

# The Tin Angel favors comfort over fuss

Venerable restaurant will appeal to those who prefer welcoming kitchens over food labs

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The Tin Angel's cheese terrine features local Kenny's cheese.

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If these walls could talk, as the old phrase goes, we would surely hear juicy stories from some of Nashville's older restaurants. But at The Tin Angel, I'd much rather the fireplace do the talking.

Since the 1970s, when the building was known as Bishop's Pub, the circular brick fireplace in the foyer has been greeting folks and wrapping them up in a warm, familiar welcome. And no matter the weather, the fireplace — and what those structures tend to embody — helps set the comfortable tone of the place.

But it indeed happened to be the first chilly night of the year when we darted in from the drizzle for 101 minutes at The Tin Angel.

I was with my boyfriend and we were meeting two of our favorite people for a weeknight impromptu dinner: Kevin Walters,

who works at *The Tennessean*, and his wife, Emily, one of the best cooks I've known. She makes bowls of pasta carbonara with shaved Brussels sprouts, and she grills flank steak to serve with bloody Mary tomato salad.

We walked under the arched brick wall into the restaurant's dining room at The Tin Angel and sat at one of the pub tables, also saved like the fireplace from an earlier incarnation of the restaurant.

Rick Bolsom, who owns the restaurant and refurbished the tables himself, said he knows that if he clothed them at night, he could raise prices 15 percent, but, thankfully, he doesn't want to do that.

## No pretense

We ordered appetizers — calamari and a terrine of local Kenny's cheese — and then a couple of "Zola French Laundry Salads" for sharing.

"I like salad as much as I like steak," Emily said.

"That's a bold statement," said Tony, who had just ordered the Steak Frites as his entree.

The name of the salad — arugula and radicchio tossed with apple, hazelnuts, fennel and blue cheese — launched us into a talk about Thomas Keller, who owns the famous French Laundry restaurant in California and Per Se in New York. Emily and I had both read with fascination the recent *New York Times* review of Per Se. Keller's food, although rather posh, still seems approachable.

But El Bulli, the famous Spanish restaurant, not so much. Emily and Kevin had just seen the documentary at the Belcourt Theatre, and though they recognize why some people might have liked the film, they most definitely were not fans.

"It's not our kind of food," Emily said, going on to describe how the documentary shows the inner workings of the restaurant where chefs make all things imaginable in a lablike setting with ingredients such as sweet potato, for example.

"My grandmother did some crazy things with some sweet potatoes, and nobody put her in a laboratory," Kevin said.

It was a conversation apropos for Tin Angel, where the food, menu and attitude couldn't be further from El Bulli. When I spoke with Rick on a later day, he said he loathes

pretense.

"If you want to serve food on platinum platters and it works for you, knock yourself out," he said. But at his restaurant he concentrates on creating a comfortable environment and then "wrapping it around great food and excellent service," while keeping prices as reasonable as possible.

"It's Tuesday night. Where do you want to go eat? I want you to come here," he said.

"I like you to feel comfortable enough to come when you're hungry."

## Commoner roots

Bolsom remembers the building when it was more casual than it is today. When he moved to Nashville from New York in 1973 as a music journalist, it was Bishop's Pub, and Bolsom lived across the street in the Westboro.

"It was basically a beer bar with burgers and fries. Really a local neighborhood bar," he said. Rodney Crowell played often, as did others.

"All kinds of really great musicians," he said. "Kind of like pre-Bluebird — but nobody was quiet."

Before making it The Tin Angel, Bolsom and his wife, Vicki, opened Cakewalk restaurant in 1987 just up the road on West End. One of the few independently owned restaurants with fresh food at the time, the Cakewalk took on Deb Paquette as chef several years later. Then as the restaurant morphed into a more upscale place, the Bolsoms opened The Tin Angel in 1993 as a casual neighborhood spot, and Cakewalk became Zola, which is now closed.

Today, though The Tin Angel is casual, it's hardly boring. The menu has an international flair. We ordered codillo, a Spanish dish of hearty farro risotto topped with pork shank braised in red wine with ginger and tomato. Merely touch it with the fork and it falls off the bone.

Kevin and Emily split a plate of Argentinean-inspired roasted and grilled chicken chimichurri, and Tony cut into his French bistro-style steak.

"I really like to draw on food that represents cultures, but peasant food. People food," Bolsom said.

Bolsom appreciates that food from different regions can have similarities as cuisine bourgeoise, or dishes people really eat in their homes. "We're an American restaurant. We steal from all cultures," he said. "Make it good, make it interesting, and try to avoid getting weird for weird's sake."

And as for that French Laundry salad? It's not even named after Keller's restaurant.

"Did you have this at the French Laundry?" Bolsom recalled asking Paquette while eating at Zola years ago.

"I've never been to the French Laundry," she told him.

It's just how she taught her employees to make it — "beating it up like it's in a laundry, a washing machine," he said, making a quick tossing motion with his hand. And so laundry became French Laundry for fun — and a little flair.

## A familiar vibe

The evening of our Tin Angel dinner we were surrounded in the dim dining room by two large parties of families celebrating as well as a young couple on a date. Though the room hasn't been renovated in years, the decor held in by the pressed tin ceiling doesn't seem outdated.

"Christmas lights and exposed brick are timeless," Tony said, noting the white lights looped nonchalantly at the windows. The artwork, too, is mostly personal, having been painted by friends. A mural of bar patrons over the hostess stand was painted for the restaurant by Janet March.

As for the food, Emily tasted and made her decree.

"It's good," she said, and it didn't seem to need more explaining than that. It was good. Really good.

"I would come here again," she said, noting the moderate price and reliable feel of the menu and setting. "You know what you're gonna get."

So as we finished our 101 minutes we passed around a couple of desserts — a warm ramekin of gooey cake with ice cream called Dark Chocolate Whiskey Indulgence. It wasn't the hot new thing, and it didn't challenge us to think about food in some deep sort of way, but on a cold Wednesday night, it was exactly what we needed.

"I don't feel like a smarter person," Kevin said summing it up, "I feel like a happier person."

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We capped off our meal with Dark Chocolate Whiskey Indulgence.