



## Prolific Minneapolis restaurateur thinks big at Tiny Diner

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Leave it to prolific restaurateur Kim Bartmann to redefine the neighborhood restaurant.

With the Tiny Diner, Bartmann and her executive chef, T.J. Rawitzer, have updated a familiar dining-out trope by adding an environmental consciousness and a locavore's outlook. Channeling the D'Amico Cucina-Auriga-La Belle Vie segments of his résumé, Rawitzer elevates the cooking far above the hash-house level that the name "diner" might imply.

The results remain accessible and fuss-free — no molecular gastronomy here, at least not yet — and wholly All-American, but the short-order fare frequently yields surprising finesse.

Consider the fried chicken. How many diners rely upon the premium birds from Pat Ebnet's Wild Acres in Pequot Lakes, Minn.? Or go to the painstaking trouble of an overnight herb brine, or a daylong soak in buttermilk?

The uncomplicated formula — dredge in seasoned flour, dunk in buttermilk, dredge again and fry in canola oil — is based on a Thomas Keller recipe (find it in his "Ad Hoc at Home" cookbook, a comfort food compendium that is essential home-cook reading). The results are marvelous: a pronounced outer crispness that yields juicy, deeply chicken-y meat.

Budget-wise, it's no Popeye's — at \$24, it's the menu's second-steepest price — but it's a worthy investment.

### Deep-fried delicacies

Yes, Rawitzer's crew clearly have a high comfort level at the fryer. If the onion rings — delicate, hot-sweet, divine — were sold at the Minnesota State Fair, there would be a never-ending line for them (and calls for Rawitzer to bottle the punchy barbecue sauce).

A delicate tempura-style batter, fortified with plenty of hot sauce, is an ideal cloak for soft-shell crab, the centerpiece of a well-embellished sandwich (an earlier iteration, deploying catfish, was equally fine). A big yes to the french fries, too.

Basics are handled with tender loving care. Witness the omelets and scrambles, their airy texture an obvious marriage of quality eggs (from Larry Schultz Organic Farm in Owatonna, Minn.) and sure-handed technique.

The straightforward salads and soups stand out for obvious freshness; for the former, don't miss the kale-Brussels sprouts combo (far tastier than its good-for-you description might imply), and for the latter it's the hearty white bean-kale combo, all the way.



Tiny Diner is located in a former gas station on East 38th St. in Minneapolis.

Renee Jones Schneider, Star Tribune

Tiny diner ••1/2

[www.tinydiner.com](http://www.tinydiner.com) • 612-767-3322

#### Location

1024 E. 38th St., Mpls.

#### Hours

7 a.m.-11 p.m. daily.

#### Price ranges

Breakfast entrees \$5.50-\$12.75, starters \$3.25-\$7, sandwiches \$4-\$16, entrees \$15-\$29, desserts \$4-\$6.

#### Recommended dishes

Onion rings, deviled eggs, pancakes, omelets, scrambles, scrapple, kale salad, burger, fried chicken, scallops, pie, soft-serve ice cream.

#### beverage program

Sixteen tap and a dozen bottled/can beers, primarily local craft brews (\$3.50-\$8). Roughly two dozen relatively affordable wines. Long list of intriguing beer and wine cocktails, a handful of refreshing house-made sodas.

#### Special menus

Nods to vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free diets. Five \$5 kids' menu items.

Rawitzer keeps the menu from becoming static by implementing a rotating series of specials — they've been sticking around six to eight weeks — that illuminate diner cultures across the United States. A nod to Philadelphia brought scrapple — hurrah — and it's everything it should be, a porky guilty pleasure that hits all the right fat, salt and crisp-edged touchstones. I loved the two culinary sacred cows — red-eye gravy with grits, and a robust pulled pork — that arrived when Memphis swept into town.

Still, the current homage to San Francisco feels less on point, more pastiche than tribute. It's easy to find love for the nuanced bowl of tagliatelle brimming with woody mushrooms and mellow garlic, but a replication of chef Danny Bowien's famous salt cod fried rice lacks the umami-laden qualities that make the original so darned addictive.

Visits earlier this summer, as the restaurant found its footing, were rocky. Happily, service glitches seem to have worked themselves out. Rawitzer also has weeded the menu of its idiosyncrasies.

Now, the little details shine through, whether it's the light-touch soft-serve vanilla ice cream (made on the premises with the grass-fed milk from Cedar Summit Farm in New Prague, Minn.), or the obvious care that goes into selecting the coarsely shaved ham, the mouthwatering bacon, the sizzling maple-infused sausage links (all naturally raised pork products from Fox Farm in Browerville, Minn.) or the big-flavored house-made fruit preserves.

Oh, and lovable pies, seemingly yanked straight out of a church bake sale, and the no-nonsense carrot cake.

Following her instincts

Is there any other restaurateur who routinely takes such real estate risks? "I'm your go-to gal for any completely impossible-to-deal-with space," Bartmann said with a laugh.

Transforming a former service station into a working restaurant wasn't easy, but the payoff has been huge. The corner lot, once covered with so much asphalt that it could have doubled as a rocket launchpad, is now home to a dramatic solar panel-covered patio (the sci-fi-esque structure dwarfs the actual diner, making it appear even, um, tinier) and a highly sustainable — as well as enchanting — edible garden, one that is surely destined to become a model for cramped urban environments everywhere.

With several nearby city lots under cultivation — along with a collaboration with Garden Farme in Anoka — Bartmann estimates that 70 percent of the produce used in the restaurant during peak growing season was raised by Tiny Diner farmers, who also found time to conduct urban gardening seminars and host a farm market stand.

What a gift to the neighborhood. Along with transforming an abandoned eyesore into a cute, colorful cafe, Bartmann has created a welcoming gathering space that skillfully caters to a wide variety of appetites and incomes. That's a near-priceless asset, particularly for the restaurant-starved sector of the city surrounding Tiny Diner.

Think of the convenience: In a single day, a sleepy-eyed Powderhorn-er can consider the Tiny Diner's perfect plate-size buttermilk flapjack as their \$2.50 wake-up call, knock back a dream of a ham sandwich at lunch for \$8.50 then celebrate an occasion that evening with a glass of not-bad house Tempranillo for \$5 and succulent scallops astutely paired with nutty farro, smoky bacon and tart apples for \$23.

Great, right? The timing couldn't be more perfect. Not for nothing did the Minneapolis electorate toss aside outmoded neighborhood restaurant liquor sales requirements in last week's election, in a landslide. The mandate is clear: More Tiny Diner-scaled restaurants, please. The tide has clearly turned.

"Restaurants are being looked upon as an amenity," said Bartmann. "Not a scary entity."

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