

# A NEIGHBORHOOD INSTITUTION IS REBORN

NEW EMMY'S IS A FITTING TRIBUTE TO ITS ORIGINAL OWNERS

BY BOBBY AMPEZZAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE WITTKOP



Owner Joe Caldarera reopened Emmy's German Restaurant in April in the old Knights of Columbus hall.



Top: Braised pork shank (Schweinshaxe Mit Kartoffel Klose) topped with its own gravy and served with handmade "gold" potato dumplings. Bottom: Potato pancakes served with a rich apple reduction and sour cream.

**EMMY'S GERMAN RESTAURANT**  
200 N. 13th St., Fort Smith  
(479) 242-3669 [www.emmystoo.com](http://www.emmystoo.com)

**HOURS**  
5-9 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

**CUISINE**  
Austro-German

Reservations preferred  
All major credit cards accepted  
Wheelchair accessible

**L**ots of towns have an Emmy's — the former speakeasy turned sandwich spot, the storefront Italian ristorante with the rear entrance and the crooning owner. In the case of Emmy's German Restaurant in Fort Smith, what people remember is an American G.I. and his war bride. He was a stout man with heavy lids who would wave guests into the kitchen to help him drink his gin. She was a vivacious immigrant woman whose flat vowels filled the rooms with the kind of authentic German ambiance that guests were dually considering with their palates.

These neighborhood institutions transition unevenly from the first generation to the second, and often not at all by the third. Emmy's skipped a family.

The original Emmy's opened in 1962 and closed on New Year's Eve 2005. Al had already died. Emmy followed him in 2007.

Joe Caldarera, scion of the Talianos restaurant line, reopened Emmy's German Restaurant in April in the old Knights of Columbus hall, the brick and mortar of which dates back to 1886. He purchased Emmy's handwritten cookbook, stained and crinkled from use, for a private sum. Then he went to work.

The new restaurant is just this — new. The partitioned, snug Victorian house in the 600 block of 16th Street where Emmy and Al Thome boiled knockwurst for four decades is no more. But after heavy renovation, the old K of C hall is an open, modern space, marked by oversized, padded oak chairs and heavy tables, stained-glass windows, and kitschy paintings of men in lederhosen and a Gothic castle and other standard German motifs. A narrow lounge is nestled between the dining hall and the original arches that open onto North B Street. The exposed brick and cool blue twilight pouring in from the tall windows pairs well with a bracing drink.

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What hasn't changed much is the menu, an arrangement more pan-Austro-German than Emmy and Al's original Bavarian intent, though it was the couple who long ago broadened the cuisine. There's sauerbraten from the northwest of the country, and schnitzel and strudel originally from Austria.

Few but native Germans would know this, so I brought along one born and raised in Wiesbaden, just a short drive from Emmy's hometown, Offenbach.

She was tickled to death with the potato pancakes (\$5) spanked thin and pan-fried in butter and served with a rich apple reduction and dollop of sour cream — as good as mom's, she said. Okay, almost.

She followed with the beef rouladen (her own mother's signature dish), a thinly sliced flank steak rolled around a stuffing of pickle, bacon, celery, horseradish and mustard and topped with a thick, almost gummy, brown gravy.

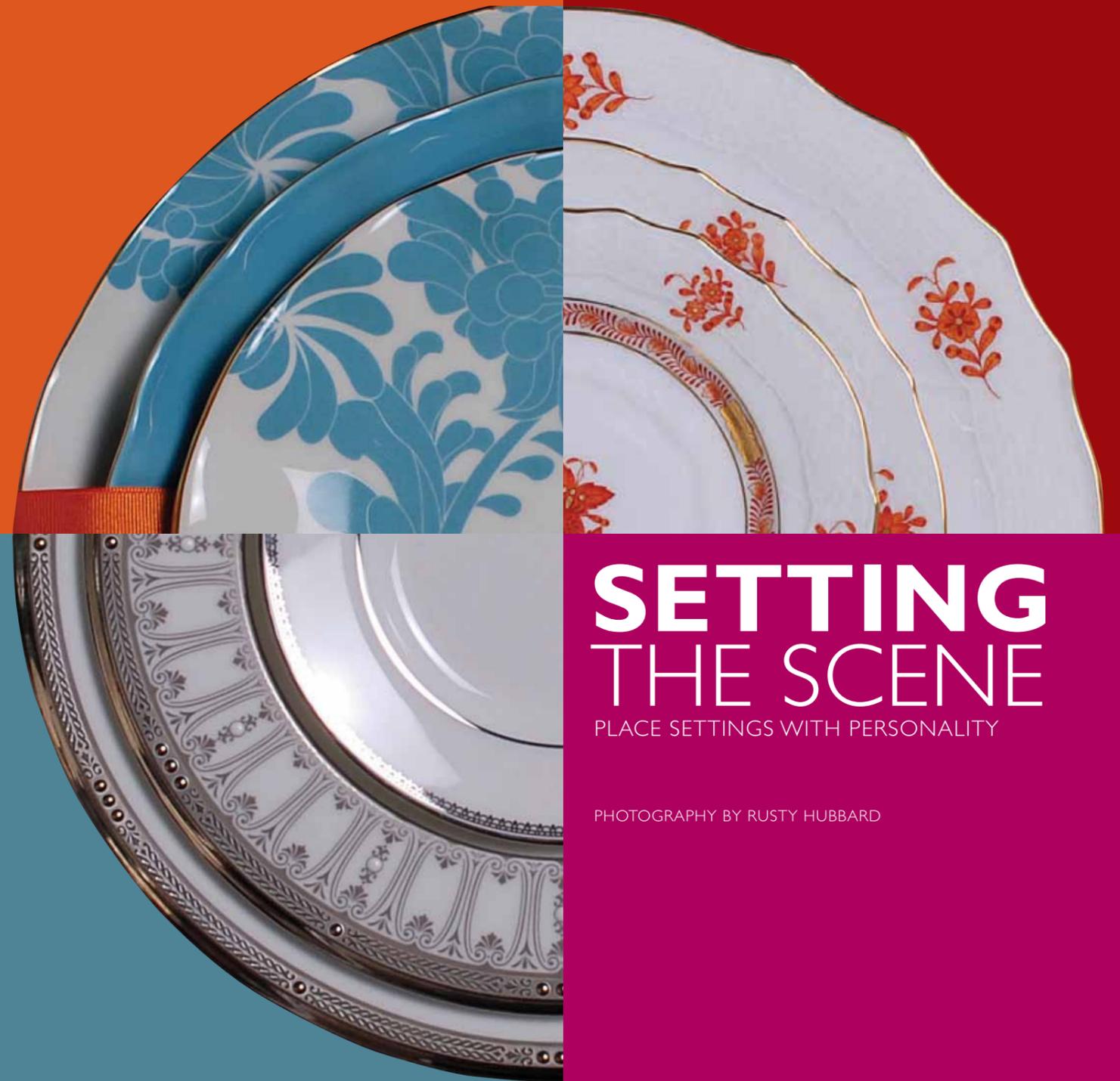
I had the "deep-fried cheese" (\$5), purportedly "Al's original" idea, and followed with Schweinshaxe (pork shank, \$22) Mit Kartoffel Klose, traditionally served in its own skin with hoof hanging, but not here. This slow-cooked, fork-tender meat is fatty and mellow, with just a dash of cumin for sport. With apologies to women, this bone-in hunk is meant for men's natural appetites.

If one of the German favorites or a schnitzel (\$14-\$20) isn't to everyone's liking, the restaurant also offers traditional fish and steak dishes (\$16-\$24). Each meal comes with a soup and a light salad splashed with Emmy's original fresh dill and pickle dressing. There's a modest wine list as well as wonderful German beers such as Bitburger and Warsteiner (\$3.50), and these will cut the adipose sweetness of most servings.

Caldarera says when he first entertained the idea of reopening Emmy's, "there was no business to purchase, but I knew it had value. Personally, the motivation for me to do this? It was my favorite restaurant."

Today, he says business is strong, and almost nightly the restaurant is visited by retired military once stationed in Germany.

And, in spirit at least, another old veteran and his German bride. ■



# SETTING THE SCENE

PLACE SETTINGS WITH PERSONALITY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSTY HUBBARD