



THE CROSSROADS OF CHURCH AND PLATE

A critic ponders, do good deeds in dining absolve so-so food?

BY JOHN KESSLER

TRADE
CHURCH



“WE’VE JUST RUN OUT of fried chicken,” the waiter says. “Also, our seafood shipment didn’t come in, so we don’t have any crab or oysters.”

This is not a welcome announcement at 7:30 on a Friday night. The waiter knows it, and his face seems geared to flinch in case my party goes postal at the news. People come from across Charlotte to eat Aunt Beaut’s pan-fried chicken at The King’s Kitchen. The restaurant has a reputation for cooking some of the best in the city. I had traveled nearly eight hundred miles.

My interest went beyond the house specialty. The King’s Kitchen has long intrigued. It functions as more than a mid-range venue for lightly tweaked but familiar Southern cooking. A bigger message is in play. The king in question

Illustrations by Natalie Nelson

here is not King George III of England, whose wife, Charlotte, gave the Queen City its name. Nor is it Elvis, but rather the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The space alternately serves as a place to eat chicken and a place of worship. Between lunch and dinner every weekday, pastors conduct Bible study for the Restoring Place Church, which takes over the dining room. The restaurant’s owner and executive chef, Jim Noble, shares this duty with another local pastor. Attendees leave with boxed meals, which might include some of Aunt Beaut’s finest. Afterward, the floor staff rearranges the chairs and sets the tables to prepare for dinner service. Worship and prayer services begin at 10 A.M. sharp every Sunday morning. Noble leads the non-denominational service. “I’m an ordained minister,” he reminds me when I phone him to discuss his food. He often steers the conversation toward faith. When he says The King’s Kitchen is “a beacon of light in downtown Charlotte,” he’s not describing the banana pudding.

NOBLE’S BALANCE between food and faith leaned toward the culinary side in the early 1990s. He and his wife, Karen, ran two upscale North Carolina restaurants in High Point and Winston-Salem, and they had named their first daughter, Margaux, for the vaunted Bordeaux wine. In 1993, after four miscarriages, their much-prayed-for second daughter, Olivia, arrived. But she contracted encephalitis and started her life in the neonatal ICU. It made Noble draw a distinction between being religious and questioning his connection with God. “It’s really more like a family relationship,” he concluded. “God has promises for all of us, but most are conditional.”

By the end of the decade, the Nobles had begun their ministry work.

The family relocated to Charlotte in 2004, where he opened Noble’s, with its upscale, Southern-inflected French cuisine. The Nobles focused their ministry on the city’s large homeless population, as much a part of uptown Charlotte as blue-suited bankers. After a few years in town, they worked to raise money for a nonprofit restaurant that could serve as

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both a home base and a source of funding for the Restoring Place. The King’s Kitchen opened in 2010, joining what was by then a small restaurant empire.

King’s lies near the dead center of town at a perfectly named crossroads, the corner of Church and Trade. I walked northeast and found the markers of civic industry: the Bank of America Corporate Center tower, the swooping Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, the NASCAR Hall of Fame. A few blocks farther, I watched people sleep on benches while others milled around closed shelter doors. The promise of food and a bed awaited them. I walked southeast, past the 7th Street Public Market’s café cortados and free wifi, and the streets took a seedier turn. I noted the United Way office and the brutalist Mecklenburg County Jail hunkering on the horizon. Even though Charlotte has decreased its



homeless population since the spike that followed the financial crisis, the numbers hover around 1,400. Faith-based organizations offer what they can: clothes, showers, beds, counsel, chicken, salvation. Charlotte is the city of Billy Graham and banking, of faith and money, of church and trade. You can see whichever side of uptown Charlotte you choose. Unless you're inside The King's Kitchen, where both sides seem to smash up against each other.

During my first visit, I didn't once notice the enormous cross in the dining room. I observed the décor—wooden farmhouse furniture, striped brown-and-cream banquette fabric, potted silk sunflowers, and ESPN on the televisions. Instead of the *de rigueur* tribute to every farm on its to-table trajectory, a chalkboard wall lists donors to the ministry. I googled some of the names. They include a pediatric surgeon, a beverage distributor, and a corporate finance lawyer—the kinds of big-pocketbook folk typically listed as benefactors in the back of a symphony orchestra program. It's only after I review my snapshots of the interior that I see the giant cross, literally looming over my table like the Christ the Redeemer looms over Rio. I suppose I mistook it for a support beam.

The cooking here inhabits a secular world I know well, that of the urbane Southern restaurant. Craggy-creamy Anson Mills white grits ennobles Atlantic shrimp in a paprika-heavy gravy. Pimento cheese, sharp and lush, arrives on a long platter with a lineup of crostini baked on site. Southern stalwarts undergird the menu. We order a chunk of rich, salty pot roast and choose sides from an ample list. The collards have a little tang, the mac and cheese seduces with richness,

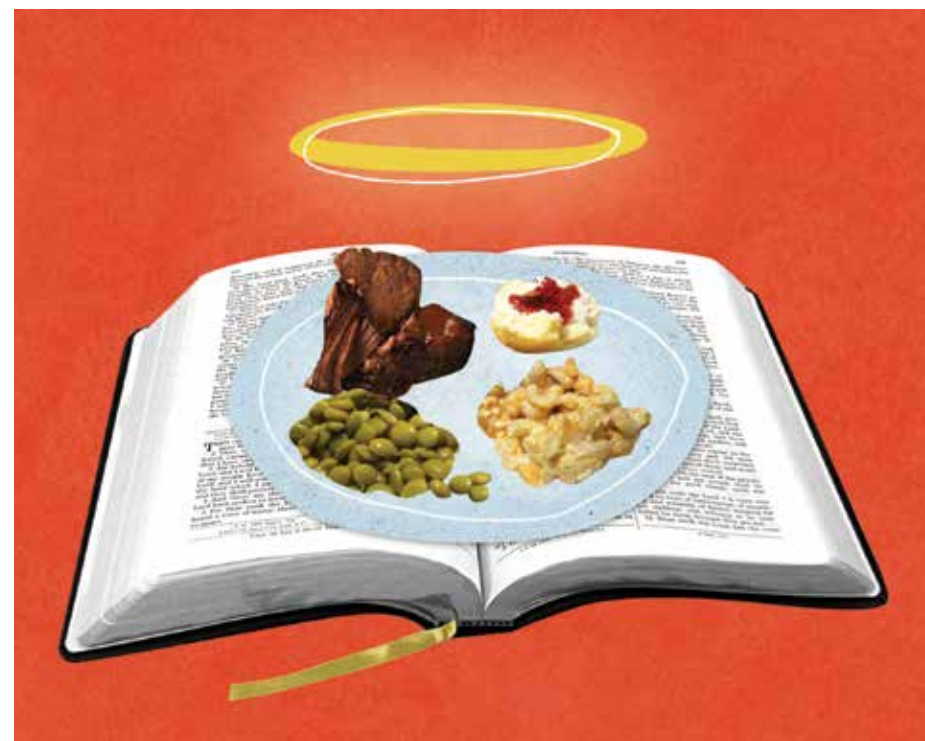
and the creamed fresh corn makes your eyes roll back in pleasure. It's all the more real for the occasional thread of silk.

The menu also wanders into upscale bistro territory, where it seems less assured. Overgrown and unmassaged kale, as stiff as packing material, fights its sweet blackberry vinaigrette. A special of pan-roasted tilefish arrives, bizarrely, over a slice of sweet zucchini quick bread.

I like the waiter, who gives me a standard pour of wine, looks at the bare inch remaining in the bottle, and says, "You should just finish this." I also admire the diversity of the diners, an even mix of races, ages, and types. There are families with little kids, and office drones who loosen their neckties. The restaurant serves beer and wine but not spirits, so the vibe is loose but not Friday-night rowdy.

If I don't take the restaurant's mission into account, it falls into the "pretty good" range. As much as I appreciate the pot roast, I suspect customers accustomed to meat-and-three lunches might balk at the \$18 price. I'd also send those in the market for a \$28 fish special elsewhere. At first blush, it doesn't strike me as destination-worthy like Noble's other restaurant, Rooster's Wood-Fired Kitchen.

Yet how can I ignore the mission? Some of the staffers I met have gone through the Restoring Place job training program. In a typical year, four or five out of ten people admitted will graduate from the program. Every dollar profit on that pot roast goes into the more than thirty thousand meals the Nobles donate in a year. This figure includes the meals served at Bible study, after church, and at adopt-a-block cookouts. The Restoring Place also delivers food to other ministries. Every Friday night, they pass out free chili-cheese dogs from a mobile delivery



service. Noble plans to expand his good works. He has joined the Dream Center network of faith-based missions, and he hopes to build a new facility for the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Dream Center that will house the church, a shelter, and offer counseling services. Am I being churlish for moaning about kale salad?

ACCORDING TO A recent report by the National Restaurant Association, more than 90 percent of restaurants make charitable contributions of one sort or another, bringing in more than \$3 billion annually. Large restaurant groups raise most of the money. Darden Restaurants, which owns LongHorn Steakhouse and Olive Garden, forges partnerships with local food pantries. Arby's donates funds to children through Share Our Strength's

campaign, No Kid Hungry.

Small, local restaurants often participate in fundraisers by donating food and staffing for taste-around dining events. Restaurateurs the country over bemoan how often they get hit up for free food. But for many would-be patrons, a tasty bite and a smile from a local celebrity chef at a fundraiser may be their first exposure to a restaurant. These events can establish goodwill.

In recent years, a new kind of restaurant has emerged—one that attempts to combine destination-worthy cooking with a philanthropic calling. Some are for-profit businesses with a charitable arm. For instance, The Kitchen group (owned by Kimbal Musk, brother of Tesla's Elon) supplies garden starter kits to local schools. Others, like The King's



Kitchen, are fully nonprofit. Jon Bon Jovi's JBJ Soul Kitchen restaurants in New Jersey serve simple meals to paying customers and those in need. If someone can't pay, they can trade their family's meal for a work shift. Staplehouse in Atlanta serves gorgeous small plates and sells out every booking a month in advance; it has been labeled the best new restaurant in America by *Bon Appétit*. All of its profits go to The Giving Kitchen, a nonprofit foundation to help hospitality workers in need. No critic would subject JBJ Soul Kitchen to a review, while every ambitious critic in America jockeys for a table at Staplehouse. But what of the in-between restaurants? At what point do you applaud the mission rather than critique the food?

The issue arose early this year when Pete Wells of *The New York Times* wrote a zero-star critique of Locol, a California burger joint. Chefs Roy Choi and Daniel Patterson developed Locol with a laudable mission to bring high-quality fast

food. A second branch opened in Oakland. That's the one Wells visited. (It has since closed.)

Wells found little flavor in his burger, chicken nuggets, and chili. He stuck a pin in what he saw as a balloon of inflated praise. Four days later, the *Los Angeles Times* published a response from Jonathan Gold. He said the criticism was "un-generous" and wondered aloud if some restaurants simply are not reviewable.

Over twenty-five years working on and off as a restaurant reviewer, I've had a pretty easy time separating out the non-reviewable restaurants. When an educator asked me to review the offerings of a revamped middle school cafeteria, I politely declined. Maybe there was fodder for a feature article, but my job wasn't to validate noble efforts in institutional foodservice. When a cooking school asked me to review their open-to-the-public restaurant, I did write an honest, unflattering review that was as generous as I could make it.

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food to neglected urban neighborhoods and turn a profit doing so. Choi and Patterson were aiming for the sweet spot—good ingredients, craveworthy, affordable, healthier than typical fast food. *Food & Wine* named the first location, in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, the best new restaurant of 2016. The blurb promoted the biographies of the chefs and their mission more than the actual

So, is The King's Kitchen reviewable? I asked Noble about his inspirations, his culinary philosophy, his cooks, and their ambitions. "I don't attract the James Beard-seeking chefs," he demurs, deflecting every opportunity to talk up the menu. "It's just Southern food."

He sees a distinction between the home cooking he serves at The King's Kitchen (gussied up though it may be) and the

more creative restaurant fare at Rooster's. The former feeds the people, whomever they may be. He calls the latter "a Southern interpretation of applied French principles of cuisine," and a destination for diners. Popular choices at Rooster's include rotisserie chicken, braised short ribs, and plentiful seasonal vegetables like fire-roasted beets.

In the early 1980s he opened Noble's in his hometown of High Point, North Carolina. It was an ambitious standard-bearer of fine dining which enjoyed a ten-year run. He found greater success with Rooster's, which anticipated the farm-to-table movement and the wood-fired oven trend. Every city has the chef who first marries local ingredients to classic technique; in Charlotte, that was Jim Noble.

By the time he opened The King's Kitchen, it was almost like his culinary path turned like a Möbius strip, leading him back from foie gras and high-concept cuisine to the kind of food he grew up with. (Yes, there was a real Aunt Beaut—she used to pan-fry chicken for Noble and his siblings whenever she babysat.) His path also led to different reasons for cooking: to raise money, help the community, and spread the gospel. Perhaps The King's Kitchen isn't reviewable.

That doesn't stop me. The next night I'm back with another posse. The chicken, in ample supply, is the kind of pan-fried exemplar that lives in your taste memory but too rarely shows up on the plate. It's neither juicier nor drier than you want; the crust goes dense in some places and delicate in others, with

just enough seasoning to prickle. Fried oysters, crisp and salty but wiggling with juice, have apparently spent ten fewer seconds in hot oil than they do at most restaurants. I love them so much I want a second order.

I don't particularly love a tri-tip steak, cut into thick, chewy, under-seasoned pieces. Grilled salmon with Carolina Gold rice tastes like a hotel banquet dish. Locals enthuse over the biscuits and cornbread here, but to me they're no better and no worse than adequate.

Many restaurateurs want to know what my thoughts are before the review comes out. Rather than discuss my impressions of the food, Noble prefers to talk about his ministry and the Friday nights he spends trying to get homeless people off the streets and into the warm embrace of his faith. He does want to know what I thought of the fried chicken, and he does digress into a moment of cheffy ego. *Charlotte* magazine—despite having nothing but nice things to say about The King's Kitchen—neglected to include Aunt Beaut's finest in a roundup of the best around the city. "I would venture to say this is the best pan-fried chicken in the Southeast," he says. "I would put it up against anyone's."

I agree. In fact I would send you, dear reader, to The King's Kitchen should business, or a visit to the NASCAR Hall of Fame, bring you to Charlotte. Your money will support a good cause, and a meal at this restaurant will make you consider this city, where a tidy downtown belies deep divisions. Just call ahead to make sure they have chicken. ▼

John Kessler is the former longtime restaurant critic for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He is working on a book with The Giving Kitchen, Atlanta's lifeline to hospitality workers in need.