

Recently opened Tuscaloosa restaurant is where “Sanctuary meets Speakeasy”

TUSCALOOSA, Ala.-- Welcome to The Sanctuary on 25th, a new Tuscaloosa restaurant whose unique atmosphere provides all that is hard to find in Tuscaloosa.

The Sanctuary on 25th is located inside a former church; however the name was determined before the location. Opened last October, married couple Matt and Nikki Ray, initially wanted to open a performance room.

“Music has always been our sanctuary,” Matt said.

Now, The Sanctuary on 25th has become a restaurant, bar, speakeasy and event space. Upon entering the outwardly unassuming building, there are two large seating areas, one as soon as you enter and one in the mezzanine of the building, as well as a bar and corner stage.

In The Sanctuary on 25th’s backyard, there is more seating, a stage for live entertainment and many games and video screens.

The church was built in the 1920s, evident from the state it was left in. The bones of the building were strong but the inside was left unkempt with the ceiling caving in and all that was left of the church being the ceiling, floors and outer walls.

Wanting to keep up the 1920s ambience, the Rays purchased vintage furniture, light fixtures and other quirky, stylistic touches. To honor the vaulted church ceilings, the Rays installed classic stained glass windows to let light into the dim space.

“The Sanctuary is not a money venture to us,” Matt said. “We wanted to bring something to Tuscaloosa no one else was doing. This is our passion project.”

When walking into the Sanctuary, one is greeted by warm, ambient lighting and large seating areas where you can enjoy an array of meals like shrimp and grits, lobster mac and

cheese, bacon-wrapped dates and many shareables. The Sanctuary offers a brunch, lunch and dinner menu.

“The idea was to make the space feel like a lived-in den, inviting you to lounge,” Matt said.

The Ray’s and The Sanctuary on 25th have an atmosphere of comfortability and convenience that bring people together, whether to eat, drink or just enjoy live music.

A frequent attendee of The Sanctuary on 25th’s events, 46-year-old, Lucy Karrh said she attended a performance of funk and soul singer Eli Hannon.

“My friends and I love to enjoy a bottle of wine here and split some appetizers to catch up,” Karrh said. “The only thing that could possibly make that better is live music, and The Sanctuary never disappoints.”

A large wooden bar serves 52 beverages on tap, many specialty cocktails and more. “Many guests enjoy ordering from our Seven Deadly Sins drink menu,” Matt said. “Each designed and named to fit one of the deadly sins.”

New to The Sanctuary, UA student Ava Harrelson ordered Lust. Made of bubblegum-infused reposado, orange liqueur, agave and lime, she said she would “come back just for this drink.”

In the corner of the room, a stage is filled with performers three to four nights a week. The building also has a one bedroom apartment and bathroom to offer sanctuary for traveling performers.

The Sanctuary currently books singer-songwriters and acoustic artists, including artists who perform genres ranging from soul, indie pop and Irish Folk. However, Matt said they hope to soon fill their large entertainment space with bigger acts, bringing in more customers.

The event space can be rented out and often hosts wine tastings, readings, and other intimate gatherings in the main den area.

Unlike many popular Tuscaloosa spots, The Sanctuary on 25th takes reservations and is open seven days a week.

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