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THE VAULT: FINDING NEW WAYS TO DRESS THE OLD

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

It is hard enough to start a new restaurant, even in the best of times. Try doing it in the midst of a global pandemic when everything is shut down and social distancing replaces social gatherings, the heart and soul of the restaurant industry. It takes guts and nerve... and a lot of community support. Luckily for them, Jesse Elliott and Mark Giunta, the owners of The Vault Restaurant, seem to meet all the requirements.

Jesse and Mark have owned and operated the 3 Mile House, the supper club in Hazel Green, WI, for the past three years, and when the owners of the old Bank on Main Street in Dubuque approached them about a restaurant, it did seem like a no-brainer. A great location in a revitalized downtown, a space rich with history and good bones to build upon, and a community that will come out for good food and drink. Jesse had experience at various places like The Ground Round and Red Robin. Mark used to own The Silver Dollar at this location and once donated a lot of old artifacts from the place to the Matthias Ham House. They decided to pay homage to the space by calling it "The Vault Restaurant" and added little touches like a penny top bar, wall hangings studded with pennies, old Dubuque photographs and such.

Jesse's wife, Heather, worked on the cocktail menu and named them after big names from the prohibition era. You can find your Gin Rickey's and Tom Collins' hanging out with Mary Pickford and White Lady—it's quite the Lavender Bee's Knees, I tell ya... OK, I got a little carried away there. I tried the French 75 named after a French gun—the combination of cognac, citrus and champagne was delightful on a warm summer evening.

When it came to the food menu, the owners, together with manager Toby Rhodes and a team culled from the 3 Mile House, put together a wide variety of dishes aiming to please a wide variety of customers. Jesse mentioned to me that they wanted things to be freshly prepared and not just frozen and thawed. They also wanted items




that did not duplicate what you could already find in the many establishments in and around town. The menu as assembled suggests an idiosyncratic American bistro with some deft touches. The filets are hand cut on site with the ends repurposed as tenderloin bites served with blue cheese and horseradish sauce. Many of the appetizers such as onion rings and jalapeño poppers are assembled and deep fried to order.

Let us talk about those poppers. A typical popper is a jalapeño, deseeded and stuffed with cream cheese and maybe cheddar, breaded and fried. The Vault version is a giant cheeseball made with cream cheese, cheddar, fresh and pickled jalapeños and a little pickle juice for added flavor; coated with Panko and deep fried. I must commend the deep frying technique—every deep fried item I had was perfectly crispy and not greasy, with a pleasing golden brown color. The poppers are then drizzled with hot honey and served with a spicy bank sauce and a ranch sauce—you can increase or decrease the heat level as you wish. A word about heat: this is actually hot, like Southwest Hot, not what I derisively call Midwest Nice Heat; something that pretends to be hot, but is as dramatic as beige is to white.

Indeed, the heat carries over to the Ghost Burger where multiple chilies collude to provide drama—think flashing red. There is the habanero incorporated into cheese, jalapeños marinated in atomic sauce, a mini version of the jalapeño poppers showing up as coins, and ghost sauce aioli on the bun. I asked for the burger to be cooked medium rare, and the combination of heat and beef was divine. A slightly different version of the popper can also be found

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on the sandwich menu as the Jala-peño Popper Grilled Cheese. Roasted jalapeños, bacon and a creamy jalapeño habanero cheese blend between a baguette are grilled and served with a spicy black currant dipping sauce that also provides a sweet counterpoint to the heat. The smokiness of the roasted jalapeños pairs especially well with the berry notes of the black currants.

While I tend to focus on the dishes with heat, there are plenty of offerings for those with a more Midwestern palate. There are the loaded nachos, a giant pretzel, and hand-breaded onion rings. There is also a nice Midwest Cheese Tray with their signature 3 Mile cheese, fresh cheese curds, shaved prime rib, and sliced summer sausage, all served with crackers, horseradish cream sauce, and blue cheese dressing. The crab stuffed mushrooms could almost be a main dish—four large button mushrooms stuffed with a creamy crab and cheese filling and served with horseradish cream sauce and cocktail sauce. The earthy meaty flavor of the mushrooms pairs well with the delicate seafood with the crispy breading on top adding a nice textural note.

The sandwiches and salads have a lot of variety to choose from, with all sauces made in the kitchen—I can always tell a freshly made ranch from the preservative-laden versions you typically find in diners. The honey mustard dressing has the right mix of sweet and tang, and the texture is creamier than the usual store bought sauce. The Caesar dressing is especially good with bright salt and sour notes balancing the umami of anchovies and garlic funk.

There are a host of main course options with chicken, beef, and seafood. As the restaurants start opening up (more on this below), they have added weekend specials. When a group of us dined in last weekend, they had a pan-seared salmon with a rice pilaf and sautéed peppers that was splendid. I usually dislike salmon, but I had more than one bite from my friend's plate! The flaky fish had a deep rich citrus glaze, and the rice pilaf was light and flavorful to provide the right backdrop for the salmon. I ordered the filet and chicken special: the filet was medium rare like I asked for and came with a tangy béarnaise sauce. The breaded chicken cutlet had a romesco sauce that was a



hair salty for me. One of my friends had a pasta dish that was also salty, and our server was kind enough to take the dish back and exchange it for another dish.

The Saturday night we visited was quite busy; after months of being cooped up, Dubuquers really seemed to need to eat out. As a restaurant that opened in April in the middle of a pandemic and never really had a chance to get their feet wet so to speak, they were adjusting and adapting rather quickly. The wait staff in general seemed to be cheerful even under enormous stress. Our group tried to be kind when a couple of things were off, and our waitress responded and course corrected graciously. One thing I would request of all my readers is to be kind and patient if you go out to eat, and tip well. These are difficult times for anyone in the restaurant business and the serving staff usually gets the brunt of customer churlishness.

If you do not feel comfortable going out (and me and many of my friends do not), order take out. You can order from The Vault through Eat Street and Uber Eats. One of the small grace notes I appreciated was the use of vented containers for grilled and fried items—the French fries stayed crisp and did not get steamed as my takeout sat in the car. It showed that the people who made the food care about keeping its quality high. The owners seemed pleased with the community support so far, and I wish them all the best. Buy local and support our local restaurateurs. ■

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