

Belly up to the bar

BY KRISTINE NICKEL / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SICKLES

Here's what I like best about bar food: You eat it at a bar. Seriously. Whether it's a girls' night out, or stopping in for a beer with the guys, or, increasingly, a date night, bars have gone beyond their role as a holding space for guests while their restaurant table is cleared.

Bars have become epicenters for entertainment.

Blame the elevation of the cocktail. Better put, we're now in the golden age of the cocktail. Mixology is serious business. Bartenders have never before had such an arsenal with which to work. The proliferation of flavored spirits is one of the weapons. On a recent sortie to a liquor store, I actually counted a dozen different Absolut vodkas. In late April of this year, the brand Cupcake released a line of vodkas with cupcake-like flavors — chiffon, frosting, devil's food.

Notice the Mason jars on the back of the bar? Many bartenders are infusing their own spirits with various herbs and foodstuffs to create totally original drinks. Bourbon infused with bacon, rum with mango — and those are just two of the more common concoctions.

To match all of this creativity on the liquid side, the bar literally has been raised on the food side. Forget about the salted nuts or dish of pretzels. A menu of bar foods is generally a range of foods that go well with a drink, be it a pint of ale or a dry fill-in-the-blank martini. It is finger food raised to a new level of taste and originality.

The “go-well-with-a-drink” part means there will most likely be an element of saltiness and generally some kind of protein that meshes well with the acidity in alcohol. The bar-food genre also has taken fusion cuisine to a new level. One of our area's favorite bars, Libby's Bar + Cafe in Southside Village, demonstrates how creative this category can be. Anyone for a cheesesteak egg roll? Or how about Buffalo-inspired calamari with bleu cheese and celery?

Gecko's, with its five locations across our landscape, recently took top honors with Ticket readers. This mini-chain caters to a younger crowd, while still appealing to baby boomers looking for a casual venue. One of its signature bar foods is the homemade potato chips, which are crisp, flavorful and totally addictive. They recently changed up the chips with the addition of layers of bleu cheese and other yummy ingredients. The bleu-cheese chip is the current day equivalent of nachos. It's salty, cheesy, crisp and with the requisite balsamic vinegar glaze — sweet. All cylinders striking simultaneously for perfect bar food.



BLEU CHEESE CHIPS

Gecko's

Ingredients:

8 ounces homemade chips

Bleu cheese fondue (Make 1 cup Alfredo sauce — store purchased or homemade — and bring to a boil. Reduce to simmer. Add 6 ounces crumbled bleu cheese and 2 ounces Ranch dressing. Remove from heat and allow to rest.)

4 strips of crisp smoked bacon, chopped

2 tablespoons red onion, diced

1 or 2 sprigs green onion, chopped

Balsamic glaze (Add 2 cups balsamic vinegar, 1 cup water and bring to a boil. Reduce to simmer and stir occasionally. Add slurry for desired thickness. Get it thick enough to coat the back of a spoon.)

Method:

Slice 1/2 pound of potatoes to desired thickness. Deep-fry to desired crispness to make chips. Place half of the chips on plate and pour half of the bleu cheese fondue over the chips. Add the other half of the chips on top and remaining half of fondue on top of that. Sprinkle bacon bits, diced red onion and green onions on top. Sprinkle additional bleu cheese crumbles on top. Drizzle balsamic glaze.



Beach bound

Siesta Key Village is known for watering holes that tourists fondly remember and locals frequent for a bit of vacation vibe. With Chef Darwin Santa Maria at the helm, the bar food at The Cottage represents Santa Maria's South American heritage as well as a deft hand in the kitchen. In this recipe, Santa Maria creates a Peruvian ceviche with flavors more often associated with Asian cuisine for his take on fusion bar food.

ASIAN CEVICHE

The Cottage
6 servings

Ingredients:

1/2 onion, chopped
1/2 ounce fresh ginger, chopped
2 sticks of lemongrass
3/4 cup white wine
1 can coconut milk
1 teaspoon soy sauce
1 1/2 pound salmon
Toasted coconut

Method:

Saute onion, lemongrass and ginger in white wine, reducing to half. Add coconut milk. Let it reduce and add soy sauce for flavor. Let cool. Pour over salmon and mix. Garnish with toasted coconut.

Speaking of nachos, they have not gone away. Nachos are now dressed up with new partners from different cuisines. Gecko's exemplifies this trend with its Tuna Nachos.

TUNA NACHOS

Gecko's

Ingredients:

5 wonton skins cut in half (start at approximately 2-inch by 2-inch square, then cut to two rectangles)
2 ounces white sesame seeds
1 ounce black sesame seeds
Pinch cracked black peppercorns
4 ounces sashimi-quality ahi tuna
3 ounces seaweed salad (buy prepared at favorite Asian market, or mix sesame oil and sesame seeds with seaweed and rice wine vinegar)
3 ounces pickled ginger
2 ounces wasabi cream (1 cup sour cream, 3 tablespoons wasabi powder, 1/4 cup heavy cream and 1/2 whole cucumber pureed, salt and pepper to taste)
2 ounces General Tso's Sauce (from your favorite Asian market)
1 or 2 sprigs of green onion, chopped
1 ounce vegetable oil

Method:

Deep-fry both sides of 10 wonton chips until golden brown. Mix sesame seeds, add a dash of cracked black peppercorns together. Roll ahi tuna in mixture. Place tuna on a hot flat-top grill or cast-iron skillet (350 degrees) with vegetable oil. Sear both sides of tuna, one minute per side maximum. Slice tuna into 10 pieces. Place 10 wontons on a plate and top with seared, sliced tuna. Place seaweed salad on tuna. Drizzle wasabi cream on tuna nachos and drizzle General Tso's sauce on nachos. Top with thinly sliced green onions and garnish with pickled ginger.

