

winter sucks



The Martinez
with gin and
vermouth
MICHELLE KANAAR
PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

Cozy confines

**HUMBOLDT PARK NEWBIE BAR MARTA
IS A PERFECT WINTER HIDEAWAY**



Chicken liver toast

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

“We’re not making things float.”

That might seem like an obvious statement coming from a restaurant with “bar” in its name, but Jeff Pikus, executive chef of the new Bar Marta in Humboldt Park, isn’t exactly a pedestrian cook. Pikus was once the chef de cuisine at Alinea. When he left the acclaimed Lincoln Park restaurant, he traveled around Vietnam for a few months, a time he calls “incredible and a great opportunity to eat and think and not have to worry whether my line cook was going to come in late.”

Shortly thereafter, he joined Brendan Sodikoff’s restaurant group Hogsalt, where he was instrumental in launching the culinary side of Maude’s Liquor Bar, Bavette’s and High Five Ramen, among others. He may not be floating stuff at Bar Marta, but the last time I ate at Bavette’s, I floated out with happiness. I was hoping for more of the same when I checked out Bar Marta.

The scene

The owner of Bar Marta, Austin Baker, is a veteran of one of the best high-end seafood restaurants in the world—Le Bernardin in New York City—and helped the Hogsalt team open Au Cheval. As such, it’s no surprise that there are some Hogsalt-like touches at Bar Marta: neat old-timey hand-lettered hours near the entrance, a hushed candle-lit vibe and a cocoon of a dining room where the windows have been blocked off by lush heavy draperies so that your focus is not on the street corner, but on the people and things happening within the room.

“Yeah, that’s a thing we took from Hogsalt,” Pikus said. “We even built a wall on the Chicago street side so that the diners’ focus is on the room, not what’s out the window.”

Though the place is clearly focused on being casual, it has some elegant touches, including a towering back bar and a sweeping white marble bar top that Pikus said was painted brown to look like wood by the

previous owner, something the Bar Marta crew only discovered after a little judicious sanding. The walls are sparsely decorated with a large map of France and a few small framed photos of seeds and plants. The place feels a touch like a speakeasy.

The drinks

Complementing that vibe is a pre-Prohibition, era-rich cocktail list filled with old-school gems such as the sazerac, a double old fashioned and the Martinez (\$10 each) curated by Au Cheval vet Christina Carrera. I loved the Martinez, a 50-50 split of vermouth and gin often thought to be a precursor to the martini. It drank like a juniper-spiked manhattan and finished with a hint of orange peel and mulled wine spices. The wine list, curated by Jerusha Frost, is deep and full of food-friendly gems such as the stony high-acid Gruner Veltliner and the Pinot Gris from Left Foot Charley of Traverse City, Mich.

My favorite part of the list, however, is a handful of “orange” wines, partially oxidized white wines that ferment with their skins (which are often removed during the white wine-making process) and thus possess an orange hue. The 2008 La Stoppa Malvasia di Candia Ageno (\$17) offered by the glass was a mind-blowing pour full of honey and orange notes complemented by a touch of shellac and barnyard funk (both good things).

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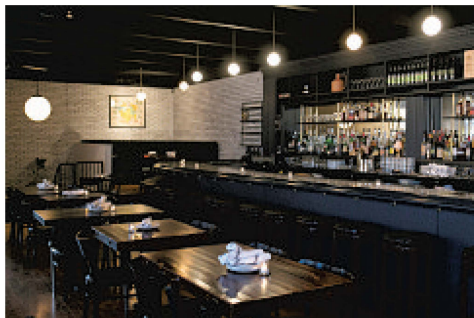
RATINGS KEY ***** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ***** PROCEED WITH CAUTION ***** GIVE IT SOME TIME ***** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ***** OFF TO A GOOD START ***** HEATING UP ***** ALREADY HOT



Iceberg and grains



Cacio e pepe with truffles



The food

That funk complemented a handful of silky triangle-shaped ravioli stuffed with mascarpone, chives and king crab glistening in an uni butter sauce (\$19). As glorious as that pasta was, it was bested by the cacio e pepe (\$12), a tangle of housemade spaghetti dripping with pecorino cheese and black pepper. I opted for a 5-gram shaving of burgundy truffle full of earthy perfume (\$10). I doubt there's a better version served in Rome.

Housemade sourdough was grilled and slathered with tufts of velvety chicken liver puree that wafted cognac and sherry vapors (\$12). Bracing wintergreen notes from parsley sprigs, the fire of Calabrian chili and smoky bits of bacon filled each bite.

Though Pikus is certainly serving many refined versions of classic homey dishes, he's also pushing the envelope at Bar Marta. There's a dish called iceberg and grains (\$10), and though it sounds like the biography of a farmer who died on the Titanic, it's actually an inspired salad. It's kind of like what I imagine a steakhouse-style wedge salad would be if it were hippified and reimagined by Alice Waters of Chez Panisse. A crisp side of iceberg lettuce drips with tangy avocado dressing fortified with butter-milk, sour cream and garlic powder. Instead of croutons, there's a smattering of sprouted lentils and farro. "When you're at a bigger spot, there's pressure to make things accessible," Pikus said. "At Hogsalt, it was always, 'Let's add more butter, more cream.' But here



Banana rum cake

MINI-REVIEW
Bar Marta
2700 W. Chicago
Ave. 773-697-4489
★★★★☆
Off to a good start

we're creating something that's maybe a little healthy."

The only thing I had issue with was a fillet of salmon (\$20), which had been grilled just a touch past well-done. Bits of the crust were dry and chewy, and the interior, while not overcooked, wasn't as flaky or medium-rare as I prefer. Still, that fillet swam in a chunky, glorious salsa-like romesco sauce spiked with Marcona almonds, red peppers, tomatoes, olive oil and smoked paprika that I spooned straight into my gullet long after the fish was gone.

Dessert

As it turns out, Pikus is also a damn good pastry chef. A banana cake (\$8) was moist and soaked in more rum than Ernest Hemingway on a good afternoon in Cuba. The dessert, inspired by a dark and stormy cocktail, was topped with candied lime-spiked ginger and wispy curls of dehydrated banana and served with a side of Ben and Jerry's finest vanilla ice cream. "We wanted to make our own ice cream, but there's not enough space," Pikus said. "We love Black Dog Gelato, but [they're] pretty busy right now, so we talked

about it and decided when you go to the bodega or grocery store and buy ice cream, you're almost always coming home with Ben & Jerry's, so that's what we use."

The service

I asked Pikus why he and Baker, two fine-dining exiles, were so committed to doing a casual restaurant. "People take themselves so seriously in that world," he said. "We just didn't want to be part of that. We want a place where the staff can have fun, drink a beer and laugh. Creating a good environment for people to work is just as important as creating good food." While I agree with that sentiment, you have to be careful that being laid-back doesn't turn into a lack of discipline while serving guests.

The dining room isn't very big, but it felt understaffed. Water wasn't refilled promptly, and though we shared six courses, extra plates and silverware were never swapped out. Many of the fixtures were inherited from the previous restaurant, including the utilitarian wooden chairs, which were a bit uncomfortable and wobbly.

Bottom line

In a part of town that's more notable for its drinking spots such as the California Clipper and Haywood Tavern, Bar Marta is a fine new neighborhood restaurant (and bar) that happens to serve fare worth seeking out.

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