

Raising the bar on pub fare

Greg Cox, N&O Restaurant Critic and Food Writer

In appearance, two newcomers in downtown Raleigh are as different as nightcaps and day boat scallops. But beneath their stylistic differences, these establishments share one important characteristic: While insisting that they are not restaurants but bars which happen to serve a limited menu of pub fare, their interpretation of “pub fare” substantially raises the, um, bar for the genre.

That the food at **Raleigh Times Bar** is exceptional comes as no surprise when you learn that the menu was created by Ashley Christensen, the talented **Enoteca Vin** chef who has teamed up with developer Greg Hatem to revitalize downtown Raleigh, one restored historic building at a time. In this case, the structure in question is the old Raleigh Times building at 14 E. Hargett Street, whose spirit Hatem commemorates with a vintage newspaper motif and dark woodwork.

Christensen’s menu is deceptively simple, by which I mean that the beef for your half-pound burger is ground fresh on the premises, and the mayo — if you order it with mayo — is made from scratch. If corned beef is available, you can rest assured that it was cured in the kitchen. Order guacamole with fried tortilla chips, and the avocados will be crushed to order and served with house-fried chips. Pretty much everything, in fact, is prepared on the premises, from the barbecued pork on the nachos to the house-cut fries to the — you get the idea.

Raleigh Times Bar opened in late March, but suffered a temporary setback a couple of weeks ago when the sidewalk in front of the was torn up as part of the downtown restoration project. By the time you read this, the bar should be back to normal operating hours (11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Monday through Saturday and 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. Sunday.

The vibe is decidedly less traditional at **The Borough**, where warm, vibrant colors, a living room grouping of couches and overstuffed chairs, and yards of blond woodwork (including a dramatic Baltic birch bar) create a setting that owner Liz Masnik, formerly manager of **Poole’s Diner**, describes as “urban pub.”

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Masnik hopes to be pouring drinks for customers as early as this weekend, and expects to be open by the end of the month at the latest. To accompany the liquid refreshment, she enlisted the help of Brian Mergenthaler (whose work in the kitchens of **Humble Pie**, **Vertigo** and **NOFO** have earned him a local following) to develop the menu.

The offering of appetizers, sandwiches and salads is brief but widely eclectic, and is executed by chef Sander Kedich. Options include homemade hushpuppies with honey butter, char-grilled oysters in the half shell, pistachio and blue cheese salad with pears and red onions, and a half-pound burger topped with thin fried onions, grilled mushrooms and jack cheese.

Once the doors open at The Borough, they will remain open daily from 4 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Greg’s Hot List: Tax refund splurges

Last week, to ease the pain of all you unfortunate souls who had to write a check to Uncle Sam, I shared some of my favorite spots for cheap eats. This week, I provide equal time for you lucky dogs who are getting a refund. You’ll spend that refund in a hurry at these restaurants, but you’ll live in the lap of luxury — if only temporarily. Just remember, when you’re calculating the cost of a meal, to allow for the tip. Oh, yeah, and taxes.

Bin 54, 1201 Raleigh Road, Chapel Hill; steakhouse.

Fairview, 3001 Cameron Blvd., in The Washington Duke Inn, Durham; contemporary cuisine.

Fearrington House, 2000 Fearrington Village Center, 8 miles south of Chapel Hill on U.S. 15-501, Pittsboro; contemporary cuisine.

42nd Street Oyster Bar, 508 West Jones St., Raleigh; seafood.

Four Square, 2701 Chapel Hill Road, Durham; contemporary cuisine.

Il Palio, 1505 E. Franklin St., in the Siena Hotel, Chapel Hill; Italian.

Rey’s, 1130 Buck Jones Road, Raleigh; continental, Cajun/Creole, steakhouse.

Ruth’s Chris Steak House, 1130 Buck Jones Road, Cary; steakhouse.

Second Empire, 330 Hillsborough St., Raleigh; contemporary.

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