

February 20, 2009

## Germantown Cafe's drinks are a cut above

*By Will Ayers*

I gotta say, those Germantownies have it made. After I took my first trip to the neighborhood that didn't involve Oktoberfest, I felt a twinge of longing as I scoped out the stately old homes and redevelopment projects that define what was once Nashville's first suburb. It was walkable and attractive, and, above all, it's got a great neighborhood bar in the Germantown Café.

This is a true community watering hole, well-sited and run without artifice. No poncey cocktail list, no snake oil vodka drink marketing campaign. The dinner menu has fewer entrees than most of us have fingers. I respect a place with enough confidence in its skill and the loyalty of its clientele to show such restraint.

The décor is loft-ish: Brooding purple walls and svelte blond wood blend the room well with the rows of new condos under construction nearby, and the diet techno music, irritatingly ubiquitous in urban Nashville restaurants, makes you feel like you just breezed into the sales center of some slickly-labeled high rise in the Gulch. It works well enough.

### A SLAB FOR ALL AGES

I was especially taken with the bar, which had been crafted of spalted cork layered with polyurethane. When I strolled in around 8 on a Friday, it was still slave to drink orders from the surrounding tables, though that changed before my eyes within about 15 minutes. Suddenly my companion and I were hemmed in on three sides with merry imbibers and, disappointingly for such a progressive-seeming place, cigarette smoke. But life goes on.

Indeed, the crowd that had assembled testified to that effect. To our left, a well-heeled retired couple waited for a table, while on our right a squadron of hipsters piled through the door. Minutes later we ran into a group of 30-something folks we knew, which was strange, considering none of us live anywhere near Germantown. It's just that kind of place.

When you've got a whiskey sour (\$6.50) as pleasantly tart yet smoky as the one they made me, you're a happy drinker. They dutifully sought my choice of poison — Maker's.

My counterpart's pink diamond martini (\$8.50), while not my kind of drink, was undeniably better structured and stiffer than any I've ever had; it actually tasted like it had some adult content. The same was true of her French martini (\$9), though its rim of sugar was botched.

But the wine list changed makes the place. Not enormous, with nothing to prove, it was simply out to put excellent wine at our fingertips. I spied a number of bottles in the \$20-\$30 range, bottles I'd readily buy at the wine shop. There were some adventurous selections such as the Sula chenin blanc (\$9/glass), an underappreciated white with a French pedigree that hails from India, of all places. It had a kind of whispering quality, not terribly sweet or forward, but really I was just excited to drink a wine from such an unusual place.

# FEEDING THE BEASTS

I don't usually reach for tomatoes out of season, but when they're fried and green, it's a little different. The café's take (\$5.95) featured an extroverted red pepper dip that bolstered the tang of the tomatoes, which were served hot in a crisp batter. We also ordered the French onion soup (\$5.95), which was superb, despite a too-thick capstone of Swiss. The soup itself tasted more like a divine reduction than a side dish, and the jolly chunk of bread at the bottom soaked up our booze with ease. Ideal for a chilled winter night.

Service was spot on, even in the midst of the dinner rush (the restaurant closes somewhat early, at 10 p.m., on the weekends). Later I noticed the bartender had accidentally overcharged me for the wine, but service was professional and prompt when I came back the next week to correct the problem.

Once all the lofts under construction nearby open, Germantown Café will likely get a lot more crowded, and not thinly patronized now. It hurts to think it'll get harder to slide in the door and have a seat on a busy night, but that's what dedication to detail does for your business. I recommend dropping by while the going's still easy, and making reservations when it's not.

## Additional Facts

GERMANTOWN

1200 Fifth Ave. N.

242-3226

[www.germantowncafe.com](http://www.germantowncafe.com)

Lunch: 11 a.m.- 2 p.m. Mon.-Fri.

Dinner: 5-9 p.m. Sun. and Mon.;

5-10 p.m. Tue.-Sat.

Sunday brunch:

10:30 a.m.-2 p.m.

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