

In Good Spirits: Euro-style sports bar shakes things up

BY JOANNE SASVARI, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 7, 2010



Champagne cocktail called (left to right) "Russian Spring Punch," "Frost," and "Italian Passion" with Red Card sports bar Assistant General Manager Chris Ballas.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, PNG

Red Card Sports Bar + Eatery

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VANCOUVER -- So, when's the last time you could sit down in a bar and enjoy both a playoff game on the big screen and a refreshing champagne cocktail? Let me guess — maybe never?

In North America, sports goes with beer. Period. It also goes with sports bars, those dark, cavernous bastions of giant LED screens and autographed hockey jerseys.

"It's a stereotype — the male-led, testosterone-fed, rock 'em, sock 'em type establishment," says Chris Ballas, assistant general manager at Red Card Sports Bar + Eatery.

Red Card, please note, is not the stereotype.

It is more like the high-end sports bars Ballas discovered over the past decade while he was running some of the top bars in London's West End, including Mahiki, where the clientele typically includes young royals and assorted celebrities.

In London — or Rome, or Paris, or Barcelona — fans can watch sports on the big screen while enjoying refreshments other than, say, chicken wings and fizzy lager. After all, the Europeans are as passionate about their food and wine as they are about their soccer.

And that's the whole idea behind Red Card, a Euro-stylish bar housed in the 1908 heritage building that's now the Moda Hotel.

With its 18 high-definition TVs, it's a place that's all about sports, especially soccer, which means that this will be ground zero during the forthcoming FIFA World Cup (June 11 to July 11).

It also has a remarkable kitchen led by chef Andreas Wechselberger, formerly of Cin Cin and the Oyama Sausage Co.

Sure, he offers chicken wings, but forget the deep-fried calories and sticky hot sauce — his are marinated in a ginger-soy sauce before being lightly grilled.

Besides, you probably want to try the pizza instead. Light, crisp and flavourful, it's made with the best cured meats and cheeses and is baked in Vancouver's only Marana Forni wood-burning oven.

But the most exciting thing for a refugee of more traditional sports bars is the drinks selection.

The list features page after page of craft beers such as Brooklyn Lager, North Coast Acme Pale Ale or Saltspring Golden Ale, as well as a finely edited list of mostly Italian and West Coast wines by the glass or the bottle.

Then there are the cocktails. No premixed margaritas here, but innovative, handcrafted cocktails made with top shelf spirits.

"The cocktails are a mix of stuff I've created in the past and learned from colleagues in the U.K.," says Ballas. "I strive for almost a layered flavour type thing. I try not to have drinks that are one-dimensional."

Guests can enjoy any of a dozen champagne cocktails (made with Italian prosecco), including the Frost (cucumber, pear puree, elderflower cordial) and a variety of bellinis, such as pineapple and ginger, raspberry or traditional peach.

"All my purees are fresh purees. Our juices are freshly squeezed. I make my own chili sugars, vanilla sugars and spice sugars," Ballas says.

Cocktails range from the always-popular mojitos, cosmopolitans and caipirinhas to creative concoctions like the Red Card Martini (Absolut Mandarin vodka, Campari, Galliano, cranberry juice, orange bitters).

Red Card does a brisk business in both wine and cocktails, though Ballas admits, “our beers outsell everything, but that’s to be expected.”

Ultimately, though, what Red Card offers is an alternative to what Ballas calls “the primal atmosphere of the North American sports bar ... one that has good food, good wine, that would also appeal to a woman and not that hunter-gatherer thing.”

After all, there are an awful lot of NHL playoff and World Cup games scheduled over the coming weeks. It would be nice to enjoy something besides beer and chicken wings with them every once in a while.

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