

THE
ART
OF
THE

MEAT
-AND-
THREE



SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL TO LOOK AT ~~SHOULD BE~~ NOURISHED

by Jennifer Justus

CHET ATKINS HAD A FAVORITE TABLE at Hap Townes Restaurant, the legendary meat-and-three tucked just a few homeruns away from the Nashville Sounds' baseball stadium. He liked the first seat to the left, by the door. So when the restaurant's owner, James B. "Hap" Townes, commissioned a portrait of Atkins, he knew just the spot to hang it.

"I kept that one in the restaurant all the time," Townes recalled.

A lanky man with a deep, gentle voice, Townes hasn't served a plate lunch in more than two decades. When, twenty-six years ago, he sold the cottage-sized restaurant—which his father founded as a mobile cart in 1921—that Chet Atkins portrait took a place in Townes's living room. For years it hung across from his favorite chair, one of nearly a hundred works in a house full of paintings and sculptures. Recently, though, eighty-eight-year-old Townes and his wife, Anne, learned of a Chet Atkins exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame. They moved the portrait, a drawing by Atkins's childhood friend Marvin Thompson, to the museum's permanent collection.

TOWNES'S COLLECTION INCLUDES Russian, Spanish, French, and American artwork. The thick brush strokes or delicate etchings transport viewers from the Wild West to the streets of Paris.

The art reflects his travels. Townes even has drawings by a man who bunked next to him during World War II. That's when he first took an interest in art. While stationed in Frankfurt at age twenty-three, he went on rest leave to Switzerland and France.

"They were just getting the art they had stored and hidden back in the galleries," he said. "A lot of guys wanted to go sit around and drink beer all day, and I said, 'No, I don't want to do that.' So I got into art."

Townes was drawn to many kinds of artistic expression, from vagabond musicians in parks to paintings at the Louvre. He was moved, too, by the stories behind the artists, such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's struggles with poverty.

Back home, Townes bought his first pieces—two small watercolors—in an alley off Jackson Square in New Orleans. He continued his education by reading about art and attending shows when he could.

"I went to a show in the basement at the Parthenon [in Nashville]," he said, remembering one of his first. "I got to know the director. He started eating at the restaurant."

Eventually Townes gathered enough works to make his own contributions to Nashville's Cheekwood Museum of Art and Belmont University. He helped some of his favorite artists, such as Robert Meredith, make their way, too, by hosting early exhibits.

But the key showings happened at his restaurant, where Townes gave his guests something beautiful to look at while they lined up for something nourishing to eat.

TOWNES OFTEN CARRIED pieces of his art collection to the restaurant to display, but it wasn't the main draw. Rather, customers lined up for the steam table that he manned, dishing roast beef, mashed potatoes, and homemade gravy. The griddle hissed with corn cakes. Tomatoes stewed. Pole beans simmered in cast-iron skillets.

"You'd have all those good smoky smells, because there was fatback cooked into the beans and the greens, and all the sizzly fried smells," Nancy Vienneau, restaurant critic for *The Tennessean*, said recently of the scene at Hap Townes Restaurant in the 1970s. "It was kind of like if you stepped into someone's country kitchen, because that's what it was."

Townes scooped stewed raisins. He ladled portions of squash casserole, which author and musician Shel Silverstein, a regular on his trips to Nashville, would order. No meat. No sides. The man who penned "A Boy Named Sue" just wanted a plate piled with casserole.

The restaurant drew a mix of writers, musicians, and music-industry folks. "You'd always see music people," Vienneau said. "They loved the food, and they loved Hap's way."

Of the serving line ritual, Vienneau recalled, "As he was spooning it on the plate, he was almost repeating what you were saying like an incantation. It was part of getting your order right, but also this connection with you."

Townes misses that connection. "I miss all the customers," he said. As for the art, he would say, back in the day, "I just brought this down here for the customers to enjoy." 🍷

Jennifer Justus is the food culture reporter for *The Tennessean*.

PAGE 2: Hap Townes, 2006. Photograph by John Egerton.



FROM SICILY TO THE CRESCENT CITY

THE BACKSTORY ON MUFFALETTAS

by Dana Logsdon

I'M A BAKER WHO DABBLES IN CULINARY HISTORY. As such, I've always been interested in the history of the muffaletta. Popular in New Orleans since at least the turn of the last century, the sandwich is a garlicky, pungent stack of olive salad, Genoa salami, ham, mortadella, provolone, and Swiss, layered on a golden round of sesame bread, cut into olive oil-soaked pie wedges and wrapped in paper.

Before I began my recent research, I knew the basics. What I didn't know was the muffaletta's backstory. How did it acquire its