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Issue 23

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Dixie Quicks' Blackened Salmon with carrots, Brussels sprouts and tomato butter.

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Eddie Morin I'm Eddie Morin. I'm from Omaha. I run B & G Tasty Foods, and I like eating food, playing video games, and dinking around with my wife and kids. I used to not be so fat. That's all I really think there is to me.

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LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER



Welcome to the latest issue of *Food & Spirits Magazine*, our 23rd. We're happy to have put this issue in front of you and we hope you enjoy it. This last quarter has been a rough one for the Omaha restaurant scene. It's seems like much longer ago than just this past January that a fire engulfed **M's Pub, Market House** and other businesses and residences

that called the building on 11th and Howard Street home. Of course, the fire was a tragedy on so many levels and for so many

"This last quarter has been a rough one for the Omaha restaurant scene... a fire engulfed M's Pub, Market House and other businesses and residences that called the building on 11th and Howard Street home."

people in different ways. I'd imagine nearly all of us know someone that was effected directly by losing their job or home. For the restaurant industry and many of its consumers, the loss of a new gem in the **Old Market** – The Market House – hurt, but the loss of the institution that was M's Pub, and everything it stood for in the Omaha dining scene, can't be overstated.

For me and *Food & Spirits Magazine*, this is the first issue that we've ever printed in our nearly nine year history that won't have an ad for M's Pub in its pages. Small potatoes compared to what others have lost, but something that is still hard for me to accept nonetheless. You see, in the early days of the magazine (before there actually was a magazine), when I was out there trying to hustle up support for this fledgling idea I had to create a magazine covering

"M's Pub was the very first business to believe in the idea and sign up to advertise; and it couldn't have come at a better (or worse, depending on how you look at it) time."

local food and spirits in Omaha, M's Pub was the very first business to believe in the idea and sign up to advertise; and it couldn't have come at a better (or worse, depending on how you look at it) time. After months of trying, I was nearly ready to give up and go work in a cubicle somewhere. Having **Ron Samuelson**, and by extension **Ann Mellen**, sign up to advertise with such iconic restaurants as M's Pub and **Vivace**, gave me the rest of the inspiration I needed, and perhaps more importantly, helped me sway other restaurants to advertise as well.

Since that time, Ron has become a personal friend and someone I think of as a mentor. I couldn't even count the number of times I called or met with him looking for advice and even more

inspiration. Those things became more valuable than any money they ever gave me for advertising. The magazine wouldn't be here without those two and M's Pub. I'm not entirely sure what the future holds for any of them, but I don't need to know to wish them the absolute best. And I'm not the only one. It was a remarkable thing the way our community stepped up to support those affected. Whether it was by donating money, attending an event or hiring a displaced worker, so many helped in the best way they could. I hope we don't see something like that happen in a good long time, but if it does, it's a comfort to know that our community will respond the way it did.

"On a happier note... Dixie Quicks is celebrating their 20th anniversary this year."

On happier note, another restaurant that has a long history with *FSM* and Omaha will be celebrating a milestone. **Dixie Quicks** is celebrating their 20th anniversary this year. Dixie Quicks is another restaurant mainstay in the Omaha Metro that has provided countless good meals and friendly conversations. Owners **Rene Orduna** and **Rob Gilmer** are two of our finest restaurant owners and I'm also proud to call them my friends. Rene was another person I talked frequently with in the early days of the magazine, and the magazine would also not be here if not for the insight and knowledge (not to mention the job) they gave me. Congratulations to you both, and Dixie Quicks. Make sure to check out an article about them inside by **Leo Biga**.

Finally, *FSM* will host the 8th Annual Omaha Pizza Review at **The Waiting Room Lounge** on June 7th at 6:30 pm. Musicians **Kait Berreckman** and **Sarah Benck Tardy** will also be performing. Doors open at 6:00 with the event beginning at 6:30. Admission is \$15, which includes pizza from 10-14 different Omaha area restaurants.

As always, let us know what you like and what you don't. We always love to hear from you.

Erik Totten – Publisher
Food & Spirits Magazine



Righteous Southern Grub

Dixie Quicks chef and co-owner Rene Orduna and partner Rob Gilmer deliver righteous Southern grub in eclectic space

by Leo Adam Biga

Dixie Quicks Public House features Southern-Tex-Mex infused dishes reflecting classically trained chef and co-owner **Rene Orduna's** many influences. But make no mistake, his good eats are soul food by any other name. He says about any cuisine, "It's all soul food if it's good, if it's got flavor." His singular bold flavors come right from the soul.

Twenty years into a run that's seen Dixie Quicks evolve across three metro locations, Orduna, together with life-business partner **Rob Gilmer**, has created an artful but unpretentious experience. Years before it got trendy, the two foodies emphasized farm-to-table fresh ingredients and made-from-scratch fine dining quality comfort food.

"From the day we opened we've had locally grown food," Orduna says. "It just makes sense. Having relationships with farmers always made it easy for me to get stuff in I couldn't find anywhere else."

His grandfather grew chilies and tomatoes for the family's iconic **Howard's Charro Cafe** in South Omaha, where Orduna got his start in the industry. On family vacations to Mexico he was introduced to the vibrant, fresh flavors of his ancestral homeland.

"We know our strengths, we know our weaknesses, we know our gifts, we know our shortcomings, and it works out really well."

Gilmer's folks back East farmed acres of organic gardens. He says, "When Rene and I lived in New York City we'd go to their place and the food was amazing. Rene was like a kid in a candy chop." "Oh, yeah," Rene recalls. "Being able to go pick it and cook it right there was great. That taught me a valuable lesson – one I'd learned before." Orduna finds it ironic that farm-to-table is suddenly "all new and mainstream."

Today, his picking is facilitated by six farmers who regularly produce for him. Several others supply specialty items. Beyond that, he uses Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and **H. Olafsson International**.

"Knowing those places and having a good salesman like I do, who's been with me from the beginning, makes the difference. It's all about the relationships. Usually I have the menu planned out at least a week ahead of time. I know what's coming and since I already know my purveyors, I get what I want."

His refined fare is served in a relaxed, whimsical setting where CEOs, bikers, creatives, families, gays and straights feel equally comfortable.

As Rene puts it, "We open up our doors to basically our home and want whoever walks in to feel comfortable."

Gilmer never ceases to be wowed by the emotion and imagination Orduna pours into his culinary creations. If the huevos ranchero is especially hot, then Gilmer knows Orduna's upset.

"It all comes out in the food," Gilmer says. "It's that love, that passion you cannot learn, you cannot be taught. It's been instilled in him since birth. Basically, cooking is chemistry, but he adds that punch. When he makes Ramen Noodles from the package at home he throws away the seasoning packet and adds his own seasoning mix and it's a banquet."

For a *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* segment, host Guy Fieri raved about Orduna's serious cooking chops and mentioned the Texas chili pepper steak, the blackened salmon, the chicken tortilla soup and other dishes. That exposure keeps bringing folks from all over the country and the world. "It's amazing how word gets out," Orduna says. He adds that the **College World Series**, U.S. Olympic Swim Trials and **Berkshire Hathaway Convention** draw people "who are serious about food – they loving coming here and they come back every year."

It's not just the food but the funky environs. In its latest iteration, glittering plastic globes and repurposed doors hang from the ceiling. Toy dinosaurs are arrayed on a front counter. Photographs and other works by Gilmer, a visual artist, adorn the dining room walls.

"It makes him part of the restaurant, too," Orduna says of having Gilmer's art displayed there. The art and ephemera continue in the couple's adjoining **RNG Gallery** and cozy curio-thrift shop.

All of it has an urban-chic yet homespun feel that gains further charm from the character of the 19th century digs whose ground floor the business occupies. In 2011 Dixie Quicks moved into the renovated Hughes-Irons Building at 157 West Broadway in Council

"We open up our doors to basically our home and want whoever walks in to feel comfortable."

Bluffs from its decade-long home at 1915 Leavenworth in Omaha. Dixie Quicks and RNG add a bohemian accent to this block of historic buildings with quaint brick facades and wrought iron-laced balconies.

Dixie Quicks began at 1516 Dodge Street in Omaha. At each spot it has fused food and art. Rene works his magic in the kitchen but he also has a strong managerial and design sense.

"The restaurant business is a perfect place to learn where to put this and where to put that," he says, "and it transfers everywhere in regular life. How I arrange my home and my kitchen – it's all the same thing."

In addition to Gilmer making art for the eatery's walls, he curates the gallery and he adds playful flourishes here and there.

"I have as much fun with it as anyone," he says of the toys and things.

He also does the books and runs the front of the house.

"We know our stations," he says. "You don't want me cooking in the kitchen and you don't want Rene with a checkbook. Every once in a while I'll say, 'Do you want me to go in the kitchen and start cooking?' and he's like, 'No, no, no, I've got that.' We know our strengths, we know our weaknesses, we know our gifts, we know our shortcomings, and it works out really well. Sometimes we do butt heads, and I just let Rene think he's right,"

"That's all that matters," Orduna says, smiling. On a more serious note, he adds, "Knowing your abilities and your inabilities makes all the difference in the world and we're able to accept that from each other."

Gilmer says he's reminded of how **Jun and Ree Kaneko** work together.

"Jun is such an incredible artist and Ree is such an incredible administrator. I mean, every Jun should have a Ree, and we sort of have that. If Rene did it all by himself here he'd have to worry about the kitchen and the front, so here we even it out. It's all good."

Making them a good match is their mutual appreciation for good food and their love for the restaurant business. Orduna grew up at Howard's and broadened his knowledge at the **French Cafe** and **M's Pub**. He then left for a whirlwind culinary life and career in New Orleans, Atlanta, Kansas City, San Francisco, Hawaii, New York City and Maryland. He learned new techniques and shortcuts, he opened and closed establishments, and he worked with legends Julia Child and James Beard.

"I was lucky enough to work at the French Cafe when they had three chefs from Paris working there. I waited tables and they saw something in me. They would take me off the floor back to the kitchen between lunch and dinner and teach me how to do other stuff. Those were the three best mentors I've ever had in my life. It was totally eye-opening to see the great food they put out. Learning how to make it was the best thing of all. It helped me wherever I went."

His famous Texas chili pepper steak is his take on the classic steak au poivre he learned to make there.

"When I moved to the South I had a different view of it. Instead of using peppercorns, I used chili peppers and peppercorns and brandy and bourbon instead of just brandy, which gave it its own little flair. I use poblanos, anaheims and jalapeños. One has a depth of flavor, one has the mildness of chili powder and one has the heat. It really brings out the flavor in all three. It's like our coffee here – a cross blend of light roast, dark roast, regular roast. It covers all the bases."

"I just salt and pepper the steak and put the peppercorns on top. It gets sautéed in a pan (in soybean oil). The peppers are added to it with a few onions. The bourbon and brandy's added to that. Then, I add a little beef stock, then cream and then that reduces in a pan."

For his blackened salmon he dredges his fillets in a secret spice mix that creates a blend of flavors and a hint of heat.

"It gives a carnival in your mouth every time you take a bite and our signature tomato butter goes so well with it."

He cooks the salmon atop a hot grill, sans oil or anything else. The oil from the salmon does the rest.

He's considered coming out with a line of spice mixes and such but there's been no time. "Maybe in the next five-year plan we'll do that."

There was no five-year plan when he left town, just a desire to travel.

"Once I left Omaha, I went to New Orleans. Working at Brennan's restaurant I realized I could do my job anywhere I wanted. My other mentor was Ma Hall from Ma Hall's Boardinghouse in Atlanta. She served brunch on Saturday and Sunday with tables on the front porch and in the gardens. People



flocked to this restaurant. It was all self-served soul food sourced from local farmers. It was heaven."

Dixie Quicks is famous for its brunch.

Gilmer never worked in the industry until he and Rene opened Dixie Quicks in 1995, but he always found it intriguing.

"I've always loved it. I've always been enamored by the restaurant process and by what restaurants can do."

Growing up in suburbia New York state and vacationing summers in Maine, his family ate out a lot and he tried wide ranging fare in diverse settings. What most stood out were spectacle-style venues. There was the Polynesian-themed Bali Hai whose outside featured a faux volcano that lit up. Running through the inside was an enclosed mini-river filled with baby alligators. A waterfall, too. At Hamburger Choo-Choo a model railroad track ran through the kitchen into the dining room, with patrons placing their dirty dishes atop the flatbed train cars.

"That's why we have dinosaurs everywhere. I look at the restaurant as almost a kid and what makes it fun."

In addition to what Orduna's taught him, Gilmer gleaned much from his partner's late mother, **Delores Wright**, who made Howard's a success.

"I learned from his mom talking with her, watching her. I picked up so many wonderful pointers – to the point where his brothers and sisters will hear me say something and go, 'God, Mom said that.' I learned from the best. She was an amazing woman."

The men are grateful the family has embraced them as a couple.

Howard's is now on its fourth generation. Gilmer and Orduna settled here after they came back to help the family move that eatery from 24th and Q to 13th and J in the former **Marchio's**.

"I thought we could either go back to New York or we could stay here and open up our own place," Orduna recalls. "Living in the South I had a love for Southern food, Cajun, Southwestern. There



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was no restaurant like that in Omaha, so we opened our own. It was the time.”

Dixie Quicks earned loyal customers from the start. Most followed its two moves. Oscar-winning filmmaker **Alexander Payne** is a fan. He says, “I went to their first place, then followed them to Leavenworth and then followed them across the river. I just think they’re a tremendous asset. It’s a place I can take people visiting for the first time and they’re surprised by how hip it is.”

“A restaurant is only as good as the last food they put out. That’s as good as a restaurant gets.”

Relocating to the Bluffs was done for business and personal reasons.

“It was an opportunity for us to give Council Bluffs something it didn’t have,” Orduna says, “and another part of it was so we could get married. We figured it was a good fit.”

The new site has more space and better electrical-HVAC systems than the past spots. Much thought was given to every detail, even the acoustics. Big windows allow ample light and cool streetscape views.

“There is a commitment here that is from the soul and you have to be committed to all of it,” Orduna says. “I’ve been in the business long enough that I do understand the art of it.”

Gilmer says, “The art is making all this hard work look easy.”

Satisfaction comes from “knowing everybody had a meal worth twice the money they paid for it,” says Orduna, adding, “That’s what I wanted people to feel. That’s what makes me happy.”

Sustaining that is an art, too.

“A restaurant is only as good as the last food they put out,” he says. “That’s as good as a restaurant gets,”

He welcomes “the camaraderie” with customers that extends over years. A generation later, he says patrons who came as kids are now

parents bringing their own kids. “We get a lot of the same people we’ve had from the beginning.” Count Mary Thompson among them. “I used to bring Rene fresh veggies from my garden,” she says. “He once did a fabulous dessert presentation – Bananas Foster to be exact – for an event I did. He is a true master.”

Orduna enjoys sharing tricks of the trade with young people who work for him. “Many are still in the restaurant business and they still look back on their time at Dixie Quicks as the hardest job they ever had, but the most learning job they ever had. That makes a difference to me.”

He and Gilmer admire the enterprising, ingenious chef owners who’ve emerged to elevate Omaha’s culinary scene. They host pop-ups to give people space for their dreams. The couple’s own dream is rooted in family. Howard’s is where Orduna’s love affair with food began. It’s still going strong in the family’s hands. Just as Rene and Rob support that legacy, the family supports the couple’s legacy.

“They’re all proud of what we’ve accomplished,” Orduna says. “Being able to be here with this place now is really great. They all come in here and have lunch or dinner on a regular basis. We go over there every Tuesday night for dinner. Oh yeah, we gotta make sure their food is right. We’re quality control.”

DIXIE QUICKS AND RNG GALLERY

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Results of the First Annual Doughnut Shootout

photos by Lisa Dirks

“A sold out crowd of over 300 attendees tasted samples from a total of nearly 2,000 doughnuts. Krug Park, Reverb Lounge and The Waiting Room also whipped up some specialty drinks to go with the doughnuts.”

The First Annual Omaha Doughnut Shootout was held February 13th at **The Waiting Room Lounge, Krug Park** and **Reverb Lounge**. A sold out crowd of over 300 attendees tasted samples from a total of nearly 2,000 doughnuts from **Harold’s Koffee House, Donut Stop, Petit’s Pastry, Sunrize Donuts (Omaha), Sunrize Nebraska Donuts (Gretna), Lamar’s Donuts, Krispy Kreme, Dunkin’ Donuts** and **Winchell Donuts**. Krug Park, Reverb Lounge and The Waiting Room also whipped up some specialty drinks to go with the doughnuts.

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Those that attended voted for the favorites and at least one doughnut from every bakery received a first place vote. Here are the results:

BEST CAKE DOUGHNUT

Sunrize Omaha
Sunrize Gretna
Harold's
La Mar's

BEST GLAZED DOUGHNUT

Donut Stop
Sunrize Gretna
Krispy Kreme
La Mar's

BEST SPECIALTY DOUGHNUT

Tie - Sunrize Gretna
Tie - Petit's
Sunrize Omaha
Harold's

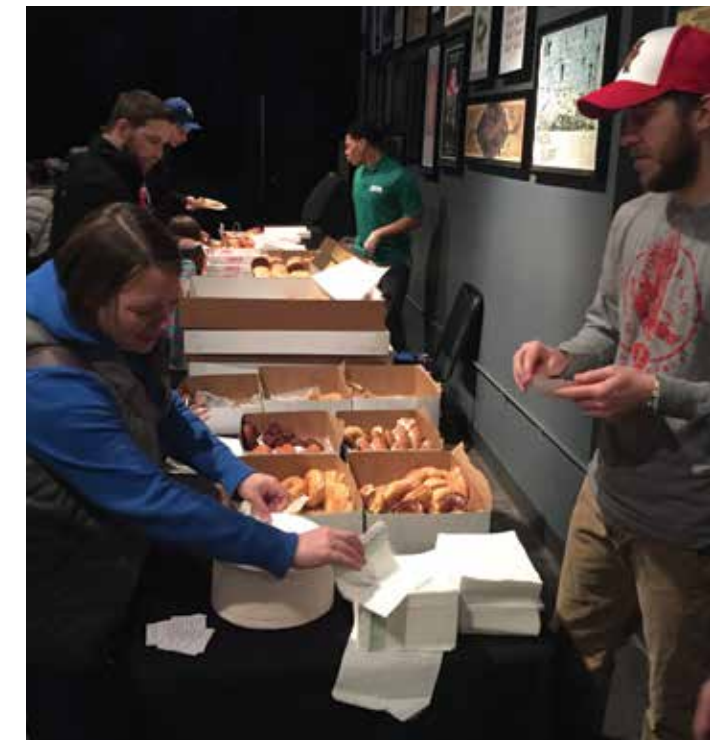
OVERALL FAVORITE DOUGHNUT

La Mar's
Sunrize Gretna
Sunrize Omaha
Harold's

Along with those votes, some attendees also wrote in their favorite doughnuts. Those mentioned were:

La Mar's – Red velvet doughnut
Sunrize Omaha – Chocolate cruller
Sunrize Gretna – Apple fritter and bacon maple doughnut

Petit's – Oreo crusted doughnut
Donut Stop – Chocolate glazed cake doughnut
Winchell's – Boston crème pie doughnut
Harold's – Spice cake doughnut





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A view of the bar at LeadBelly's Midtown Crossing location

Two Tales of LeadBelly

story and photos by Jessica Clem

In most cases, a red herring is a clue left at a scene; a distraction meant to mislead others from the trail. For **Mike Martin**, a red herring means more than simple bait and switch. “A red herring is a distraction from everyday life,” he said.

“That is the philosophy we have for our company. When you come into our restaurants, we don’t want you to worry about anything other than being comfortable.”

That philosophy is why **Red Herring Concepts**, owned by Martin and his partners, **Tony and Wendy Young**, focuses on creating restaurants and experiences that blend fresh ingredients with an informal atmosphere, giving diners the chance to kick back and enjoy themselves.

“Flying away from the Lincoln nest, the newest LeadBelly has a growing fan base in Midtown Crossing.”

“Back in 2009 we found ourselves at our own crossroads, needing a new distraction from life. We needed to be on our own.”

So after identifying a need for dining options in Northwest Lincoln, they opened **TOAST**, a neighborhood gathering spot that just happens to serve food and drink. The success of this location led to the 2013 opening of the original **LeadBelly** in Lincoln, nestled in the **Haymarket**.

Nearly a decade ago, Martin and his partners approached the developers of **Midtown Crossing** with an idea for a casual restaurant

while the development was still a baby blueprint. “At the time, it didn’t work out,” said Martin.

“But seven years and two successful restaurants later, we have the opportunity to come full circle.”

Flying away from the Lincoln nest, the newest LeadBelly has a growing a fan base in Midtown Crossing. Designed by architects Sinclair Hille, the major issue was reverting the design from a sterile counter order setup to a restaurant that had character. “Anytime you try to create your own concept in someone else’s space, it is a challenge to build what you want,” he said.

“In order to create something that feels comfortable, it needs to have a lived in feel,”

Partnering with Jason Gilbreath of Reclaimed Enterprises, LeadBelly’s design mixes contemporary colors with warm tones of light and dark wood. Along the walls are worn wooden planks, etched with scratches and marks from previous lives in barns, along railroads, and in homes throughout the region.

“The wood paneling is from a hotel that was demolished from up the street. The bar is made from an old railcar floor, and the front of it are the doors from that same hotel.”

Above a row of booths are bare artisan bulbs, secured by a large rectangular structure of the same worn wood, blending old and new world aesthetics above shiny red booths. Bits of history are woven throughout the restaurant, creating a comfortable atmosphere that makes it easy to settle in for a while.



LeadBelly runs its kitchen based off the phrase, “Contemporary American Pub,” coined by Red Herring Concepts as a way to distinguish itself from the competition.

“Let’s be honest, LeadBelly is a gastropub. But the term has been misused by so many other restaurants that we needed our own phrase to get past that image.”

In *The Gastropub Cookbook*, food writer Diana Henry describes a gastropub as “a place in which you can have a drink, but which also serves really great food.” While other pubs may deliver on one but fail on the other, LeadBelly delivers on both.

“Bits of history are woven throughout the restaurant, creating a comfortable atmosphere that makes it easy to settle in for a while.”

15 tap beers are always on hand, with local favorites highlighted. An extensive cocktail and wine menu covers all tastes respectively, designed around the hope that all customers who dine at LeadBelly can find something they enjoy. A lovely whiskey and scotch menu, along with a famous Bloody Mary, ensures that all patrons can indulge in a spirit of their choice.

Pub food is often thought of as comfort food, with portions large enough to be enjoyed with a beer slowly, with the company of good

friends. And LeadBelly certainly doesn’t disappoint. The Dusk ‘Til Dawn Griddler is large enough to nap on. Bavarian sausage relaxes under a comforter made of candied bacon, Muenster cheese, and sriracha. A fried egg oozes onto a brioche bun, all elegantly chaotic on a bed of crispy fries. It is rich, decadent, and the perfect way to celebrate any day of the week.

“With LeadBelly’s foundation, excellent kitchen and comfortable ambiance, it is sure to be a Midtown staple for years to come.”

If you aren’t feeling a breakfast sandwich large enough to take to a movie, LeadBelly also offers a variety of salads, one of which offers sweetness and crunch. The Raspberry Pecan salad has a foundation of crisp spinach, with pieces of candied bacon accenting the sweet sting of red onion. Pillowy sliced hard-boiled eggs bring a pop of color to the dish, along with rivers of raspberry. The food is hearty yet fresh, a medley of flavors that brings classic and modern tastes together. The Razzle Dazzle pizza also incorporates raspberry; in this case, as a spicy jam that enhances the flavor of fresh chicken and poblano pepper. If you feel the urge to make a toast while eating it, you probably taste the hint of champagne used in the dough.

The Full Leaded Jacket, the Turdunken of burgers, is a true treasure from the LeadBelly kitchen. Inside a cinnamon roll is a patty of fresh ground beef, topped with chili, queso (awesome), jalapeños and tomatoes, served with house made tortilla chips. This dish is as rich as it is unique, and is the perfect blend of sweet and savory.

From the drinks, to the décor, to the entrees, to the bartenders, to the cooks, to the servers, there is a sense of pride in the restaurant. “LeadBelly stands out because it isn’t just a restaurant, it’s a community,” said Chelsea Thomas, head bartender, manager, therapist and all around creative guru.

“We are a group of friends who support each other and love what we do.”

With LeadBelly’s foundation, excellent kitchen and comfortable ambiance, it is sure to be a Midtown staple for years to come.

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OMAHA'S TOP PATIOS

With the break in the cold temperatures and spring making its appearance, patio season is now in full effect. The ability to enjoy beers and cocktails on a deck is, once again, ours for the taking. With that in mind, *Food & Spirits Magazine* has compiled a list of some of our favorite patios to be found in the Omaha Metro. Make sure to check out the accompanying map to find the best patio near you!

"The ability to enjoy beers and cocktails on a deck is, once again, ours for the taking."

1) BRICKWAY BREWERY & DISTILLERY 1116 Jackson Street, Omaha, NE 68102 | 402-933-2613

Brickway, located in the Old Market, has one of the best patios in the area with the south facing deck insuring sun all throughout the day. Daily happy hour drink specials are available throughout the week and all day Sunday with \$5 Bloody Mary's and \$4 pilsners. Starting on May 2nd, Brickway opens at noon Monday through Fridays and 11 a.m. on the weekend. Brickway offers a massive selection of local brews and spirits with over 20 Brickway beers as well as at least four of their own spirits, including their American Single Malt Whisky.

2) BRIX MIDTOWN 220 South 31st Avenue #3103 | 402-991-8466

Visit Brix at Midtown Crossing to experience one of Omaha's largest patios. With seating for up to 150 people, high and low-top tables, and the incredible view of Turner Park or the "city feel" of Farnam Street, you may want to stay all summer long! If the



evenings get a little chilly, their three fire pits with soft, cushioned seating will be sure to warm you up. Their patio is the perfect venue to sip on an ice-cold beer, enjoy a great glass of wine or refreshing cocktail – all while savoring a juicy Brix Burger, Avocado Crab Tower, or Chicken Club. Patio seating is in high demand during Jazz on the Green and other live music events at Turner Park, so call to book your reservations.

3) BRIX VILLAGE POINTE 225 North 170th Street, Suite 101 | 402-991-9463

The Brix Village Pointe patio is the perfect place to enjoy spring, summer and fall with friends, family, and business associates. With seating for up to 50 people, you are surrounded by a casual, inviting atmosphere and just steps away from Main Street at Village Pointe – Omaha's premier shopping experience. Enjoy your favorite glass of wine with our innovative wine dispensing technology, a refreshing beer, or a house-made craft cocktail, all while taking in the open air of west Omaha.

And in case of rain, they've got you covered – literally. Their covered patio will keep you dry from the rain, protected from the sun, and warm and toasty on the cooler nights with our ceiling space heaters. Brix at Village Pointe is your go-to patio in west Omaha.

4) BRUSHI BISTRO & BAR 721 N 132nd Street | 402-884-6878

While lounging in Brushi's incredible patio, make sure to order some food with your drink. Brushi's daily happy hour is from 4-6 p.m. where they offer cocktail, wine and beer specials as well as appetizers including pulled pork sliders with citrus barbeque sauce, or beef carpaccio with mustard aioli. Full lunch or dinner complete with chocolate mousse cake or fresh rhubarb strawberry tart is also available. "I want people to come in, sit at the bar or on our patio, and try it," chef and owner Paul Braunschweiler said.

"I think they'll really like it." For those who were regulars at Prima 140, they'll be happy to know that their favorites are still available at Brushi. In fact, Braunschweiler keeps a Prima 140 menu on hand so customers can refer to it.

5) CEDAR OMAHA 8726 Countryside Plaza | 402-933-7143

Newly opened Cedar will soon be adding a patio to their location in Countryside Village. Featuring wrought-iron railings and piped-in music, Cedar's patio will be a prime destination for midtown denizens throughout the spring, summer and fall months. Cedar's impressive drink menu, focusing on craft beers, wines and classic cocktails will be available in its entirety. Look for this up and coming patio to open in May.

6) CHARLIE'S ON THE LAKE 4150 South 144th Street | 402-894-9411

Charlie's on the Lake, open since 1995 under the same management and ownership, provides and extensive list of appetizers and dozens of martini selections. It's also been voted best of Omaha in seafood, martinis, patio and steaks over the past years. Using only the best products available for their guests and having a kid-friendly menu is just one of the reasons. The patio atmosphere overlooking their private lake with waterfalls and fountains is something that guests can enjoy from May to October.

Along with a great patio, they also have two beautiful private rooms that they use to host wedding receptions, private parties and holiday parties. Don't forget happy hour – Charlie's on the Lake offers happy hour every weekday from 3 to 6 p.m. with ½ price appetizers and \$1 off all adult beverages.



7) ENZO'S ITALIAN
8510 North 30th Street | 402-933-9755

Enzo Zurlo, owner of Enzo's Italian in the Florence part of Omaha is a first born American and NY native. He brings a traditional Italian cuisine with a new age flair to the Midwest. His menu consists of fresh and local ingredients that is all made in house and to order. Pastas, breads, brick oven pizzas and dressings are just a few to mention. This summer their 500 square foot patio will be open with a cozy fire pit and an exclusive al fresco food and drink menu and featuring a wide selection of Italian wines.

Be sure to make a reservation on the weekends because, with a featured special on Fridays and Saturdays, they pack a full house. Enzo's is great for a fast casual lunch with mouth-watering paninis and salads. If you don't have time to sit in their quaint dining space, call ahead and place a to-go order (everything on the menu is available to go). Hours of operation are Monday-Thursday 11 a.m. -2:30 p.m. and 4:30-9 p.m., Friday & Saturday 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. and 4:30 - 10 p.m.

8) JACKSON STREET TAVERN
1125 Jackson Street | 402-991-5637

Enjoy open air dining at its finest at the Jackson Street Tavern. Their patio, with its massive roll-up door, provides for excellent people watching, offers a great view of the Omaha skyline and the Old Market, and a great way to enjoy after work drinks. Whether you are looking for a light bite after enjoying the farmers market, Sunday brunch with family, or wining and dining a special friend under the stars, the patio at the Jackson Street Tavern is your spot.

Join them for delicious fresh food, full bar service and courteous, professional service served seven days a week on their patio. And if it's too hot or too cold or raining, they have plenty of seating available inside.

9) LIV LOUNGE
2285 South 67th Street | 402-884-5410

An award-winning cocktail bar in the Aksarben Village area of Omaha, LIV Lounge offers an extensive cocktail menu, diverse wine and beer selections, and small plate appetizers in a warm, inviting environment, including a large outdoor patio. Since opening in 2009, LIV Lounge has become one of the most respected cocktail bars in Omaha with a menu that includes over 100 hand-crafted classic and craft cocktails.

Only steps away from Stinson Park, Baxter Arena, the Keystone Trail, restaurants, theaters, hotels, shopping and convenient free parking, LIV Lounge is the perfect place for happy hour, after-dinner drinks, or evening cocktails in a civilized setting. The LIV Lounge outdoor patio – one of the largest outdoor patio spaces of any cocktail bar in the area – is a popular spot for groups large and small. With a gas-fired fire pit, bistro table seating and designated outdoor wait staff, the LIV patio provides a relaxing setting for socializing with friends, enjoying fresh air, day-time sunshine and evening star gazing.

10) NICOLA'S ITALIAN WINE & FARE
521 South 13th Street | 402-345-8466

Nicola's Italian Wine & Fare has been in Omaha's Old Market since 2003. They are known for their divine Italian Lemon Cream Cake and incredible lasagna. Dinner at Nicola's is a delightful experience. Whether you are dining on the outdoor garden patio or inside the rustic cozy dining room, the freshness and care for each menu item is unmatched. "Stay Sweet, Nicola's" is the newest part of Nicola's. They offer amazing desserts, baked goods, hand painted



cookies and artisan chocolates to enjoy at home or for that special occasion.

Order online at StaySweetNicolas.com, or call us at 402.403. YUMM. They love taking requests and working with you to make your event extra special. Catering is also available for all of their dinner, lunch and dessert items.

11) PETROW'S RESTAURANT
5914 Center St. | 402-551-0552

Petrow's recently added one of the best outdoor spaces in Midtown Omaha. With seating for 65 and a bar capacity of over 200, their patio lends itself to accommodating any event or casual dining experience with a contemporary feel. Stay comfortable eight months out of the year with an automatic louvered and watertight awning, keeping the area cool and shaded in hot weather and dry if rainy. Heaters warm the space on cool days and nights.

Big screen TVs along with water and fire features complement their patio and bar menu. The fast, casual menu features salads, wraps, homemade falafels and appetizers. Enjoy a beer or a drink with drink specials and a full bar. Petrow's on the Patio is open for breakfast (self-service), lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday during the outdoor dining season.

12) SALT 88
3623 North 129th Street | 402-991-9088

The patio at Salt is tucked away on the south side of the strip. There are no streets with rush hour traffic hurrying past and the patio overlooks the golf course at Eagle Run. The feeling on the patio is an upbeat scene of people enjoying cocktails, catching up with friends and even laughing at the occasional bad golfer, making their way through the course in the distance.

The patio is a popular spot at Salt and although they offer the largest patio in Omaha, their outdoor tables are available on a first come, first serve basis. Salt offers numerous styles of dining when it comes to al fresco. Enjoy seating under the cover, or next to one of their beautiful wood walls, crafted from 100-year old reclaimed wood. If you have the shades in toe and want to catch some rays, they offer seating under the elegant patio lights or the stars of the night sky.

13) SPEZIA
3125 South 72nd Street | 402-391-2950

Spezia has a quaint hidden patio off the main dining room and bar. The architectural charm of the building is well received with brick surroundings and slanted windows. Two large trees shade the area and rows of string lights add a nice ambiance as the sun goes down. First come, first serve and weather permitting. Serving lunch and dinner seven days a week and a brunch buffet on Sunday morning.

Expertly prepared wood fire steaks, seafood and innovative pasta dishes offer an excellent variety from their award-winning menu. High backed booths provide privacy under sky lit windows or in the cozy "cave" area. Along with craft cocktails and an extensive wine list, Spezia has happy hour every day from 4-6 p.m. with ½ price cocktails. Private party rooms are available for large groups, weddings, meetings or special events. Reservations recommended.



FOOD & Spirits
presents

OMAHA'S Top PATIOS

1

**BRICKWAY BREWING
& DISTILLERY**
4150 South 114th Street
402.894.9411

2

BRIX MIDTOWN
220 South 31st Ave
402.991.8466

3

BRIX VILLAGE POINTE
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402.991.9463

4

BRUSHI BISTRO & BAR
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402.884.6878

5

CEDAR
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CHARLIE'S ON THE LAKE
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ENZO'S ITALIAN
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JACKSON STREET TAVERN
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402.345.8466

11

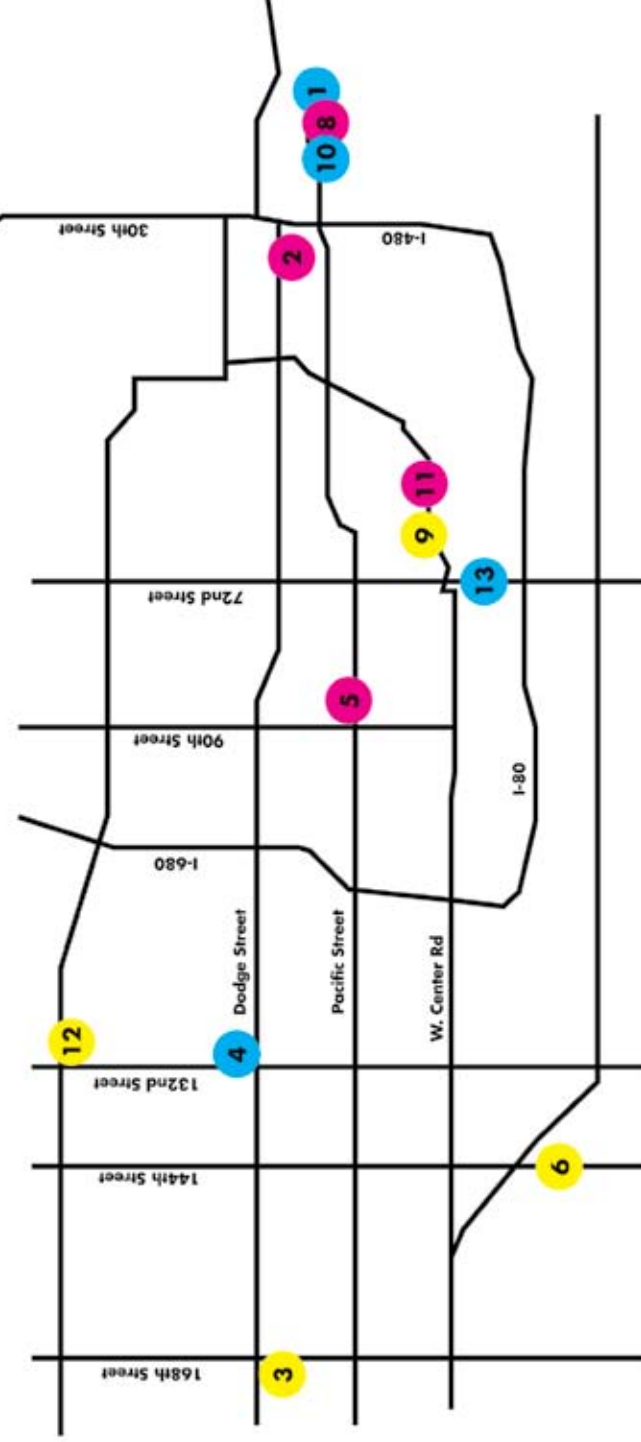
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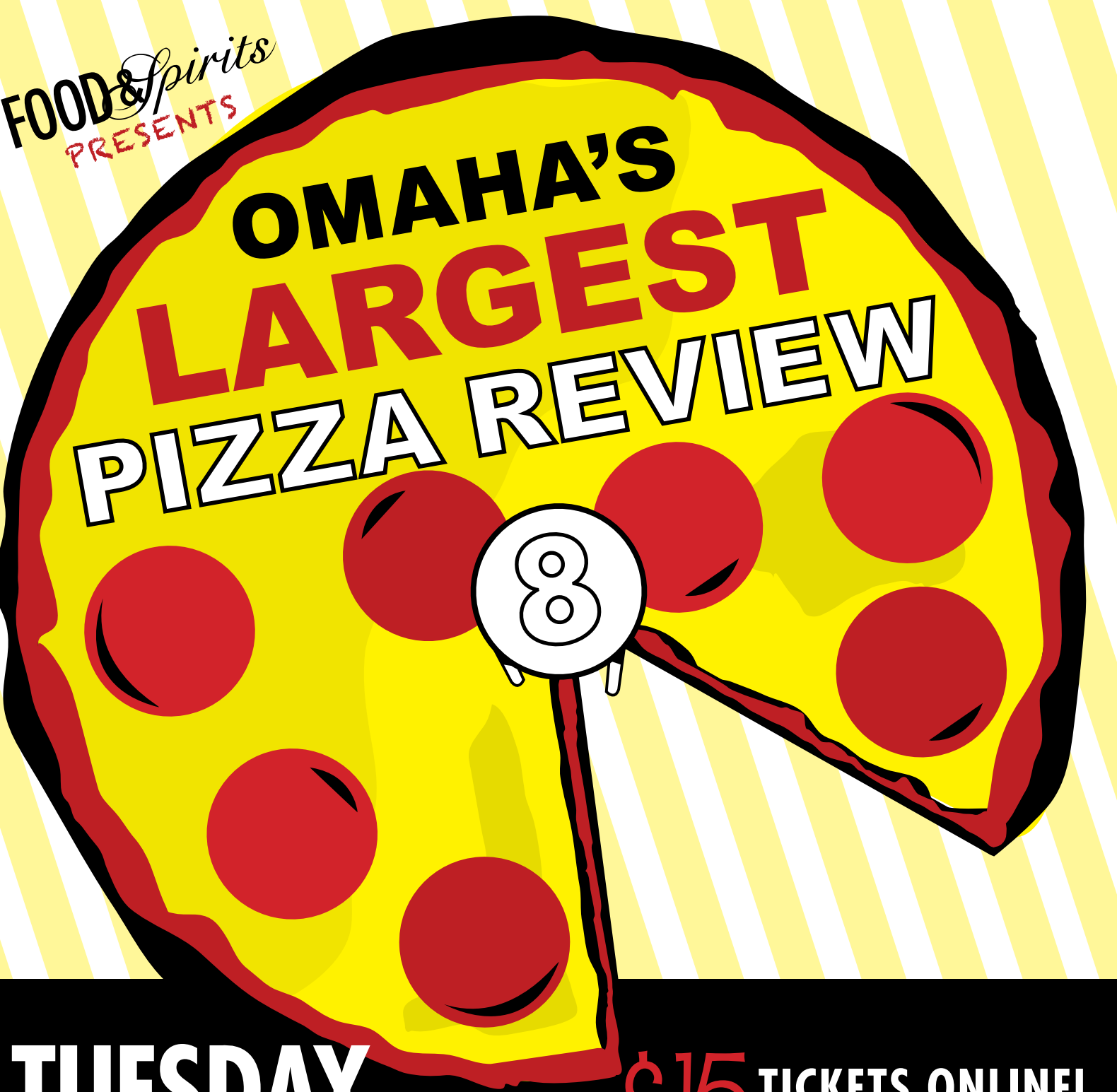
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SALT 88
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SPEZIA
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Sweet & Spicy Summer Slaw

story by Charles Schlusell, photos by Jacob Herrman

Spring is almost over and summer will soon be in full swing. That also means that we Nebraskans, being firmly ensconced in the center of the Midwest, are ready to fully engage into party mode after months of singing the frigid winter blues. Unlike my Floridian friends who are continually drenched in unending sunshine and frolicking in the sand year round, we Omahans must make wise use of our limited amounts of the coveted gold warmth that lasts for us but for a brief moment.

"We all need a few sharp and accurate arrows for our culinary quiver that always hit the target of fast, easy and phenomenally tasty."

I'm guessing that most of my *Food & Spirits* family will be in the same boat that I am come this time of year. We always have a few parties sparsely sprinkled throughout the rest of the year, but summer is the time we find our inboxes and Facebook invitations turn into a torrential flood as we try to squeeze all the fun we can into our few short allotted months. We all need a few sharp and accurate arrows for our culinary quiver that always hit the target of fast, easy and phenomenally tasty. I would like to share with you one of my favorite recipes that will transform you from an ordinary partygoer into a deftly skilled kitchen ninja.

"It's a perennial favorite... It's fast, easy and hits all the notes we look for in a pleasing party dish."

I've developed this recipe for sweet and spicy Asian slaw through trial and error over the last decade. It's become a perennial favorite that always has people coming back for seconds or thirds. It's fast, easy and hits all the notes we look for in a pleasing party dish. It's sweet, sour, salty, spicy, crunchy, and even has some umami going on. Of course as with any recipe with fresh vegetables, feel free to add or substitute any of the wonderful array of fresh produce available in the farmers markets. Let the recipe be your launching point as you paint the canvas with your own brush strokes.



Sweet & Spicy Asian Slaw

INGREDIENTS

Slaw

- 4 cups shredded cabbage (white with a little red)
- 1 carrot, shredded
- 1 each red, yellow and orange peppers, diced
- 1 bunch of cilantro, rough chopped
- 1 bunch of green onions, thinly sliced

Dressing

- 1/4 cup Thai sweet chili sauce (Mae Ploy brand)
- 2 tbsp. fresh squeezed lime juice
- 2 tbsp. unseasoned rice wine vinegar
- 1 tbsp. soy sauce
- 1 tsp. sesame oil
- 1 tsp. fresh grated ginger
- 1 small clove garlic, finely minced
- pinch of kosher salt

DIRECTIONS

Prep vegetables and place in the serving bowl, mix dressing ingredients and store in a separate container. Mix the slaw and dressing together right before serving. This will keep the slaw fresh and crispy.



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Shoyu Ramen at Ika Ramen and Izakaya

THE SUPPER CLUB

Ika Ramen and Izakaya

story and photos by Angela Nichols

Publisher's Note: Omega Omega Omega (Tri Omega), the culinary fraternity at the Institute for the Culinary Arts at Metropolitan Community College, strives to provide students with opportunities to apply and develop their skills through unique experiences. One of these experiences is the Supper Club. The Supper Club selects a restaurant once a quarter and works with the chef of the restaurant to provide a unique dining experience to challenge the palate and minds of the students with the unique ingredients and techniques found in that chef's kitchen. The article and photography for this article are also done by students.

Since many of our students had never experienced ramen outside of the dehydrated noodle “bricks” you get at the grocery store, the cold month of January was the perfect time for a winter quarter supper club at **Ika Ramen and Izakaya**.

Ika Ramen and Izakaya is the brainchild of **Chef Jose Dionicio**. The idea of a standalone ramen shop started with a limited time

ramen Sunday service that Jose offered at **Taita**, his restaurant just up the street from the Izakaya. Ramen Sunday lunch was the place to be and it booked up quickly each week. Diners started asking for ramen more often, setting the wheels in motion for the birth of Ika, which opened its doors December 10th, 2015.

When you step into the small, welcoming spot at 6324 Maple Street in Benson, you are transported back to the ramen and Izakaya spots in Japan. Similar to a Spanish tapas bar, a traditional Izakaya is a style of drinking establishment that serves small courses of food over a period of time and often meant to be shared with others.

Once inside, the casual, friendly atmosphere put everyone at ease, instantly staving off the apprehension that some students were feeling since they had never dined at an Izakaya. The tantalizing aroma of the rich broth floated in the air, whetting appetites. The bright, delightful mural offered an exciting and energizing backdrop to the tables, while the open prep counter allowed for the guest to watch the creation of their meal.

Our meal started with the kimchee chicharones, glazed with a fish sauce caramel and scattered with scallions. The chicharones were



Steamed pork belly buns

light and crispy, seasoned well and made a wonderful vehicle to enjoy the tart and spicy kimchee. The fish sauce caramel imparted a sweet and salty note that gave the entire dish the taste of umami.

“The tantalizing aroma of rich broth floated in the air, whetting appetites.”

Following the chicharones, the perfectly steamed and salted edamame pods and a jar of Togarashi allowed each diner to control the spice and heat level of the dish. A fragrant Japanese spice blend, Togarashi is usually made of red chili pepper, black pepper, sesame seeds, dried mandarin orange peel, green nori seaweed flakes and poppy seeds.

Next up were steamed pork belly buns that had a rich, braised pork belly inside a soft open bun, fresh cilantro and pickled



Kimchee chicharones

cucumbers. Denny Nichols said they were his favorite dish and that they were, “rich, decadent, balanced and fresh.”

It was now time for the main course: the ramen. The first bowl was the Shoyu Ramen, a rich soy and pork broth, perfectly cooked noodles, soft boiled egg, scallion, pork and bamboo shoots. The last bowl was the Tonkatsu Ramen, a rich and creamy pork broth emulsified with pork fat, filled with noodles, soft boiled egg, pickled red onion and fresh scallions, topped with toasted sesame seeds. Hearty, decadent and satisfying.

As the meal came to an end we were treated to a whimsical dessert. A green tea ice cream with green tea KitKat candy bar. The ice cream was rich with a floral note and not too sweet, while the KitKat gave it a much needed bit of texture. It was a perfect ending.

At the end of the day, most of the students remarked that they were now spoiled ramen connoisseurs, who would never go back to their old grocery store “bricks”. Many wanted to share their experience with others.

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Food Caddie Delivers Dozens of Omaha's Top Restaurants

by Erik Totten



We've all been there: Unable to find the time to make dinner, not wanting to leave the house due to weather, simply too tired to muster up the energy to cook anything or perhaps wanting to order lunch for the office. Either way, when left to delivery, your choices amount to franchise pizza places, a Chinese restaurant or

two and, the perhaps, hopefully, local place that provides delivery service. Point being, while the Omaha food industry has evolved in many ways, one way we're still woefully lacking is in our availability of restaurants that deliver.

However, an option available in the Omaha Metro area that many aren't aware of exists. Local startup Food Caddie delivers food from many area restaurants all over town. They deliver to individual homes as well as large organizations or companies. Restaurants are being added all the time, but at last count, over 60 places were available for delivery.

Nationally, the food delivery industry is on a huge upswing with more than \$1 billion invested in 2014. With online ordering at 1% (give or take) penetration, food and grocery delivery remains one of the largest markets still mostly offline, and its transition to online and/or mobile in the coming years will create a wealth of opportunities for entrepreneurs. In fact, online ordering is expected to surpass telephone orders for the first time in the next few years.

Founded in January 2012 by Michigan native Sean McLeod (who moved to Omaha in 1996), Food Caddie specializes in moving your food from the restaurant to wherever you may be. Early on,

Sean worked in many different types of delivery. "I had a freight background in delivery, including serving subpoenas," Sean said. "I've always been delivering something."

After attending a restaurant delivery conference in Las Vegas, Sean saw the possibilities for delivery in Omaha.

"The first time I went to the conference I came back with a bunch of notes," Sean explained.

"I went again and this time I came back with a bunch of ideas."

Ordering with Food Caddie couldn't be simpler; Go online to foodcaddie.com or download their app, place your order and get ready for your food. The average delivery time is right around 45-50 minutes, but it can be longer during busier times, like the weekend.

Quality and timeliness are at the forefront of Food Caddie's concerns and that's reflected in how they do business. Some restaurants have a different delivery area, which is dependent on the quality of the final product delivered to your door – some food travels better than others. To that end, most delivery drivers are dispatched remotely so that you get the closest driver to your intended restaurant.

But at the end of it, it comes down to a pretty simple formula. "Customers want their order correct and they want it on time," Sean said.

Currently, 95% of orders take place online and about 5% of orders are from the mobile app. Sean noted that while online ordering makes up the bulk of their orders, mobile ordering is on the rise – and that's not expected to change. As well, lunch makes up nearly half of all orders and continues to grow along with an emerging breakfast delivery market.

No matter how, or what, you order from Food Caddie though, the most important thing is that you get what you ordered as

quickly as possible. It's there that Food Caddie excels the most and that's not lost on Sean. "I like that we provide a service that wasn't being done here and it was needed," Sean said.

"I think we're pretty good at what we do and I'm proud of that."

How to Order:

- Click 'Order Now'
- Select your zip code
- Select the date and time you want the food and click 'Continue to Restaurants'
- Click on the restaurant you want to order from
- Select the Menu Heading from the left side of the screen (Appetizers, Sandwiches, etc.)
- Add menu items by clicking on each item, then selecting the 'Add Item' button
- Once you are done ordering, click the 'View Order' button below your order summary on the right side of the screen.
- Review your Order
- Click 'Continue to Checkout' in the lower right portion of the screen
- If you do not have an account, you will need to create one at this time
- If you have an account, select the delivery address
- Review your order and click 'Place Order'
- Enter your credit or debit card information

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Omaha Adventures in Pairing Food & Spirits

by Oliver B. Pollak

Café de Paris and the French Café were wonderful destinations for anniversaries, birthdays or out-of-town guests. Fine dining adventures became ingrained in our lifestyle. My wife and I have been going to food and wine pairing dinners at Omaha restaurants for several years. We started wine tastings at Vivace in the Old Market and Prima 140, both now gone. We sampled single malt scotch on Sundays at the Dundee Dell.

“Anticipating the menu and the wine pairing is part of the excitement.”

Recently, we enjoyed food and wine pairings and destination dining at Le Bouillon, the Boiler Room Restaurant, Salt 88, Biaggi's, Dolce, 7M, Dario's Brasserie, Le Voltaire and Dante Ristorante Pizzeria. The menus joined my special meals collection going back to 1952, and that is not a typographical error.

Under Paul Kulik, The Boiler Room has paired wine, champagne and scotch. I learned to make a good whiskey sour with single malt Glenmorangie, a no brainer. Dario Schicke paired Belgium beer.

Dinners cost \$40 to \$100 per person. At \$250 Avoli's pairing of several barolos was too rich for me.

These four to seven-course meals are paired with European and California wines. Emails announce upcoming events. Shall we go? Will we be in town? How busy are we that week? Can our budget, waist and weight bear it? Despite the meal's fanciness, the dress is casual. We made our reservations, indicating allergies and possible substitutions. Anticipating the menu and the wine pairing is part of the excitement. They usually start at six on a weeknight. Get there a little early and enjoy a cocktail, perhaps a negroni, sazerac or dirty martini in preparation for an Italian, French or American repast. Pleasure and learning, not decadence, occur as we move from aperitif to white, red and dessert wine.

We usually cannot finish the plate from the third course onward, so we box the unconsumed portion. It's a good feeling to get a second meal out of the experience and as it drives down the cost, it makes for a tasty bargain.

There is little chance of inebriation as the pours are not voluptuous, and mixed with proteins, carbs and water, the meal is balanced. Even so, my wife who imbibes less than me was the designated driver.

The chef or server described each dish, indicating with pride the local providers of chicken, beef, pork and vegetables. The vintner discusses terroir, geography, temperature, moisture, growing and harvesting season, barrels, oaking and stainless steel, vintage and the vineyard history.

Chefs want to show their stuff. The kitchen staff and the attentive knowledgeable servers were at the top of their game. Water glasses are topped off. Appropriate silverware, plates and stemware gracefully appear.

Three performances stand out. Biaggi's had a wild game wine dinner. The seven courses included wild boar, duck pastrami, elk ragu, cedar smoked salmon and bison short ribs, all paired with six Italian wines selected by Banville & Jones Wine Merchants, headquartered in New York. Chef Aaron King emphasizes, “fresh, relaxed, delicious.”

Dante hosted a dinner which ran \$100 and featured four chefs: Bryce Coulton of The French Bulldog provided gravlax pastrami, boar salami & 'nduga; Clayton Chapman of The Grey Plume offered up an amazing potato soup with oxtail croquette, blood orange and cipollini; Nick Strawhecker of Dante provided veal agnolotti; and Paul Kulik of Le Bouillon and Boiler Room prepared South Dakota goose. About 100 people enjoyed the extravaganza with Austrian, Spanish, Italian and French wine. The chefs signed the menu. Author Summer Miller and photographer Dana Damewood sold and inscribed their book, *New Prairie Kitchen*, which features the four chefs.

“Pleasure and learning, not decadence, occur as we move from aperitif to white, red to dessert wine.”

Le Voltaire hews closest to French haute cuisine. Chef Cedric Fichepain offered duck four ways; foie gras mousse pate, shredded duck confit salad, duck breast with fig and honey gastrique, and duck cassoulet with sausage and beans, accompanied by several French Brumont wines.

Novelty and innovation complement classical cuisine. Some meals involve chemistry, froth, smoke and dry ice. Rarely is something too spicy, or the texture not to the diner's liking.

These events are opportunities to increase restaurant patronage. Social media, Yelp, Urbanspoon/Zomato, Trip Advisor and Zagat can make culinary reputations. Chefs earn national publicity and awards. It is challenging marketing good taste to people with discretionary income, developing clientele and presenting a product that pushes the boundaries of good taste and high-end consumption.

“These experiences develop our tastes for the new, fresh and unusual in an ever-changing culinary world.”

The sumptuous meal closes around nine-ish with appreciative remarks by, and for, the chef, serving staff and liquor distributor, perhaps a toast is invoked. The social occasions are shared with old and new friends, with a delicious sense of satisfaction.

These experiences develop our tastes for the new, fresh and unusual in an ever-changing culinary world. We've been beguiled with sea urchin, scotch quail eggs and saddle of rabbit. Beyond consuming the leftovers, we purchase some featured wines and mark them with date and restaurant to remind us of the good times and tastes.



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SODAS WHICH YOU MAY NOT BE ENTIRELY AWARE OF

Grapefruit Kiss

by Eddie Morin



The soda featured in this quarter's S.I.W.Y.M.N.B.E.A.O. is Grapefruit Kiss. I'll be honest with you – this one was difficult for me to choose. It's just a real classy soda, and I am reminded of my lowly station when in the presence of Kiss. Oh well, I'll get over it. I will be doing a much more simplified exposure than I normally do this time (as this article is due tomorrow morning and I don't want to be punished again). I am bringing forward a new feature I call "Word on the Street" to liven up the review. Let's take a big sip and dive right in.

"It's just a real classy soda, and I am reminded of my lowly station when in the presence of Kiss."

When first glancing at Kiss, you can see that the bottle and label are done in a traditional style. The bottle is transparent green which tricks the brain into immediately thinking of general crispness. This green is contrasted by the yellow grapefruit on the label and the yellow cap. Both of these are round, which obviously shows that the manufacturer was paying attention to symmetry. Lastly, bright red letters spell out the soda's name followed by the phrase, "with other citrus flavors." Red, highlighting the word "kiss" being the color of passion, gets the drinker ready for some primo action. And the other, unspecified citrus flavors? We have a mystery here, ladies and gentlemen, and I am excited to see where this is taking us!

All in all, I'm totally pumped to try Grapefruit Kiss even before opening the bottle. When I finally twist off the cap, I'm greeted with a sparkling effervescence. Delightful.

"Simply put, if you are looking for a nice summer grapefruit experience, you could do a lot worse than Kiss."

BAM Surprise "Word on the Street" feature! I conducted a survey and compiled the best responses to the question of what average humans think of Grapefruit Kiss. Here they are:
Eric Shew: "I think it tastes more like Fresca than Squirt. I've only had one Kiss soda ever."
Ross Negrete: "I don't know if I've ever had it. I've never looked at the bottle until now. It looks fresh."
Benny Bagels: "I know I've had it. It's mega-juicy."
BLAMMO Word on the Street over!

The taste really matches the bottle. It's crisp and classy. It's much less sour than squirt. Simply put, if you are looking for a nice summer grapefruit experience, you could do a lot worse than Kiss. We sell Kiss at B & G Tasty Foods and my favorite thing about Kiss is when someone orders it, I get to say to one of the kitchen staff, "Hey, can you go in the back and gimme a Kiss?"



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Love On The Rocks

Percentage Markup and Bar Ownership

by Jill Cockson

Quality, or quantity? That is the question. Recently, I have spent a lot of time analyzing the profitability of 'percentage markup' vs. 'profit margin' models in our industry. The bar biz love affair with percentage markup is undeniable; it poses an obstacle for newcomers to the industry who do not want to give up markup percentages easily. The result is a potential missed opportunity to create an extremely profitable business, as a result of misunderstanding the big picture. In order to initiate this conversation, we need to define our terms.

"In markets where fixed costs are lower, a new species of bar is on the rise: the quality-driven, small and focused venue where you can actually make more money with less liability and less people."

| COGS | Selling Price | Profit Margin Model | Markup Percentage Model |
|-----------------------|---------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| \$.23 (rail cost) | \$4 | \$3.77 Profit | 1,640% Markup |
| \$4.54 (premium cost) | \$18 | \$13.46 Profit | 296% Markup |

Profit margin models are concerned with the amount of money left from a transaction minus the cost of goods sold (COGS): Selling price - COGS = profit.
Markup percentage models are concerned with the ratio of the COGS to the selling price – or in other words, how many times the COGS can be divided into the profit dollars.
The love affair with percentage markup begins and ends with the notion of a 1,640% markup, which seems quite impressive, until you correlate it with the number of dollars above COGS you get to keep in that transaction: \$3.77. Conversely, the premium spirit transaction might only sustain a markup of 296%, but yields \$13.46 that you get to keep over COGS.

The reason we are so obsessed with percentage markup is that the tolerance for percentage markup is incredibly high on the well liquor (far below premium) end of the spectrum. Until recently, the industry standard has been to target a consumer on that end. In essence, when every bar is quantity-driven, the name of the game is to find the cheapest product you can find to sell against everyone else's rail for the same price.
A resurgence of classic cocktail culture, however, is creating more educated consumers, and growing the demand for quality products and services. In markets where fixed costs are lower, a new species of bar is on the rise: the quality-driven, small and focused venue where you can actually make more money with less liability and less people.

In order to understand which model is appropriate in the establishment of a business plan, it is necessary to understand what role these models play when building a brand and creating brand identity. Quantity-driven, volume-based establishments can be seen as lower maintenance insofar as hiring, training and operating procedures. The required skill set is not as technical, so competitive wages are also lower. Guests in these environments tend to be more forgiving; you don't expect a fine dining experience from a fast food place.
However, lower price points mean that you have to do more transactions to yield the same number of dollars profit over COGS as a quality-driven, premium establishment. Here, the costs/benefits are an inverse of the former. Hiring, training and operations are more labor intensive, and therefore more expensive. Guests will not be (and should not be) tolerant of much error. If you tout yourself as a premium establishment, and charge premium prices, you had better be able to deliver. The guest who is spending \$12 on a drink reasonably expects a greater added value for their dollars in return.
Consider a bar of 75 people who are all drinking \$4 drinks at the average rate of one drink per hour. In this model, each hour has a projected income of \$300 per hour. Now, consider a room full of 30 people consuming drinks that cost \$11 each at the same rate. This model projects an hourly revenue of \$330... more money on less than half of the people. The latter, quality-driven model takes less space and less people to run, so several other fixed costs could decrease as well. These models simply cannot generate a million in sales as a result of limited space, but they can fly steady as low-maintenance, money-making machines.
When deciding which financial model best fits your brand vision, you simply need to ask how much effort you are willing to put in. Both have their merits and drawbacks. The worst thing you can do, however, is fail to understand both options, thereby eliminating a potential opportunity for success. I choose to remain in the Midwest, primarily because our fixed costs are low compared to other parts of the country, and I have a realistic option of pursuing my goals as an entrepreneur.





Alex Lund tends bar at Krug Park in historic downtown Benson.

Portrait of a Bartender: Alex Lund

photo by J. Michael McBride

For this issue's bartender portrait, I sat down with Omaha native Alex Lund. I've known Alex from many of his bartender jobs leading up to his current position, and in the time I've known him, I've been impressed by his dedication to learning his profession. Beyond that, he knows his beer and can whip up a wicked cocktail.

Food & Spirits Magazine: Where do you work and how long have you worked there?

Alex Lund: I work at **Krug Park** located in historic downtown Benson. I have been there since day one back in 2011.

FSM: How long have you been bartending and what are some of the past places you bartended at?

AL: I've bartended for about fifteen years now. I started at **Old Dundee** as a door guy, a barback and then finally a bartender. I started from the bottom and worked my way up. I then found

myself at **Jake's Cigars**. That's when I really started to understand what being a bartender was all about.

I learned so much about spirits; particularly bourbon and scotch. To this day, I still feel like Jake's has the finest selection at the fairest prices. Then, I did a year at **España**. I think I needed that. It was nice to see what you have to go through as a bartender in a restaurant.

As soon as I heard about Krug opening, I desperately wanted to be a part of it. When it opened, I was there. It's at Krug where I really learned about all the styles of beer and how it's produced. That's when I finally respected beer and I fell in love with it. Then there are the cocktails. My skills got way better and my imagination and attention to detail came together. My confidence grew more and more each day and I knew that I was getting pretty darn good at my job. It nearly took me a decade, but better late than never, I guess.

FSM: When did you know you wanted to be behind the bar?

AL: I knew I wanted to be behind the bar when I was barbacking. I paid attention to the bartenders back then and it just seemed like it would be a lot of fun. I'm a people person, so getting to know my regulars and meet new people is amazing. I have met so many wonderful human beings since I have been a part of this industry. Being behind a cubicle at nine in the morning makes absolutely no fucking sense to me.

FSM: Have you had any people along the way who have helped you be the bartender you are today?

AL: I've had a lot of people give me insight on how to make drinks, but it's the respect that bartenders have for each other that makes me who I am behind the bar. I'm constantly inspired and driven by my fellow mates.

"I think as a city we are moving in the right direction – not only with cocktails, but also with craft beer."

FSM: Where do you find inspiration?

AL: I find inspiration in a lot of things. Allie and my daughter, Hannah, give me inspiration every day. When I make a cocktail I want it to be perfect, yet abstract, as much as possible. Sometimes that can be very difficult, yet that's also what makes me want to move forward and try new things; to go outside the safety zone. It's hard to be original and crafty and make cocktails that get that "wow" factor every time. I'm not the BEST bartender, I don't consider myself a MIXOLOGIST; I'm just a 37-year-old bartender that takes pride in his work every single day.

FSM: What is the best part of your job? And the worst?

AL: The best part of my job is when I get to teach my customers. It's the look on their face when I blow their mind with a beer they have never had before, a beer they never thought they'd ever like, but do. It's the look on their face when they have that perfect cocktail. I get so much joy and satisfaction when I can make that happen for someone and believe me, it just takes one person to tell me "Hey! This beer was amazing!" or "Hey! Thanks for the fantastic drink!" That's all I ever need.

The worst thing about my job is when I get the customers that just don't care about what you are doing or trying to show them. I want every single person that walks through my door to have the best time. When that doesn't work, I just get bummed out.

"The perfect cocktail, in my opinion, consists of three to four ingredients... but I have been known to get weird and come up with a few abstract drinks that taste pretty good too."

FSM: Do you think bartending will be any different in 20 years?

AL: I'm not sure if bartending will be different in 20 years. I kind of hope it stays the same. I truly feel that, since the beginning, the bartender has been a rock star. He or she has made your drinks, poured your beer, listened to your sob stories, and hell, maybe even given you some good advice. I think the styles of bartending have changed throughout the years and unfortunately, there was the movie Cocktail that was absolutely dreadful and gave everyone a bogus look at how a bartender acts behind the bar. I don't do flair; I just work my butt off, but I hope that the next generation is hungry for knowledge and takes it seriously.

FSM: What makes a good bartender?

AL: I think what makes a good bartender is someone who actually cares about what they are doing, someone who takes the

time to know what they are talking about, someone who pays attention to details and someone who is simply friendly. There are bartenders out there that just want the money – and I get that; money is good, we need it.

There are bartenders out there that do it just to look cool and maybe get laid or something. I get that, too. Sex is good. But the bartenders I know and love are the ones that know my name, that know what I want to drink and they take great care of me because they really care.

FSM: What is your favorite drink to make?

AL: My favorite drink to make is probably the Old Fashioned. I just love that drink. It is so good when done correctly, yet you can put your own spin on it by using different bitters or syrups. It is a true classic.

FSM: What do you drink?

AL: If you see me on the other side of the bar, I usually have a dram of fine Kentucky bourbon or a glass of Italy's best amaro. But let's be real here. I'm a bartender! I drink EVERYTHING.

FSM: What's something you wished people knew about being a bartender?

AL: I wish that people understood that this is a serious job and that I take it very seriously. This is my only job. This is how I make ends meet, put food on the table, pay my bills, put clothes on my baby's back. This is not a fun part-time job; this is for real. This is my profession and I am a professional.

FSM: Describe the perfect cocktail.

AL: The perfect cocktail, in my opinion, consists of three to four ingredients. You don't have to go crazy and have eight things in your cocktail and have it take you ten minutes to make it. That can be sort of ridiculous. I'm mostly known for making classic cocktails and adding a little twist to them, but I have been known to get weird and come up with a few abstract drinks that taste pretty good too.

FSM: What do you think some of the current trends are with bartending?

AL: I don't know if there are current trends going on in this great city of Omaha, but I will say this: Omaha has some very talented bartenders and I am ALWAYS humbled and appreciative to be acknowledged as part of that group. I think as a city we are moving in the right direction – not only with cocktails, but also with craft beer. And don't even get me started with the culinary scene in this city! I can go on and on with how proud I am to know people that create and cook amazing food in this city and the people that present it. I love this industry and the people that are involved in it.





Newly Opened Cedar Lounge Hits the Mark

by Erik Totten

When Nick O'Connor opened Cedar, one of Omaha's most recent lounges in November of 2015, his goal was to provide a unique and casual neighborhood bar that focused on the details. Details like lighting, music, art, décor, all-natural cocktails and a robust wine-by-the glass list. "It's neighborhood driven and it's a neighborhood bar," Nick explained.

"It's neighborhood driven and it's a neighborhood bar."

Those details started with coming up with the name for his new venture. Cedar, located at 8726 Countryside Plaza (in Countryside Village, across from Westside High School), is in a neighborhood surrounded by streets that are named after trees. In fact, Cedar Street is just seven blocks away. Nick, who grew up in

the neighborhood and attended Westside, thought Cedar was the perfect name and complemented it with a cedar-topped bar.

The details expand to cover the lighting that provides the perfect low-key ambiance; the lights are turned down low and the candles are lit. As opposed to many other neighborhood bars, you won't be overstimulated when you walk into Cedar. No 10 TVs blasting sports (although there is one TV available for the premier events) or music blasting so loudly you can't hear the person next to you. This is a place where being able to have a conversation is important and it shows. New additions are the horizon as well – a patio will be added in May and will featuring wrought-iron railings, piped-in music and umbrellas for shade and rain cover.

At Cedar, music is an important detail, too. Powered by a vintage Marantz 2270 analog receiver ("It's amazing – one of the best things I own," Nick said) and making use of 400 vinyl albums, the sound system features a subwoofer, built in monitors and acoustic



sound panels. Add in a curated playlist and the music feels cutting edge and timeless at the same time. Immediately noticeable and enjoyable, but not overwhelming the space in such a way as to make it the defining characteristic. Oh, and if that's not enough, you'll notice old-school hip hop, Motown and soul playing in the men's restroom.

Speaking of restrooms, local art also has a place at Cedar with the restrooms being done in old-school graffiti by Shawn Rediger and high-end art by local artists Kami Kuhlman and Tyler Chickinelli adorning the main room.

"Cedar really excels with their cocktails, by again, focusing on the details."

Equally important in any neighborhood place, the drink menu received no less attention to detail. Eight white and eight red wines are available by the glass (and served in Reidel wine glasses) and Cedar is also building up a nice reserve list of wine available by the bottle. The beers focus on mainly European and microbrews, but domestic beer lovers will also find a home with all the standard fare – including Busch Light and Colt 45 – available even though they may not be listed on the menu.

"I wanted to give people a place to come in Omaha that's different than any other place you walk into."

Cedar really excels with their cocktails, by again, focusing on the details. You'll find classics such as the Americano, gimlet, old fashioned (their number one seller), Manhattan and others on the menu. Two types of ice are available for the bartenders to make their creations along with reverse osmosis water and house-made seltzer

– not something you see in every neighborhood bar. Another nice touch, every four seats also has its own USB charger.

The cocktails are done with care and concern and, importantly, they're in your hands quickly. Which is by design. "I don't consider myself a mixologist," Nick Said.

"But I do consider myself a bartender who can make a high quality drink and get it in your hands quickly."

Although it can be trite to say it, Cedar really does feel different than many other places that make up the Omaha lounge/bar scene. It's classy while still feeling unpretentious, and the prices are right. It's a place to hit up after work to relax or to bring a date for a few cocktails and conversation. The type of place that anyone can enjoy and you see the starving artist sitting next to the millionaire. "I wanted to give people a place to come in Omaha that's different than any other place you walk into," Nick explained.

"I want our customers to feel comfortable and have a great time."

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Wine Recommendation

2015 Meadowcroft Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc

by Mark Gudgel

I'm more or less a red wine drinker, full stop. That being said, when summer rolls around, I can't help but crave "patio" whites; those light, crisp and refreshing wines you drink from a sweaty glass served poolside or on the lawn during a scorching hot afternoon. With summer approaching, I'm on the lookout for great, low-budget wines that fall into this category.

Right now, I'm excited about the 2015 Meadowcroft Russian River Valley Sauvignon Blanc. Better known for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, RRV is producing some neat stuff of late – and Tom Meadowcroft is capable of cranking out hits faster than Taylor Swift. With a light golden hue and a huge nose of tropical fruits – pineapple, mango and passion fruit – this dry white boasts notes of alfalfa and cut grass mingling subtly in with tropical fruits on the palate. Smooth and drinkable, this wine is destined to be one of my go-to's this summer.

Meadowcroft is the definition of a boutique operation; only 120 cases of the wine were produced, and at \$28 per bottle, it's an outstanding QPR for such a limited production wine, earning 93 points on my scale. I've had a lot of great Sauvignon Blancs this spring, though for its combination of quality and value this one stands out. Available online at www.meadowcroftwines.com/shop.

Read more wine reviews on Mark's blog, <http://itheewine.com/category/marks-wine-ratings/>



by John Finocchiaro

Wine lovers love their toys. We have aerators, bottle tags, bottle stoppers, coasters, corkscrews, capsule cutters, carafes, decanters, drip screens... and that's only the first four letters of the alphabet. You've got to hand it to the creative thinkers in the wine paraphernalia business, they do keep them coming. The culture of wine seems to breed a nearly endless array of gadgets and gizmos. But which of these items are really purposeful? Let's look at some of the standard gear.

"You've got to hand it to the creative thinkers in the wine paraphernalia business, they do keep them coming... But which of these items are really purposeful?"

STEMWARE

Glassware can cost anywhere from a single dollar up to \$50 per stem for expensive crystal. I love a nice wine glass, but as beautifully enhancing as a quality glass is to wine, it can be an ergonomic nightmare. Think about it. Let's fill perhaps a one third pound of often times pricey juice in a fragile bowl, perch it atop a single thin stem of glass and then let sometimes-tipsy people play with it. Brilliant. Regardless of its practicality, quality wine stemware is essential. Styrene cups won't cut it. If they did, our college kids would be playing wine pong.

CORKSCREW

This is the quintessential wine tool and the entire wrist-twisting, cork-popping, tip-and-sip ritual is dependent upon this device. Despite the advent of alternative bottle closures, I seriously doubt the corkscrew is in any danger of extinction. Until someone invents a screwcap that makes the same popping noise as a pulled cork, forget about it. Plus, try sniffing a screwcap. Eww.

DECANTER

A wine decanter is really no more than a pitcher with a smaller pourer. Its purpose is to expose the wine to the open air, which opens up the flavors and bouquet of the wine. And yes, it actually does improve the flavor of most (but not all) finer wines – particularly reds. Truth be told, a pitcher would actually serve as a better aerator of vino since it allows for more air exposure due to the wider opening. A fishbowl would function even better than a pitcher if aeration was the only purpose, but neither a pitcher nor a fishbowl would be any fun, would they? So, they dress up a pitcher with various funky shapes and elegant curves and call it a decanter. That way, they can charge you more for it.

HUMIDIFIER

Seriously, we live in Nebraska. You need one of these about as bad as Antarctica needs an ice maker. Save your money.

FOIL CUTTER

The fingernail scraping and ripping method of capsule removal can be clumsy and cumbersome. That's why a small but deadly sharp hook knife is usually tucked neatly into the handle of the aforementioned corkscrew. It is employed to remove the metal capsule that covers the bottle top and cork, and it can be a tricky tool. It is frequently used improperly, and the spear-sharpening method so frequently employed by neophytes can be a bit ugly – even hazardous. The stick whittler comes to mind. Or the carrot peeler. I've seen glass chip, fingers nipped and lots of wine drip as a result of the improper hack-attack technique of foil cap removal. It's not pretty.

An alternative tool for capsule removal is an actual foil cutter, which you squeeze tightly over the top of the bottle while simultaneously rotating it with your free hand. It is a small tool, comfortably fitting in your palm. It is quite simple to use and produces a perfectly clean, smooth cut along the lip of the bottle.

"I've seen glass chip, fingers nipped and lots of wine drip as a result of the improper hack-attack technique of foil cap removal."

You can purchase a foil cutter for about three bucks. No kidding. Why most wine lovers do not own one is baffling to me. My thinking is that if it came in elegant shapes, was made of crystal, somehow made a distinct popping sound as the foil was removed and sold for about forty bucks, it would sell like hotcakes. I guess wine people don't like cheap stuff.

BOTTLE COASTER

Few items in your kitchen stain tablecloths and carpets as well as wine does. Those pesky wine drips running undetectably down the side of an open bottle are significantly reduced with a bottle coaster. From around \$10-\$50, depending on how much you wish to spend, you can acquire a nice silver or pewter piece that looks quite attractive on your table, and they last forever. Yes, forever. It's a no brainer. Go buy one.

BOTTLE TAGS

As with the bottle coaster and foil cutter, more folks should consider using these. Inexpensive tags are a mere couple of inches of hard stock paper with a hole cut out to hang onto the bottle neck, labeled for each one lying horizontally in your cellar rack. These tags eliminate the age old ritual of sliding a dozen or so bottles from their horizontal laydown rack position every time you wish to locate a particular wine in your cellar.

Such a repetitive act can be unnerving. Think of it as milking a cow sideways – or checking each individual egg in the container before buying the dozen. Wouldn't such a tedious process be much

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simplified if every egg had a tag that said ‘unbroken’, and every udder had a marking stating ‘all dried up’ when it was? Ok, that was bad. Never mind.

WINE RACK

Yes, buy one. Storing your wine bottles on their side will keep the cork moist, which prevents oxidation and spoilage of your precious vino. It also eliminates the “bowling with wine bottles” effect of single-minded bottles rolling aimlessly along a refrigerator shelf or cabinet counter every time a door is opened. Simple countertop versions can be acquired for as little as \$20. For those looking for a more substantial piece of furniture to spice up a kitchen or dining area, a wine rack, table or cabinet can be quite a beautiful focal point. They can also be a bit expensive if you choose to go that route, but well worth the price for both their beauty and functionality.

“Storing your wine bottles on their side will keep the cork moist, which prevents oxidation and spoilage of your precious vino.”

CARAFES

These are pretty much extinct. Call them old school decanters, often used to house everyday wines of sometimes indiscriminate quality. Personally, I kind of liked them. They looked nice on a table and were easy to pour from. Carafes bring back vivid memories of happy times in many of Omaha’s old Italian restaurants. I guess that makes me ‘old school’... sigh.

BOTTLE STOPPERS

We know what a wine stopper does. Bear in mind, the ultimate wine closure (aka the cork) already comes with the bottle. That being the case, the stopper – while actually performing a function – is often times not much more than an ornamental adornment. Perched atop your bottle, it may be the single greatest item of bling for displaying your opened wine bottle.

Stoppers come in a nearly endless selection of decorative and artistic styles. Think of the stopper as the lipstick, makeup and earrings for your wine. It is there for appearances, it won’t change what’s inside, but if you’re bringing it to the party, the least you can do is dress it up a bit.

So, there’s my rundown of a few of the more standard wine tools for your tool box. Some are essential, some are not. Shop around and acquire some of these items to enhance the enjoyment of your wine tasting experience. After all, wine tasting should be fun and we adults should be allowed our toys. We’ll leave the beer pong to the kids.





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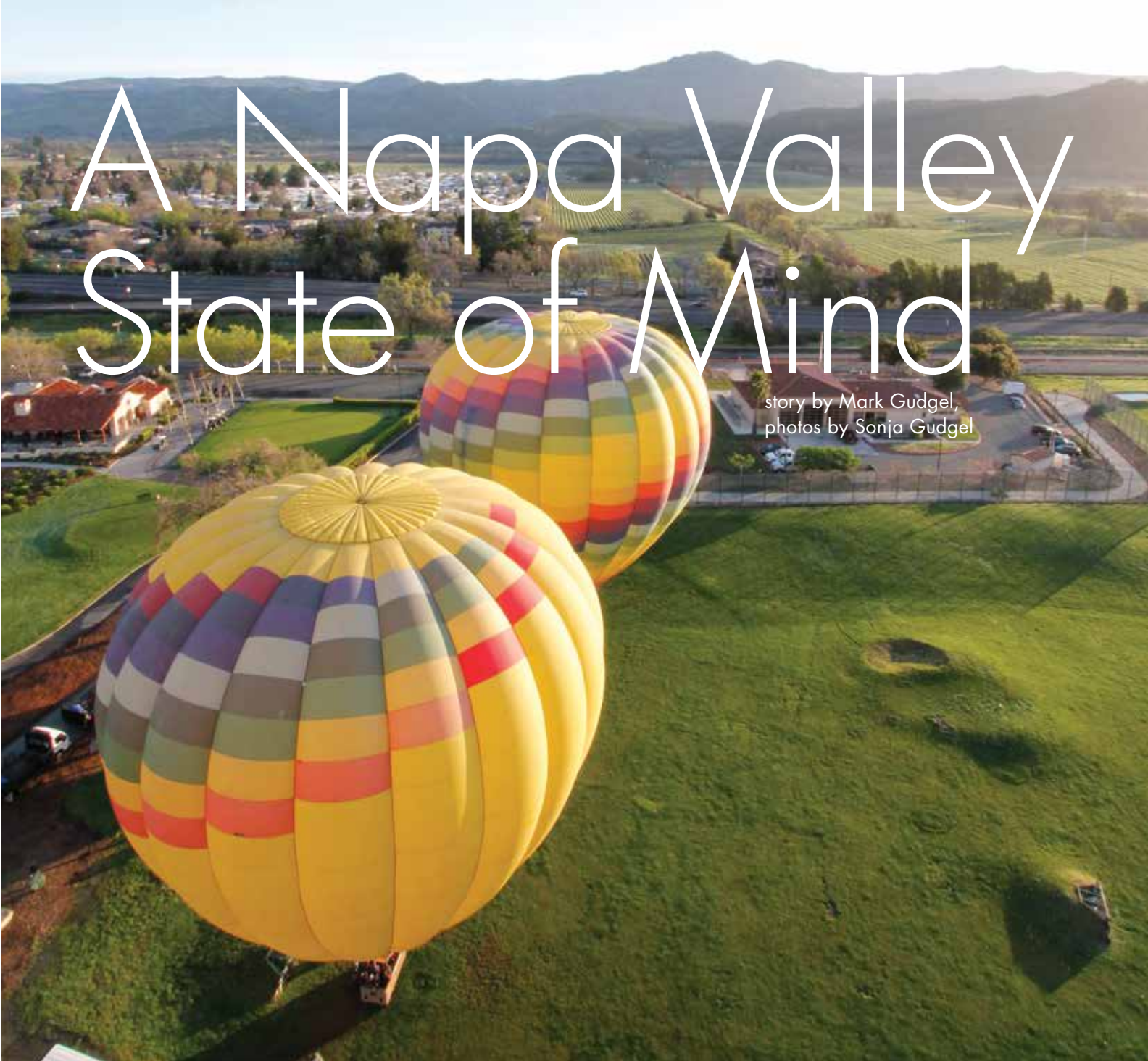
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story by Mark Gudgel,
photos by Sonja Gudgel

“Some folks like to get away, take a holiday from the neighborhood, hop a flight to Miami Beach or Hollywood.” But I’m flying Frontier, through the blue and gentle skies; I’m in a Napa Valley state of mind.

The Napa Valley has for many years been a place that drew people in by its sheer natural beauty. The emergence of literally hundreds upon hundreds of wineries no doubt playing a role in the attraction. Yet lately, the Valley has come to take on, in places, certain Disneyland-like qualities; the elegance and refined nature of the landscape and its most valuable product being overtaken by housing developments such as American Canyon, with McDonalds, Target, Starbucks, and other throw-away chains popping up, tarnishing the formerly prelapsarian beauty of the tiny, narrow basin that today is often backed up with taillights for miles on end.

The worst thing about this boom in growth isn’t the popularity of the area, but rather, the overpopulation. Traffic stresses me out. When Highway 29, which spans the length of the valley, is as backed up with cars as Dodge Street is at rush hour, I haven’t gained much by way of a vacation by traveling all the way to California. While I favor wineries producing deep red Cabs over white sand beaches whenever the choice is mine to make, I nevertheless prefer those Cabs to be served not only in crystal, but also in muted reticence, complimented not by the buzz of humanity en masse, but rather by quietly spoken notions and perhaps some well-aged cheese. Sadly, such an experience is becoming increasingly difficult to find.

There are, however, still plenty of wonderful little places in the Napa Valley that can offer those with my preferences not only the best of wines, but also the quiescence and stillness of a more peaceful time than that in which we live. The following are my

personal recommendations, taken from a recent visit to the Valley, of places to visit that offer something of real substance to the visitor. Places that are, yes, about the wine, yet somehow so much more; places where genuine relaxation and rejuvenation can occur. Oh, and don't go telling everyone you know about these spots; let's just keep them between us.

Though it's full of untamed wildlife, striking natural beauty and too many incredible little bistros and cafés lining the streets of the quaint hamlets of St. Helena, Rutherford and the others for one person to enjoy in a lifetime, the thing that undoubtedly suggests most strongly a trip to Napa is nevertheless the wine. Before you begin to imbibe in the Napa Valley, it is important to get acclimated to your surroundings.

“Though it's full of untamed wildlife...
the thing that undoubtedly most strongly
suggests a trip to Napa is nevertheless
the wine.”

Your visit to the area should begin with a proper tour, and there's no better way to get a feel for the place than as a bird from above. Though a hike through the Robert Louis Stevenson State Park or a brisk morning jog along the Napa River will certainly give you beautiful views from the land, nothing compares to the gentle serenity and unparalleled vantage point of a ride in a hot air balloon; the rare chance to drift noiselessly through the sky, looking down upon the world below.

I shopped around for a long time before I found Napa Valley Balloons Incorporated. Offering an all-inclusive package that departs from the parking lot of the Moet and Chandon (yep, that Chandon, the same company that makes Dom Perignon, but based in Napa), their friendly staff, experienced pilots and competitive prices made them the clear choice. I suggest you arrive early for hot coffee and pastries before climbing into a van and traveling a few hundred yards to an open, grassy field where the colorful behemoth will already be blossoming, swaying back and forth in the gentle valley winds as it takes its form, growing fuller and fuller, climbing higher and higher, until at last it's ready to climb into the heavens and take you with it.

Piloted by Bob, a fellow **Nebraskan** and an expert with more than 8,000 flight hours, we drifted gently into the air in a \$120K basket affectionately named “Dragonfly” until we had a view not only of the entire thirty-mile valley, but also of mighty Mt. St. Helena to the north. To the south, we could make out the glint of morning light off of San Francisco's distant skyline. Best of all, however, was the view down on the vineyards; a sight that made my mouth begin to water in anticipation of the days and nights to come. The balloon landed gently, and we returned to Chandon for a champagne brunch and some banter with Bob about the panhandle and the **Huskers** before departing for the day. Though it's far from free, should I have my way every trip to California wine country will begin in just this manner.

Once acclimated to the Valley from above – and with a glass or two of Chandon mingling playfully with the glorious smoke bacon and egg soufflé inside your belly – you'll be in a better state of mind to begin visiting wineries. Bypassing the immense arch just off 29 and other, more touristy spots, I suggest you strike out east toward the Silverado Trail, crossing ancient stone bridges that span the muted river below, until you begin to explore some of the most superlative and out-of-the way producers of wine that this storied region has to offer.

High in the mountains, in the Chiles Valley sub-appellation that towers over the eastern side of valley, the road that connects this isolated spot to the rest of Napa follows a lone creek high into the alpine-esque slopes, to the location of one of the oldest wineries in the valley. Originally founded as the Lomita's Vineyard by a German immigrant named Francis Sievers in the 1870s, it was reestablished by Volker Eisele, another German immigrant, a hundred years later as the Volker Eisele Family Estate.

From the moment you step out of your vehicle, the bustle of the busy Valley below can be forgotten, as the wind rustles through the vines and over the gurgling creeks. Tastings take place in the original, ancient white barn, elegantly laid out and complimented by cheese and excellent conversation with Alexander, the son of the late Volker Eisele, a pioneer of Napa wine in every sense of the expression. Not only family-run but literally a two-person operation, availability to taste is very limited, but very worth arranging. Reminiscent in some ways of the lush green **Sandhills** that surround the **Niobrara River** from my youth, if I could pick



only one winery to visit on my next trip to Napa, it would be this one.

If you can't visit, order: The 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon. At around \$50 a bottle, they're making one of the single best Napa Cabs I've ever had. I've seen older vintages in **Omaha** at **The Winery**, and in large format at **Winestyles**.

In an intriguing structure that is part-utilitarian, part-tour de force of modern architecture, boasting immense glass panes and striking views, Phillip and Eric Titus produce their wine on a family plot of land that traces the Napa River and was first planted by their father. Phillip serves also as the winemaker for Chappellet, and it is not at all absurd to compare the excellent wines he makes there to those made for his family label. The deck of their new tasting room overlooks the vibrant, green vineyards. Inside the rough pressed concrete walls and functionalist facilities, the wines to be tasted are among the best anywhere.

“The quality of the wine matters greatly,
yet the wine itself is never more than
a mere compliment to the experience.”

Just off the Silverado Trail, the tasting room offers beautiful views, excellent service and a chance to learn and taste in an environment just far enough off the main road to ensure that you aren't sharing space with the spillover from Beringer. The room sees at most, forty visitors a day, so call ahead to schedule your tasting; you'll be glad you did.

If you can't visit, order: Any vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon, a specialty of Phillip Titus. I've seen it in Omaha at **Corkscrew**. Or order the Zin or Cab Franc, also wonderful, direct from Titus.

Down a row of what looks like towering, slender palms is the Round Pond Estate; a veritable newcomer to the valley, and an exciting young member of the boutique winery gang. Here, the MacDonnell Family has created something very special. The incredible tasting room boasts exposed wooden beams, a spacious layout with something of a Mediterranean feel and an immense patio overlooking the vineyards. In the barrel room below is the

chance to taste still more of Napa's best young vintages straight off the staves.

However, where most wineries may stick with wine and perhaps dabble in other realms, Round Pond has imported an impressive olive press and makes a vast array of virgin olive oils, gourmet vinegars and brilliant syrups to compliment their place in the wine industry. The Il Pranzo tasting, a two-plus hour experience, will give you a tour of the facilities, a full lunch complete with dessert, and a chance to taste all of the best wines, oils and more than you could hope for, is definitely the way to go. With limited availability, schedule your experience far in advance.

If you can't visit, order: The Cabernet Sauvignon; I've seen it in Omaha at The Winery, or the Nebbiolo (seriously, Nebbiolo) available online. It's beautiful and well-priced around \$50/bottle. It's also rare to find this Italian varietal represented in Napa, which to me makes it extra cool.

Long before he realized it, Jeff Smith was the heir to some of the very best land in the entire Napa Valley, though in time – and with help from the Dean of Viticulture at the storied UC Davis – he has transformed his family's small claim into one of the single best boutique wine producers anywhere. The caves of the Hourglass Blueline Estate are as gorgeous as they are exclusive; only members of their wine club or those waiting on the list can make an appointment. That being said, theirs is a wine club worth joining, so adding your name to the list wouldn't be a bad thing. Through the vast wooden doors lies an extensive cave. Across from the barrels a small antechamber with a striking chandelier and a huge, blue marble slab for a table, surrounded by plush animal skin seating. It's easy to imagine that in rooms such as this, important things are happening, not least the tasting of some extraordinary wines.

If you can't visit, order: The 2012 or 2013 Blueline Estate Merlot. This is the single best Merlot I have ever had, full stop. I've seen it in Omaha at **The Omaha Wine Company**.

If you've ever paused to take a photograph in front of the iconic “Welcome” sign of the Napa Valley, then I have two pieces of advice: 1. Don't admit that, and 2. Pretend that you knew that just behind you, on a distant hillside, was one of the oldest and most interesting wineries in the region. Far Niente translates loosely into “Without a care”; that's precisely what Gil and Beth Nickel loved



about it when they acquired the winery back in the late 1970s with the intent of giving it new life after Prohibition had all but killed it once before.

Having won awards making Chardonnay in his apartment in San Francisco, Gil Nickel, a rocket scientist-turned-vintner, was ecstatic to have his own full-scale laboratory in which to craft quality wines and set about focusing on two favorites: Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon – both of which are still produced by the winery to this day. With gorgeous grounds and plenty of quiet rooms to accommodate your private tasting after a tour of the impressive caves, it's easy to find yourself "without a care" while tasting at Far Niente. They take only a few groups a day (up to five if I recall), so again, plan far in advance.

If you can't visit, order: The Chardonnay. Gil Nickel, the late proprietor, was famous for his Chardonnay, and while their Cab is excellent, the Chard, which undergoes no malolactic fermentation and ages well, is special. Available online.

Finally, there's Dunn Vineyards, in many ways the antithesis of the typical Napa Valley experience, and in just as many ways, the absolute essence of the Valley itself. High on Howell Mountain, even above the fog line, Randy Dunn and his son, Mike, produce one wine: Cabernet Sauvignon, and they do it to perfection. The tasting will take place above the caves at a kitchen table, the very opposite of the elaborate marble tasting room bar, where several vintages of Dunn's legendary Cabernet can be sampled from a library dating back to the early 1990s.

If you're lucky, Randy himself may even drop in to say hello, though even if he doesn't, a walk through his vineyards, a tour of the caves, and the chance to taste some of the best Cab Sauv ever produced in this casual and relaxed environment is one not to be missed by the traveler who doesn't mind traversing the winding roads that lead to some of Napa's highest altitude vineyards. Oh, one more thing: get on the list. The waiting list is said to reach as much as two years in length.

If you can't visit, order: The Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon. Every vintage is different, but they're all very worth drinking! I've seen it in Omaha at Corkscrew, or library wines are available for order on their web page.

Wine may be bottled poetry, but if you've read much poetry you know that it's not all created with the same passion, and it

doesn't all yield the same results. The quality of the wine matters greatly, yet the wine itself is never more than a mere compliment to the experience. These places I've recommended not only craft extraordinary wine, they also offer an experience that possesses, at least to me, an element of life that can be lost in the melee of modern living; one that can only be regained in those rare places one can find in which what takes place is out of the ordinary, truly something special.

"At it's worst, the Valley can be a tourist attraction; at it's best it's a place of peace and unparalleled serenity."

I find solace in a glass of good wine and the beauty in watching ghostlike fog lift from a vineyard, or the golden orb of the sun lower slowly over the peaks of the Mayacamas. At it's worst, the Valley can be a tourist attraction; at it's best it's a place of peace and unparalleled serenity; a rare refuge from the hectic daily life that I lead, and that I assume many readers may as well. I hope that if you take the time to visit these quiet, out-of-the-way gems, they will afford to you the same pleasure that they do me, and perhaps assist you in feeling refreshed and prepared to continue doing battle in this increasingly bizarre and rapidly changing world in which we live.

Life caught up with me a long time ago. I went from being "far niente" and frankly, rather reckless, to having a job, a wife, a kid, a dog, a mortgage, and the heft of significant responsibility and accountability at what felt like warp speed. I've adjusted to all of it, and the truth is, I really enjoy all of those things (except the mortgage) and what each of them does to enhance my life. But that doesn't mean I can't get away once in a while, take a holiday from the neighborhood, and unwind. When the mission is relaxation, I know exactly where I want to go. As Billy Joel pointed out, it comes down to reality, and it's fine with me 'cause I've let it slide. I don't care if it's Howell Mountain, or on Chiles. Life may get rather stressful, but we can leave it all behind... in a Napa Valley state of mind (with apologies to Billy Joel).



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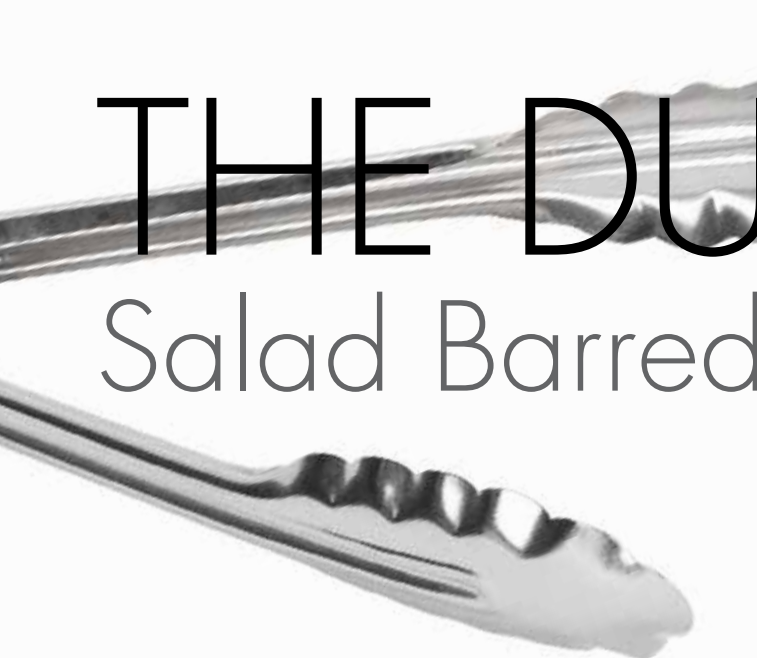
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THE DU

Salad Barred

I checked: every bottle of salad dressing in my refrigerator states: "Serving size: 1 tablespoon." Hahahahaha! Dressings at the salad bar come with ladles. Two servings of French dressing equals a bowl of soup.

One safety feature I do appreciate: the “sneeze guard” glass barrier you have to peer through and reach around. I’m not sure whether the glass guard works because I’ve never seen one with a sneeze on it. I have seen the glass show a face print from someone stretching to reach the tub of sesame seeds on the other side.

My first job was being a busboy in a small town's fanciest restaurant. It was so fancy we wore red checkered vests. The salad bar had homemade croutons. The restaurant was known for its fresh, warm bread, served as individual loaves on a mini cutting board with matching tiny bread knife. Très fantaisie! Still, guests did not always devour their entire loaf, and we busboys were instructed to save the remnant in a separate bin of our cart, above the greasy plates and fingerprinted glasses. The leftover bread was then tossed into a five-gallon white plastic tub conveniently placed within splashing distance of the dishwasher station. After a few days the wet loaves were thin-sliced, dusted with ample parmesan cheese and garlic powder, and recycled into: ta-da! Our famous homemade croutons!

This nose-scratching, pimple-picking fourteen-year-old busboy licked the toasted parmesan crumbs off his fingers before deftly loading clean plates under the sneeze guard and wiping excess crud off the old ladle before placing it in a fresh new tub of dressing.

simple-picking fourteen-year-
tasted parmesan crumbs off
loading clean plates under
ping
iddle
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A large, dense pile of bright red, irregularly shaped crumbs or small pieces of food. The texture appears moist and slightly sticky. The pile is concentrated on the right side of the frame, with some crumbs scattered to the left. The background is plain white.

The waiter could have asked, “Would you like iceberg lettuce, or spinach with your salad? For your dressing: French, Italian, or lumpy bleu cheese? Croutons? Fake bacon bits? How many spoonfuls? Ten? Very good, sir.”

spoonfuls? Ten? Very good, sir.

A close-up photograph of a pile of approximately 15-20 golden-brown, cubed croutons. The croutons are irregular in shape, with some showing a porous, bread-like texture and others appearing more uniformly cubed. They are scattered across a plain white background, with some overlapping. The lighting is bright, highlighting the texture and color of the croutons.

It's the "how much" part that's the biggest problem, because who of us would admit to a waiter we want two lumps of macaroni salad, with a cup of bacon bits on top of that, and we'll be going back for a second helping before our main course arrives?



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