

To Kingston Come

Forget all those notions of small-town dining: MacK & Kate's competes with the big city's best

By Kay West

If MapQuest has noted a spike in requests for directions from Davidson and Williamson Counties to Kingston Springs, they can almost certainly attribute it to Jan and Bernie Strawn, who opened MacK & Kate's Café & Wine Bar there a year-and-a-half ago. Kingston Springs is a teeny dot on the map about 20 miles west of Nashville that counted less than 3,000 residents in the last census. While several fast food places and other commercial markers of economic development have opened just off the interstate, it's Main Street where most of the out-of-county tags head when they take Exit 188 off I-40.

Despite its off-the-beaten-path location, MacK & Kate's—named for the Strawns' daughters MacKenzie and Kathleen—met with such success that it almost immediately outgrew its original address. Four months ago, they moved from one end of Main Street to the other, a distance of less than two blocks. Even so, on weekends the two dining rooms fill with patrons, and reservations are a must.

Traffic, the Strawns say, has been built entirely on word of mouth. And much of the credit for their good fortune, ironically enough, goes to chef Darrell Manhold, who cites a run of bad luck as the impetus that moved him here from his home in Southern California.

The grandson and son of chefs, Manhold has been cooking almost since birth, stoked by living in an area with a year-round growing season. "We had avocado trees, citrus trees and all kinds of vegetables in the backyard," he says. "My mom would send me out to pick dinner, and then she'd make something with what I brought in." When he was just 19, he and his roommate made an auspicious debut on the local food scene.

There was a Mexican festival where we lived that sponsored a salsa contest every year," Manhold says. "There were cash prizes, and we thought it would be fun to enter. We spent our rent money on the entry fee and the ingredients, and then we found out that there were thousands of entries. We thought we had totally screwed up, but we made it anyway; we called it Puck's Mango Madness, named after my roommate's puppy, which he got from Wayne Gretzky's dog, which is why he was named Puck.

"Anyway, when they announced the winners and they called Puck's Mango Madness as Most Original, we couldn't believe it. They couldn't either when we came up to the stage, a white kid and a Cuban kid, beating out all the native Mexicans and Mexican Americans. We won \$500 and I thought, 'Man, if you can get that kind of money for doing something that fun, that's what I want to do.'"

He got an entry-level job at an upscale restaurant in Ventura and in three years worked his way up to fifth sous chef. Then the bottom fell out.

"The restaurant was sold, the executive chef left, and they got rid of his whole staff,"

Manhold says. "My roommate got a scholarship to Cumberland University in Tennessee, and I was worried about how I was going to pay the rent with no job and no roommate. Then my apartment caught on fire and I lost about everything I had but my car."

Manhold decided the time was right for a change in venue. After selling the car for cash, he boarded a Greyhound bus and headed to Tennessee, bunking with his former roommate in Lebanon.

He knocked around different kitchens for a while and worked for Gulf Pride Seafood, getting to know chefs and keeping his ears open for opportunity. Hearing through the grapevine that a contemporary dining restaurant was opening in Kingston Springs, he went to check it out—which is how he found Jan Strawn.

The Strawns, veterans of the corporate world and Green Hills residents, had decided several years ago to go into business for themselves. They started by purchasing an old Shell station in Pegram. Jan decided we needed to sell food there, so we got some Boar's Head meats and began making sandwiches," Bernie Strawn explains.

Their first hire in the kitchen brought years of experience to the table. Kahlil Arnold, son of the owners of Arnold's Country Kitchen, was on one of his leaves from his parents' popular meat 'n' three. He suggested that the Strawns expand their menu. Customers and former colleagues began to request catering, so when the Strawns purchased the original MacK & Kate's location in Kingston Springs, they outfitted it as a catering kitchen.

"But people wanted to eat there, so we decided we should turn it into a restaurant," Bernie Strawn explains. "We got just enough tables in there to get our wine license."

They also got a chef when Manhold aced his audition with Jan Strawn. Though the open kitchen, which occupies the rear corner of the main dining room, is small, it's big enough for two chefs: Devin Malcolm came over from Zola with the blessing of owners Deb and Ernie Paquette, Pegram residents who regularly dine at MacK & Kate's.

Preconceived notions of what a restaurant will be in a rural town with a two-block main street, a six-man police force and a volunteer

fire department can be checked at the front door, which opens into the elegantly appointed main dining room, a winsome combination of hominess and sophistication. During the day, large plate-glass windows light the rooms,

starter size was enough for four to share, and foretold a predilection for large portions that was indeed borne out by the main courses. (Be advised that the prices, like the preparation, are on par with an upscale Nashville restaurant: entrées alone typically run \$20 to \$30.)

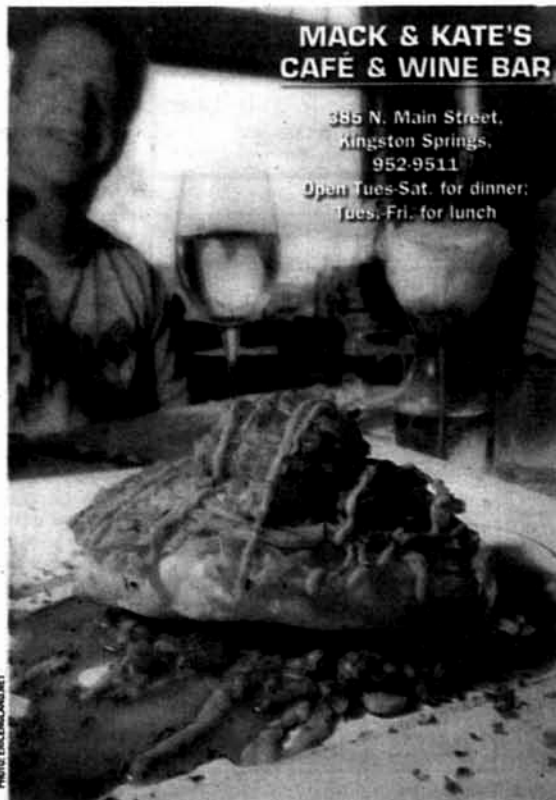
West Coast chef Manhold has a deft touch with fish, so any entrée that comes out of the water will likely be a winner. The tortilla-crusted Alaskan halibut was perfectly cooked, with the crushed tortilla forming a nice crunch around the moist fish; it was topped with a sweet-spicy mango salsa (Puck's?) and nestled up to a mound of roasted tomato risotto. Large sweet scallops likewise left the frying pan in the nick of time with their cornmeal dredge crisped golden, perched atop a semi-composed spinach polenta cake.

Meat-and-potato aficionados need look no farther than the blackened rib-eye, a thick one-pound cut of beef that was also exactly cooked to medium-rare order, topped with tangy bleu-cheese butter sauce and sided with a fan of thinly sliced au gratin Yukon Golds. One of Manhold's signature items (he adapted his grandfather's recipe) and a customer favorite is the Portuguese Style Chicken, a rustic and robustly seasoned one-bowl meal that combines chorizo sausage, lump crab meat (watch for renegade pieces of shell), plump mussels in the shell, roasted pulled chicken, jumbo northwestern

beans and artichoke hearts in a tomato broth that could have only been improved by a basket of crusty sourdough bread for sopping.

Desserts change nightly, and once they're gone, they're gone—which was the case with the pomegranate crème brûlée, the last bit of which was taken by the table beside us. Hopeful glances in their direction did not inspire them to share, so we were forced to make do with a toasted pound-cake-and-chocolate-mousse sandwich plained with sweet fresh raspberries. Service was attentive and personal, though never intrusive.

An informal survey of acquaintances seated at three different tables, each visiting for the first time, revealed that all had come to the restaurant on recommendations from friends. MacK & Kate's is the kind of place that encourages happily surprised and satisfied diners to spread the word about their marvelous discovery. But selflessness only goes so far—as far as the last pomegranate crème brûlée. ■



MACK & KATE'S CAFÉ & WINE BAR

385 N. Main Street,
Kingston Springs,
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Open Tues-Sat. for dinner;
Tues.-Fri. for lunch

and in the evening, sconces set the brick walls aglow. Not only are many of the diners from Nashville, the tables and chairs they inhabit are as well, purchased from the Satsuma Tea Room when it closed some years ago. A place card with your party's name set discreetly in the center of the white-linen tablecloth is a lovely welcome; gleaming silver napkin rings that encircle rolled white napkins at each place setting add another warm and personal touch.

The delivery of the menu—printed on one sheet—further whets the appetite. Manhold and Malcolm add at least a couple of specials nightly to the set menu of four starters, two dinner-sized salads and 10 entrées, which is of particular interest to those who dine at MacK & Kate's on a weekly (and in one case, nightly) basis.

First-timers have some tough decisions to make, though if the lobster fondue is offered as a special, by all means begin there. The crab cakes with a mustard remoulade are classically composed, light on filler, fattened with crab. These are available as a starter or entrée; the