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THE MUSIC

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OF THIS YEAR'S
HOTTEST HIT
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ISSUE

101 MINUTES at Tin Angel

A Nashville classic continues to draw patrons
for very good reasons

BY JENNIFER JUSTUS • PHOTOS BY RON MANVILLE



Chicken chimichurri



Sous Chef Chris Word
and Executive Chef Donald Main



Kenny's Bleu Cheese Terrine



Zola French Laundry Salad

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 the Walters, two of our favorite people, for a weeknight impromptu dinner. Kevin Walters works at *The Tennessean* and his wife Emily is 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. But even beyond that, the Walters just have great taste.

We walked under the arched brick wall into the Tin Angel's dining room 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 place now and refurbished the tables himself, says he knows that if he clothed them at night, he could raise prices 15 percent—but he thankfully doesn't want to do that.

We ordered appetizers—calamari and a terrine of local Kenny's cheese—and then a couple “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.

But 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 Yountville, Calif. 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 interworkings of the restaurant where chefs make all things imaginable in a lab-like setting with ingredients like 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 Bolsom 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 keep 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.”

Bolsom also 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.



Codillo



Dark Chocolate Whiskey Indulgence

“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. Kind of like pre-Bluebird, but nobody was quiet.”

But before making it The Tin Angel, Bolsom and wife Vicki opened Cakewalk 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. As the restaurant morphed more into a more upscale place, the Bolsoms opened The Tin Angel in ‘93 as a casual neighborhood spot, and Cakewalk became Zola.

Today, though the restaurant is casual, it’s also 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 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. He appreciates that food from different regions can have similarities—as what the French term “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 recalls 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.

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 décor held in by the pressed tin ceiling, it 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.”

Tin Angel, 3201 West End Ave., (615) 298-3444, tinangel.net.