

These two bar menus point to the direction of Pittsburgh dining

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By Melissa McCart / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

We have no shortage of breweries around Pittsburgh, many of which started with beer but no food, graduated to food truck options and have segued into offering a full menu, made possible by a kitchen build-out.

But wine-and-cocktail bars are a different animal: They're more expensive for regional operators because they require the purchase of a Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board restaurant liquor license that can cost \$85,000 to \$90,000 in Allegheny County right now. That fee is based on a limited number of licenses — approximately 1 per 3,000 residents, says Sidney Sokoloff, managing director of Specialty Group on McKnight Road, which handles restaurant real estate transactions and liquor licenses.

Even with increased license fees and the byzantine PLCB laws, liquor is more of a moneymaker than it was at restaurants 20 years ago. That's why we're seeing an uptick in the drinks-first, food-if-you'd-like restaurant approach.

This makes even more sense when you throw in the increased competition for labor: With a spread-thin supply of line cooks, dishes have to be easier to execute than they were at Pittsburgh restaurants even four years ago.

Two places that are doing the drinks-first approach well are The Warren, Downtown, and Lorelei in East Liberty. Both offer several dishes you're not going to find elsewhere, on menus that are uncomplicated yet sophisticated. They're also offering unusual wines that likely took some wrangling to find in the PLCB system, along with cocktails from some of the best bartenders in the city.

Let's start with The Warren, a hybrid space with several revenue streams, which includes the fast-casual Penn Cove Eatery, the neighborhood version of Penn Ave. Fish Company that serves sushi, fish sandwiches and chowders for business lunch customers.

This space also offers a tightly edited wine shop with wine guy/buyer Jason "Spider" Matthews, who's overseeing one of the first Downtown spots to take advantage of the new wine sellers license. He offers

an interesting selection from small vintners, boutique- and natural wines. This is not your stop for big Super Tuscans or Cakebread Chardonnay.

Once 5 p.m. hits, The Warren gets going. It's the first standalone bar from drink maven duo, Spencer Warren and Carrie Clayton, in a comfortable barroom, with its mid-century vibe and dominoes bar aesthetic.

I took a colleague here for the first time over the weekend and she was relieved it didn't feel like a concept or contrived; it's as much like a good neighborhood bar as anywhere, despite the fact it's smack-dab in the Cultural District. You're reminded of that location this month by its "Hamilton" cocktail list — a nod to the Broadway musical playing next door at the Benedum.

All cocktails are \$10, with one drink named after Willy Wonka's Violet Beauregard with green tea and honey, and another cold-weather favorite, Whiskey in a Tea Cup served in mismatched china.

And yes, there are wines, from a fizzy Quattro Mani Lambrusco for \$9 a glass (It's a fine pairing for pizza if you want to buy this one by the bottle for home drinking) to an unusual Southern Italian red, the Donna Marzia Negroamaro, for \$8 a glass.

There's a sushi menu connected to the Penn Cove place, along with The Warren's bar food menu — the latter of which would be my suggestion for any evening visit. It would start with snacks like the crab Rangoon dip (\$14), that 1950s suburban Polynesian fried dumpling that's having a comeback in restaurants around the country. Here, it's a vat of crab and surimi dip layered with cream cheese, scallions and peppers, served with fried wonton chips, and a side of sweet and sour sauce.

Other yesses: Vegetarian bao (\$10), four per order, served with tempura portobello mushrooms, Kung Pao sauce, cucumber and peanuts, along with the lentil falafel, a global-inspired \$10 sandwich seasoned with bold spices and served in a pita. On another visit I enjoyed the classic Buffalo wings (\$11), though you can swap Buffalo for sauces like garlic Parmesan. For other standard bar dishes, you've got the Plain Jane burger, variations on the hot dog, and thankfully, a couple of fine salad options. I say that because I've been on a bar menu crawl lately, they're hard to find — and even harder to find good ones.

Across town in East Liberty, the German-slash-Alsatian Lorelei took over the moody space that had been The Livermore, and transformed it with lots of au courant hanging plants, a living wall and communal tables that give the space a beer garden feel.

The talented Cecil Usher oversees the bar here, introducing German liqueur and enthralling cocktails. A wine list put together by Max Stein ranges from variations on the most underrated of grapes, Riesling, to a white Gemischter Satz (Weingut Wieninger \$11), along with reds like Pinot Nero by the glass (Colterenzio, \$10).

This being a sibling restaurant to Independent Brewing Co. and Hidden Harbor from Adam Henry and brothers Pete and Matt Kurzweg in Squirrel Hill, Lorelei showcases German brews, many of which I love — like an Ayinger Pilsner, a Reissdorf Kolsch, and a Schneider Weisse — since they're blissfully not hop-forward and defy the sandwich-in-every-beer heaviness of a lot of American craft brews.

The food menu just changed, so while it's still a short list of snacks, soups and salads, sandwiches and savory pies, you can't get the raclette anymore, but chef Jamilka Borges offers it in a speck sandwich on a focaccia (\$14). The chicken soup is apropos for cold season, this one, a cup of tomato-laced broth peas and greens (\$7).

In addition, I can't resist the warm pretzel, quite large, served with spicy mustard and a side of kielbasa kraut cheese spread, which I tend to overlook. Another must is the lamb hand pie with chickpeas, tamarind and chutney (\$11) that's deeply savory and memorable for such a casual dish.

Don't forget there's a pastry chef at this bar. Now granted, Dianne DeStefano, like Ms. Borges, is in charge of desserts across the three spots in the mini restaurant group, and you'll often find the duo in Squirrel Hill rather than here. At Lorelei, she's showing off a lovely rendition of black forest cake that I ate during a stop-in at the bar, enjoying the warmth of the place in contrast to the early evening snowfall that had just begun.

If these two spots are a peek to the future of restaurants in Pittsburgh, we may be deprived of some full-service dining perks, but there is also a lot to like.

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