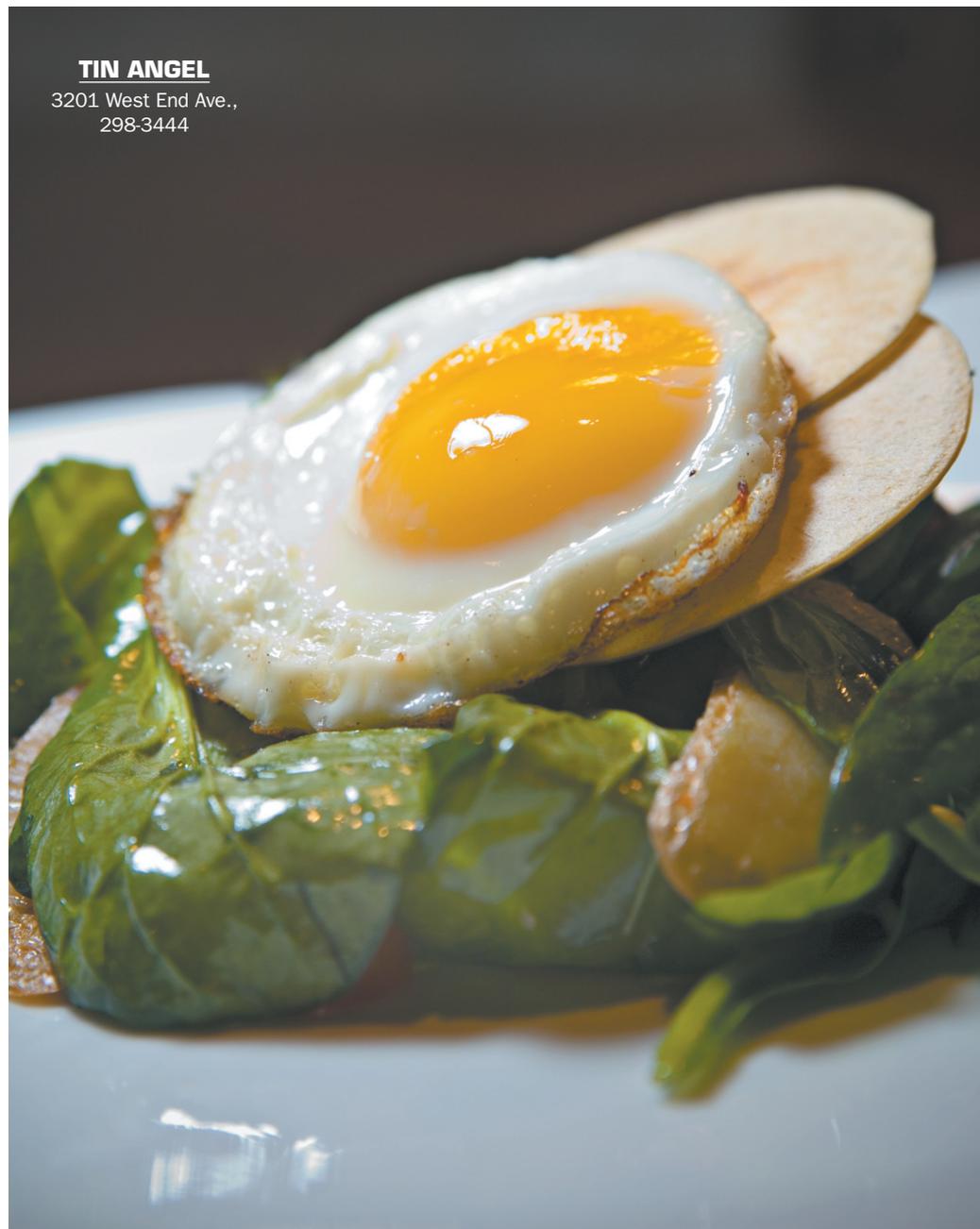
The presentation of the grilled salmon was impressive, on a bed of faintly emerald-tinted Israeli couscous studded with hazelnuts and pickled fennel and topped with a dark-green tussle of deep-fried arugula, which melted across the tongue with a salty finish. Our one regret was that we didn't override the chef's cooking recommendation of medium. We would have preferred the meat slightly more rare, particularly since there was no sauce.

While we usually yawn at the tenderloin—who can't cook a doorknob of expensive meat?—Chef Main & Co. executed beautifully with a filet of melt-in-your-mouth beef, finished with a port demi-glace and a dollop of blue cheese and served with a medley of sautéed asparagus, mushrooms and fingerling potatoes. Not the least impressive feature of the filet was the price—\$19.95.

On the dessert menu, Tin Angel transformed predictable sweets into noteworthy indulgences. We particularly enjoyed the chocolate praline pie and the lemon tart, both made by Renée Kasman, pastry chef at nearby Zola, which the Bolsoms co-own with chef Deb and Ernie Paquette. Both cold pies had a sheen reminiscent of molten glass being pulled into shape, though in the case of the decadent desserts, they were pulled through giant clouds—not miserly garnish-squirts—of fresh whipped cream.

The staying power and quality of Tin Angel are particularly encouraging at a time when economic anxiety is swinging its scythe across the restaurant landscape. If there is an upside to a market downturn, as far as the dining industry is concerned, it just might be that tight-fisted diners will keep restaurateurs on their toes, forcing them to deliver good food at fair prices. That's a deceptively simple formula that Tin Angel appears to have down pat.

Tin Angel serves lunch and dinner Monday through Friday, dinner Saturday and brunch Sunday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.



Yolk Salad Fried egg nestled on a bed of spinach and apples at Tin Angel

creativity abounds.

An unexpected standout was the spinach salad, which plated a delicately poached-then-fried egg over spinach, fingerling potatoes and dried apples. When pierced with a fork, the egg's warm yolk oozed into the greens, adding a velvety finish to the lightly dressed leaves. Under the sultry amber

pendant lights in the main dining room, it was hard to see our food, and each bite of salad was a flavorful surprise of texture, comprising crisp spinach, molten potatoes and chewy bacon.

Salad with a panko-coated croquette of

the kitchen had plated its last pâté. Rather nimbly, he offered to replace our order with headcheese, which was not on the menu. Out of curiosity, we accepted the substitution, and quickly learned beyond a shadow of a doubt that we do not like headcheese. I repeat: We do not like headcheese. But if we were going to like any cubes of pig face in gelatin, it would be Tin Angel's version, which arrived on the most elegant of ploughman's platters with triangles of cheese and crostini and a garnish of pickled fennel and cornichons. And we certainly appreciated our server's

BUNLESS BLT BURGER \$10.50
SPINACH SALAD WITH FRIED EGG \$8
CATFISH POMME DE TERRE \$15.25
SEASIDE RISOTTO \$18
STRIP STEAK \$25