



CHICKEN & WAFFLES



BUFFALO CHICKEN DIP AND CRAB STUFFED MUSHROOMS



GARGANTUAN PORK T SANDWICH



LUNCH PORTION 1/2 PRIME RIB DIP

The Vault Restaurant & Cocktail Lounge

By Danny Fairchild

Boy howdy do I love dining in downtown Dubuque. I mean sure, parking can be a bit of a thing. Even if you park in a paid lot, you likely have a bit of a jaunt to your restaurant, but I even like that part. Downtown Dubuque is a lovely walk. Not in the wintertime, obviously, but if I HAVE to do some walking in the wintertime, I'd rather it be downtown Dubuque. And I'm sure the history is part of why I like it. I've officially lived here longer than I've lived anywhere, so I kind of feel like a part of that history. And, of course, the food itself is usually pretty darn fab. And then there's the bars. I like a good drink. Hell, after a certain point, I even like a bad drink. So if you can point me in the direction of a place with a good kitchen AND a

good bar? I'll make as close to a beeline as you can make in this wonky ol' town.

Enter The Vault, located in the historic German Bank location.

I'm not going to get into that history. Many know it, and for those who don't, you can conveniently read the story while standing in front of a urinal. I assume it's posted somewhere in the women's restroom, too.

You know what? Since I brought it up, I'll discuss the restroom situation right away. I kind of got out of the habit of telling you all about the restrooms of the eateries I've columned, and that's a bad thing. People need to know about bathroom cleanliness and availability going in. Speaking for the men's room, it's one of the cleanest bathrooms I've been in downtown. Downtown is old. And the

bathrooms are usually the LAST priority when it comes to remodeling. For those who need accessibility, there is a bathroom on the main floor. Everybody else can head down the stairs (carefully, if you've had a few), turn left when you see the old bank vault doors. Once you enter the restroom, you know your poo and pee will be in good hands. VERY clean. The floor tile is black-and-white checkered to the point of almost inducing a seizure. The walls are a classy kind of deep red. Maybe maroon. I'm red-green colorblind, so don't trust me on that. But clean. Trust me on that.

The drinks. I like their drink menu. Yeah, there's a few cocktails specifically novel to The Vault, but I didn't order any of them. I went right for a Tom Collins. A Tom Collins was the first drink I legally ordered in a restaurant. My parents took me out to dinner to celebrate 21, I'd been reading a lot of J.D. Salinger at the time (it was mentioned a lot in *Franny and Zooey*), and unfortunately I was still of a mind that Salinger couldn't possibly lead me wrong. In this case, he didn't.

What's interesting about the cocktail menu at The Vault is that even with a classic cocktail like a Tom Collins (gin, lemon juice, simple syrup, topped with club

soda), they put their own little spin on it. Once I tried it, I wasn't entirely sure I was served the right drink. I didn't read the description on the cocktail menu before ordering it. I thought I knew what I was getting into by ordering a Tom Collins. I looked at the description finally and there it was: champagne. You might be thinking that this was a French 75 instead of a Tom Collins. But The Vault has a French 75 on their menu as well. It's made with cognac, which is a perfectly cromulent way to make a French 75. Anyway, it wasn't what I was expecting IN a Tom Collins, but it was certainly what I was expecting FROM a Tom Collins. A little sweet, a little sour, a little aromatic, and refreshing as hell.

The food. Your *365ink* gang went to The Vault with a fairly large group, so I had the chance to sample a lot of different menu items.

We started with a few appetizers: Buffalo chicken dip and crab-stuffed mushrooms. Buffalo chicken dip has become a modern potluck classic. Or it would if people were doing potlucks right now. No criticism there. Now is not the time for potlucks. The Vault's Buffalo chicken dip is everything you've been missing. There's some spice but not a lot

of heat, and that wonderful accompanying tanginess. As for the crab-stuffed mushrooms... I have a hobbit-like affinity for mushrooms. These were brilliant. Unless I was fooled, which isn't likely, the crab that was stuffed into these mushrooms is real crab. Amen to that.

I, myself, ordered the chicken and waffles. Pay attention to this because I was fooled. It came served looking like... well... remember in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when the Empire invades the ice planet of Hoth and destroys the shield generators for Echo Base? Remember what those shield generators looked like? Kind of like dishes in a drying rack buried in snow? That's how the chicken and waffles come. "Dishes" of waffle alternated with some damn fine chicken in between. I thought you just kind of ate them like that. And I was fine with that. Nice presentation, yo. But it gets better. They're actually arranged on your plate like a club sandwich. The chicken and waffles are *handheld!* You just dip it into your syrup and take a bite. I love it. And the waffles were crisp on the outside, and the chicken had this wonderful potato chip breading on it. And if that doesn't sound good enough, there's crumbled bacon on it! Not Bacon Bits. Those aren't really bacon. I'm talking bacon that's been candied and crumpled on your chicken and waffles like the most delicious garnish EVAR!

Let me get more into the breading at The Vault. Most times you go to a restaurant, you're getting one kind of batter. Usually their signature beer batter, dig? It's certainly more efficient in a restaurant kitchen to just worry about one kind of batter. But The Vault knows that not all batters are the best for all circumstances. Like baseball, right? The chicken and waffles has that potato chip batter (and it should be noted that The Vault makes their own potato chips), but the pork tenderloin had kind of a tempura batter, and the fish and chips had more of a beer batter. Three different batters. And maybe more on dishes I haven't tried—yet. Does that happen often and I'm just now noticing it because these batters were so well-suited? I don't know. But I appreciate the work.

The French dip. I LOVE a French dip. It's probably my favorite sandwich. To get you as excited as I am about this sandwich, I need to call it by its listed name. The Prime Rib French Dip. Oh. Do I have your attention, now? Well throw on some fontina; some horseradish cream; sauteed peppers, onions, and mushrooms and how's your attention span now? With a nice crusty hoagie roll? Yeah? You like that, too? Well wait until I tell you about the au jus. The Vault serves a very decent bowl of French onion soup. And I'm almost positive that the au jus for the Prime Rib

French Dip is just some of that French onion soup. Yeah. You're listening now.

The pork tenderloin sandwich. I teased you with the pork T a little earlier when discussing the breading. Some of you may have been affronted when I described it as tempura-like. See, this is the Tri-States. If there's one thing we know, it's pork T sandwiches. So if you go straying from the accepted breadcrumb method, you'd better deliver. The Vault delivers. The batter is a good choice. A GREAT choice.

The fish and chips. I have a reputation as a bit of an Anglophile, so maybe my perspective is skewed, so I must ask: Is there really anybody left who DOESN'T know that traditional fish and chips are, in our terms, chips and fries? I ask because literally every single restaurant in the area that has fish and chips on the menu serves fish and potato chips. The fish is comparable, but are people really still confused about the starch that traditionally comes with fish and chips? Whatever. At The Vault, you're getting potato chips, but at least they make their own. And the fish isn't at all overcooked, and the beer batter is perfect. But come on. Am I the jerk here?

All in all, The Vault is your quintessential downtown Dubuque dining experience. Nice, but not too toney, great food and great drinks, and the shadow from the bluffs takes your look from day into night. Enjoy. ■



The Vault Restaurant & Cocktail Lounge

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