



RESTAURANT STORIES

A fantasy first look at Abbatoir

By JOHN KESSLER

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After stepping through the looking glass, Mark Blair and I drive north on Howell Mill Road and into the parking lot of the White Provision complex. That's where we catch sight of the ceramic cow. The slanting, early evening light hits the facets of its mosaic surface and makes it sparkle like a diamond.

"That's funny but kind of gruesome," I remark. This cheerful bovine statue is poised on the ramp up which many cows took their final walk into this building when it was a slaughterhouse. Now it's a restaurant with the queasy-making name Abattoir and a menu that specializes in "whole-animal cuisine."

"That's Annie Quatrano's humor," says Blair, who was the lead architect on the project for chef/owner Quatrano. "She doesn't pull any punches."

We climb the stairs to the second-floor entrance, and it's ... crowded. And dark. And buzzy.

Two hostesses are trying not to look frantic behind their desk as they juggle the phones and the seating chart. Ahead, beyond the lounge, we see Blair's partners, Vivian and John Bencich, at the bar where they've scored a coveted pair of stools. We wiggle through the crowd to find them.

"They should have given us one of those things that lights up when your table's ready," joked Vivian, who was sipping a glass of champagne.

I follow the low ceiling over her head — past the far end of the bar and a row of tables — to the windows along the west wall through which the sky is losing its last traces of orange to darkness. Love those pollution sunsets.

"Your table's ready," says a menu-bearing hostess suddenly at my side. "How does the patio sound?"

She leads us from the bar into the dining room where, suddenly, the low and nearly claustrophobic ceiling gives way to a soaring one, and that first vision of the room etches on my memory.

A long steel table — laden with glassware, sprays of dried reeds arching from a vase and a cured pig haunch set in a sinister metal clamp — stretches through the center of the room. Spotlights embedded in strange, skeletal wooden structures overhead cast it in chiaroscuro, giving the scene the look of a 17th century Dutch still life.

"Those are Thai fishing cages," says Mark. "Annie found them somewhere."

We walk through the dining room to the patio, where a fire burns in an oversized hearth. The patio looks over the freight rail tracks that separate White Provision from the West Side development where three of Quatrano's other businesses — Star Provisions, Bacchanalia and Quinones at Bacchanalia — are located. A bridge that arches like the one in Monet's Giverny garden connects the two retail centers.

"We designed it," Mark tells me after I admire it.

"So what shall we eat?" I ask, suddenly famished.

"I think they have haggis on the menu," says John, who up until now had been quiet. "I had it once in Scotland. There was definitely every part of the sheep in it."

"Really?" I ask.

"No. Or, rather, I don't know," says John. "There is no food. There is no menu."

The menu in my hand has vanished, as has the table, the fire, the other guests.

I run back into the room and find a blasted-out shell of chipped concrete and exposed structural beams. Shafts of light coming through the windows glower with dust.

In fact, the only thing in the room is that table, but it holds the pedestrian items from a construction site. A crumpled-up Checkers wrapper. A paper breathing mask. A Ziploc bag filled with Wheat Thins. A hammer.

"You'll have to wait for the haggis," Mark says with a laugh. "But at least you now see what we see."

Note: Abattoir will open in April or May. Mark Blair, Vivian Bencich and John Bencich are principals in Square Feet Studio, which is the architecture firm that will bring Abattoir to life. (Dominique Coyne will design the interior.) The quotes above were gathered during an imaginative walk-through of the space. For more information about the firm, go to www.squarefeetstudio.com