



LOADED NACHOS



TACO TRIO



OUR SERVER, DRESSED TO THE NINES

# Galena Lion's Den

By Bryce Parks

Ismael and Christina de Leon opened Galena Lion's Den on the main drag in downtown Galena on March 17, 2023. Ismael spent much of his life in the restaurant industry since he was only 14 years old, mostly as a side gig. After five years in Jo Daviess County and three years in Galena proper, they started thinking about opening a place of their very own.

"I wasn't looking at Galena," explained Ismael. "I was looking in Warren, Apple River, and Guttenberg. And Christina said, 'If we do this somewhere else, we're going to have to keep two regular jobs in order to support the restaurant. I know a few people that own places in smaller towns, and there's not enough revenue to keep it open.'"

That's when Roger and Becky Gates, who are partners in Galena Lion's Den, suggested the current property. They owned an adjacent property and noted the building was for sale. "So Roger bought the building, and we put in the business," said Ismael.

Since 1919, the building had been a jewelry store up to the 1990s by three different families. In the mid 90s, "like

everything else here in Galena," jokes Ismael, it turned into a thrift store. And it had been vacant for the last few years.

After a few different incarnations of how to develop the building, the eventual idea for the Lion's Den included two different vibes under one roof with a speakeasy BBQ joint upstairs and a more high-end dining establishment on the main floor. Upstairs you'll find a very sport bar-like setup with big screen TVs, a pool table, and a bar. Eventually, they want to lease the property next door and expand the second floor into that space.

Downstairs (main floor) is nothing less than gorgeous. They did a very nice renovation that is a mix of 1919 ambiance and contemporary amenities. It's both old and at the same time, current. All of the cabinets behind the bar are original to 1919. They even utilized the frame of the old counter displays to build the bar itself on. Each lion head displayed in the venue is 22 hours in a CNC machine. The copper bar top itself was more than \$14,000. So, they did it right, and it shows. Even our very nice server during our evening visit was dressed in vintage flair.

On the weekends, it's been pretty busy. "We're trying to bring in lots of music," explains Ismael. "One thing that me and my wife were very adamant about was bringing in different entertainers than you see everywhere else. I want to say 95% of my music is not from here. I got everything from outlaw country to jazz, blues, rock.

There's a lot of folk around here, and we like it, but it's covered well in other places, so we're going in a different direction. I had a group a couple of weeks ago. They came down from the south side of Chicago, very bluesy, very jazzy, and they packed the house. And that's what I'm trying to bring in."

A bluesy performer named Desiree is currently developing a house band for the Lion's Den, which has a permanent P.A. system with drums and amps so performers can just show up and jam, usually 8 to 11 p.m. And on many weeknights, you'll hear pianist Rebel Wells, who's also got a stellar voice. You might also stumble into a great party as they've hosted cabaret parties and just had a crazy-fun Pride festival with drag queens performing.

"On the second floor upstairs, we host DJ Papi who you might know from the Smokestack in Dubuque at 9:30 p.m. on the weekends"

So this is a food article, Bryce, talk about the food already! Okay, caveat! But even there, I have a caveat. Things may change—and soon.

The upstairs menu is strongly based on great BBQ smoked right in house (or out back if you're being a stickler). And we will come back to that as we think it's the highlight of Galena Lion's Den. But first, let's check out that downstairs menu.

The "downstairs" food menu features more refined entrées, but even as I write this, Ismael is considering changing that up.

"Originally when we first started, I wanted to do tapas, but then I went more into entrées and stuff. The reason I just went on about the music is because I figured out that downstairs, I'm more of a music venue than I am a restaurant. So that being said, I'm going to go more towards tapas style. Shared plates and appetizers."

So that change may occur by the time you go try the place out for yourself. So, we'll run down the offerings but don't want to dwell in case they change a lot up.

We bet the appetizers stay. They are right in the tapas wheelhouse, and that's good because these are all good. How can you go wrong with fresh calamari, chicken wings, pretzel bites, cheese curds, fries, loaded nachos on unique corn chips, and toasted havarti crostini? I do love me some calamari, especially when it's not too breaded, and this offering fits the bill. The five flatbread pizzas also fit pretty nicely into the sharable lane, with chicken bacon ranch, Mediterranean, BBQ chicken, deluxe, and Bada-Bing that features marinara or pesto with mozzarella, ricotta, prosciutto, and portobello mushrooms.

"I don't have anything on my menu that is pre-prepared," notes Ismael. "Everything from the pork tenderloins to the giant shrimp and fresh chicken is prepared from scratch, seasoned, battered, etc. right on the spot which can take a little bit longer." But our food was out very pretty fast, almost too fast between apps and entrées.

During our visit, the entrée lineup included sirloin steak, ribeye, stuffed pork



chops, a burger named after Gen. Grant (because it's Galena and you have to do that or else the CVB comes after you), seared salmon, seared scallops, and even a massive \$149 Tomahawk steak. Don't worry. The other entrées all run \$18-\$40. There are also four Asian-inspired dishes: Thai basil chicken stir-fry, Pouncing Lion beef stir-fry, Fire Cracker Shrimp, and orange chicken. You can get fettucine alfredo or marinara with chicken or shrimp, or scampi style with shrimp. There is also a good-looking strawberry jalapeño chicken (or salmon) salad, Caesar, or a sirloin salad. All entrées come with vegetables, a BIG side salad with house made dressing, and a choice of rice, hand-cut fries fried in tallow, or a generous serving of loaded mashed potatoes.

Now, let's get to that BBQ I was talking about. It's the featured upstairs menu, but clearly popular demand made them have to offer it up as a main floor option as well. It's all included on the separate "Lunch and Lounge" menu.

Naturally, this menu starts with the same apps and flatbreads as you find on the main menu and adds a 12" pizza that you can build yourself. And then we get to the BBQ which is infused into

many of the sandwiches. De Leon and crew smoke up fresh brisket, ribs, and pulled-pork regularly. Go ahead and get a half or full rack of those baby backs with slaw beans and fries from \$18 to \$22.

The smoked brisket sandwich is not-surprisingly their best selling sammy with your choice of BBQ sauce (or go without for you Texas purists). The pulled pork ain't no slouch either. And how about a Reuben with real house-smoked corned beef? Real smoke makes all the difference. And since the BBQ obviously has to be done in advance, it's a fast turnaround on an order which is especially nice at lunch. Even Ismael sees the BBQ as the center point for the venue. I guess when you know what you've got, you know what you've got.

But if you must stray from the smoker, you're still in good hands with offerings like the fresh-cut and hand-breaded pork tenderloin with cajun mayo and all the fixins. Or go with the classic Italian beef, patty melt, grilled or fried chicken sandwich, house burger, or Grant Burger (which is a spare rib and brisket blend by the way... why not add some bacon for a buck?) Or maybe a hand-battered tiger shrimp Po Boy with slaw? Or fall back on the safety of chicken, pork and brisket taco trio. Yep,

all three in those unique corn tortillas that they use to bake their own nacho chips and served with the usual taco fixins. Sammys come with hand-cut fries or a side salad or upgrade to mac and cheese for a couple bucks. Why not? When in Rome and such.

They have 14 beers on tap including some local ones like Elizabeth, IL's Highway 20 and Lena, IL's Maverick and OMG Becky, which is pretty popular. And obviously that changes with seasons including shandies, Guinness, Blue Moons, Pompeii from Toppling Goliath, and more. And their craft drink menu was developed by Carl Busch, the mixologist from Hotel Julien Dubuque's Riverboat Lounge who recently won yet another State Mixology Championship from the Iowa Restaurant Association. So they got that goin' for them... which is nice.

It sure helps that it's all served up in a really sexy atmosphere. You will just love the look of the place, and it sounds like you'll love the sound of it too if you come at the right time of the night. And since it's pretty much smack dab in the mid-point of the main tourist drag along Main Street in downtown Galena, it's very convenient for visitors or to tempt you to do a little shopping while you're in town. Tell them Bryce sent you and save me a rib! ■



**Galena Lion's Den**  
109 S. MAIN ST, GALENA, IL  
779-202-1312

**GALENALIONS.DEN.COM**  
**Upstairs Hours:** Daily: 11 AM–Close  
**Downstairs Hours:** Tue–Thu: 4–19 PM;  
Fri: 4–Close; Sat: 11 AM–Closed;  
Sun: Noon–6 PM; Mon: Closed

**SUBMIT YOUR DINING SUGGESTIONS!**  
DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE RESTAURANT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE US VISIT? PLEASE SEND US YOUR REQUESTS, SUGGESTIONS AND COMMENTS!  
EMAIL: [DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM](mailto:DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM)



# Start Your Engines

By Hy-Vee Nutritionist Megan Dalsing

It's finally summer, which means many families are hitting the road. Whether you're taking a day trip to the beach, heading out on a long road trip, or joining Hy-Vee at the INDYCAR Race Weekend in Newton, IA, it's important to fuel your adventure with nutrient-dense foods. Here are Hy-Vee dietitians' top three tips for packing a variety of snacks and drinks to help make travel a breeze.

## 1. Keep MyPlate in mind.

The MyPlate method of meal planning is a great way to make sure you're getting foods from all five food groups—protein, dairy, grains, fruits, and vegetables. This provides the balance of nutrients your body needs. A general rule for meal planning is to include three to five different food groups for meals and one to three different food groups for snacks. Utilize this tool when selecting foods to pack for your trip.

A great choice for protein on the road is peanuts and peanut butter. Peanuts contain 7 grams of protein per serving and are a good source of fiber and good fats. Use

peanuts to create your own trail mix that features several food groups. Combine peanuts, dried fruit, and cereal or popcorn for a quick snack that includes protein, fruit, and grains. Energy balls are also great for traveling. They combine protein and carbohydrates to fuel your day.

## 2. Pack a Variety of Cold and Shelf-Stable Snacks

Include a mix of foods that need to be refrigerated with shelf-stable ones to save cooler space. Fill up a cooler with things like raw vegetables, hummus, guacamole, cut-up fruit, string cheese, and Greek yogurt. Complement those items with shelf-stable things like whole-grain crackers, applesauce, bananas, peanut butter sandwiches, nuts, and popcorn. To maximize cooler space, freeze water bottles and drink them when they melt.

## 3. Don't Forget the Drinks

Speaking of water, make sure to include a variety of drinks to keep everyone hydrated. Besides water, another great option is Remedy Kombucha. Kombucha is known for containing probiotics, or live cultures, which promote digestive health. Remedy Kombucha is also a great choice because it doesn't contain sugar. And because it can be stored in or out of the fridge, it's perfect for travel.

Need more ideas for fueling your summer? Consider working with a Hy-Vee dietitian. Our new Healthy You Subscription is a monthly subscription program where you will have access to a Hy-Vee dietitian, including two 30-minute consultations per month, as well as access to virtual Hy-Vee classes such as freezer meal workshops and Short & Sweet fitness videos, plus free registration in Healthy You Challenges and much more! Ready to start your health and wellness engine? Reach out to a Hy-Vee dietitian today. ■



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