



How to Get to Heaven Without Dying

Finger-picking and fellowship at Chattanooga's Bluegrass Grill

by Dana Shavin

IT'S FITTING THAT, ON THE DAY IN 2007 when Bluegrass Grill opened on Main Street in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Alison Krauss music played from a jukebox in the corner. Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die, she sang. It is a well-loved lyric from the bluegrass world, one that Father Jonas Worsham, an ordained priest and the owner (with wife Joan Marie) of Bluegrass Grill, has incorporated into his sermons.

But if there were a way to get to heaven without dying, it might involve mushroom hash, a spanakopita omelet, a smoked-salmon frittata with herbed cream cheese, or any number of other breakfast and lunch selections at Bluegrass Grill, a small but high-energy eatery at the heart of the newly revitalized Southside neighborhood. Southside

is home to a variety of restaurants, art galleries, artists' studios, boutiques, and a bakery. There are remnants of the old neighborhood still visible here—abandoned buildings and weedy patches of unused land—but these are slowly vanishing in the wake of a socially conscious gentrification effort led by civic-minded Chattanoogaans, including the Worshams.

The Worshams have been in the restaurant business for thirty years. Early on, they were members of a Christian Brotherhood organization that opened Raphael Houses, emergency shelters that operated soup kitchens—and later, day cares—in high-crime areas. They went wherever the need was highest, ladling soup in cities as far-flung as Indianapolis, Boston, and San Francisco. It was this immensely satisfying ministry work that helped inform their decision to open their first restaurant in Memphis, in a formerly condemned building they renovated for \$10,000 with the assistance of their parish.

By then, Father Jonas—who learned how to cook while working at a Greek restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio—was an experienced cook. The Memphis restaurant was “wildly successful,” according to Joan Marie, drawing in not just nearby Memphis State students but residents from the neighboring communities as well. A family business—and lifestyle—was born. “Every Saturday for years, our kids worked in the restaurant with us,” Joan Marie says.

“They realized they had to work through the sibling and family stuff in order to work together effectively. And they did.”

Father Jonas is sixty-one. His wife calls him “Pappa,” apropos of his long beard, round girth, and pensive eyes. Joan Marie, fifty-two, is built like a teenager, with a single waist-length braid, tinted glasses, and an easy, engaging smile. “Pappa and I believe in building community,” she explains. “Once you’ve been in a few times, I know who you are, what you eat, and enough about your life to support



you in whatever's going on. Our mission is fresh, local produce—conscious food—served with awareness and love. Our food is eclectic and cross-generational. We can feed a vegan teenager as easily as we can feed her grandmother.”

“I took my son to the IHOP, and they brought out pancakes with canned fruit on top. It broke his heart.”



The logo on the menu—a banjo and a frying pan forming an X with the Orthodox cross centered between them—speaks volumes. The Worshams' focus is on food, bluegrass music (which Father Jonas likes because it is “ninety-nine percent positive and uplifting”), and faith.

The Worshams bake all their own bread, including gigantic wheat-blend biscuits and a five-grain Scottish Struan bread. You can even get a blintz with sour cream, a nod to Joan Marie's Jewish upbringing. Because of their emphasis on fresh produce and homemade fare, Father Jonas says it's easy to be disappointed by other restaurants. “I took my son to the IHOP, and they brought out pancakes with canned fruit on top. It broke his heart.”

Life for the Worshams, inside and outside the restaurant business, is busy and fulfilling. In addition to doing the payroll and bookkeeping for Bluegrass Grill, Joan Marie works as a renal nurse at a local hospital. When asked how she has time for her twelve-year-old son and sixteen-year-old daughter still at home, the restaurant, her RN job, and her two other grown sons, whom she sees regularly, Joan Marie says simply, “Time opens up.”

And if that isn't a bluegrass lyric, it probably should be. 🍷

Dana Shavin is a visual artist and lifestyle columnist for the Chattanooga Times Free Press ; her essays have appeared in the Oxford American magazine. Photographs by Dana Shavin.

A GOOD MEAL AND A STORY TO TELL

Cultural sustainability on Virginia's Eastern Shore



Oystermen on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, ca. 1975. Photograph courtesy of Bernie Herman.