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FOOD+DRINK » DINING OUT

July 06, 2010

The Ball & Biscuit: Just what Indy needs

by Jennifer Litz



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Pre-prohibition era semi-speakeasies have been cropping up all over the nation, from Louisville to, well, Indy. New York and New Orleans don't count, since they practically invented the genre (and cocktails).

The Ball & Biscuit's theme is nostalgic with items from the era. The name signifies some old time voice transmitting device; you'll see it as that diminutive artifact that sits atop the bar, like a vintage diving helmet, with a long black tube attached. An old fashioned backlit sign — "on the air" — adds to the othertime charm.

The drinks also hearken to another time, in more ways than one. Hamhattan, Silver Gin Fizz, Sidecar, Aviation, are all classic cocktails with small twists. But you've also seen them at Euphoria, where current chef Brad Gates and mixologist Zach Wilks formerly held court.

In fact, much seems directly lifted from the previous menu, including the small plates roundup that boasts a solid lineup of choice cheeses, fantastically moist and savory duck rillettes, and the tendency to run out of everything by week's end. To be fair, though, they've barely been open a week.

Also to be fair: I've stood in line for an hour to get into a real speakeasy, New York's Little Branch, and still didn't get a better balanced cocktail than what Wilks can make when he's at his best. His Sazerac, with magically perfect proportions of rye whiskey, absinthe and blood orange bitters, practically drinks itself. Though I've also had one here that tasted the way it was originally supposed to function — like medicine.

At least you can always count on top shelf, small batch alcohol. Practically half the house drinks menu is made with Death's Door Gin, an artisan liquor crafter out of Wisconsin. That's where that peculiar dry, herbal flavor comes from in a lot of these cocktails. I adore it. Some won't.

But that's the allure of a place like this, which is built for connoisseurs. Though my simple fiance likes the place too, for its chewy, thick, garlic chips and its Robert the Bruce beer. And as with any good speakeasy, there's good contraband off the menu — if you know to ask. But that's all I'm allowed to say.

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