

## Gourmet Onion

In Winooski, eating is being redeveloped along with the buildings

By Suzanne Podhaizer [10.10.06]

Chris Galinas grabs his shaker and some liquor, performs a few quick steps, and pours out a drink. The glowing "Aqua Marine" lives up to its name. It sits on a cocktail napkin looking like the Caribbean Sea trapped inside a martini glass. Galinas slides a star fruit garnish onto the rim of the glass and pushes the drink across the bar. The first juicy sip transports me briefly to the beach.

Then I'm back, and on the other side of the bar I see Galinas' co-worker putting the finishing touches on a "Stiletto" - a sexy, fuchsia-colored concoction embellished with an edible orchid. He presents it to a twentysomething woman with long, blond hair and business attire, who "oohs" and "aahs" with her friends before she even takes her first sip.

Are we in Montréal, or maybe Burlington? Nope, this scene is taking place at 38 Main Street Pub, formerly Hooper's Pub, in downtown Winooski. And fancy cocktails aren't the only culinary surprise in the Onion City these days. Less than a block down the street, at the Blue Star Café, they're serving foie gras and tossing truffles into the macaroni and cheese.

Clearly, the vibe in Winooski has changed in the past few years, since the Winooski Falls redevelopment project began replacing the old Champlain Mill parking lot with new buildings. Start-up businesses are rising to the challenge of feeding the 1000-plus people who are expected to eventually live and work in the new apartments. At the same time, the eateries that have long been Winooski staples are still alive and well - and retaining their hometown appeal.

38 Main is a sports bar. I can tell because there's a baseball game on TV, and both Corm and the Coach are hanging out just a few feet to my left. But on a recent Thursday night, it doesn't feel like your average sports bar. Since the place added high-end drinks to its menu last winter, the crowd has diversified. Most of the cheers I hear are for the bartenders, not for the baseball teams. And as I chat up people in the crowd, I learn that many of the patrons work in the food and beverage industry. There's J.T., a wine rep from Vermont Wine Merchants, Jennifer Swiatek, owner of Winooski's Beverage Warehouse, and Tyler, a Sam Adams sales guy. Coming across this crew at a single bar is the alcoholic equivalent of finding a dining room full of actual Chinese families at a Chinese restaurant - a really good sign.

The drink menu, lovingly entitled "Liquid Architecture," features libations such as the "Nova," a classy combo of blueberry Stoli, Cointreau and grapefruit juice. I swoon when I sip the "Scarlet Letter" - lemon juice, raspberry puree, citrus vodka and raspberry liquor, but am less sure about the naughty-sounding "Dip Your Monkey." The combo of rum with banana and chocolate liquors tastes great, but the chocolate shavings and banana chips on top give me pause: Am I expected to sip it, or chew? But that's a minor quibble. The drinks are luscious and the atmosphere is both comfortable and high-energy.

38 Main isn't the only sports bar in town that has grown more chi-chi in response to the redevelopment. Over at McKee's Pub, a townie staple for 20 years, owner Lance McKee has embraced gourmet food. In February 2005, he introduced his new Sunday brunch, with what a longtime patron describes as "a very aggressive menu." Each week, Chef Brian Lantagne and Barry Mayhew collaborate on dishes such as white-chocolate-and-strawberry pancakes, seafood crepes and McKee's best-seller, Nantucket Benedict - asparagus, crab meat and a pair of poached eggs on English muffin halves, topped with Hollandaise sauce.

"It was pretty brutal for a long time" during the construction, McKee says. But since the backhoes and cement trucks cleared out, the food has "brought in a lot of people who have never been to McKee's before." He's excited that things are more family-oriented now, and says he "loves to make people happy with our food." As he puts it, "If you don't grow with the community, you go out of business."

Changing with the times has also been important for Matt Sutte, owner of The Blue Star Café. Sutte used to be a partner in Winooski's Higher Ground, which was razed to make way for some of the new buildings. The Blue Star's upscale menu might seem out of character with the town, but business owners seem to think that the best thing about the redevelopment project is that it's been making way for wider offerings.

After checking out the "liquid architecture" at 38 Main Street, I head to the Blue Star to sample the restaurant's new dinner menu, unveiled just three weeks ago. I settle into a funky mod chair, and manager Ben MacIntyre hands me a dinner menu featuring an eclectic selection of appetizers, small plates and entrées.

I start with the pan-seared foie gras, which comes with Vin Santo and fig compote. The inside of the liver is gorgeously melty, and the fruity accompaniment makes the dish extra-decadent. After cleansing my palate with a small mesclun salad, I move on to succulent braised ribs with bear's-tooth mushrooms and an earthy-sweet puree of parsnips and carrots. Delicious.

I can't resist sneaking a bite of my friend's truffled macaroni and cheese - it's as comforting as it is sensual, the fragrance of truffle a natural match for the cheese. My vegetarian buddy's coconut-crusting tofu could use another dollop of curry sauce, but I thoroughly enjoy my purloined taste. I had hoped to try the coffee-pepper-crusting New York strip steak, which uses Blue Star's own espresso blend - the beans are roasted in the restaurant's basement. But I've run out of room. Something to look forward to next time.

And I find myself venturing to Winooski more often, now that it's no longer necessary to leave if I want to find a cup of Fair Trade coffee, or to visit a place with unusual wines by the glass. Or electric-blue cocktails. It's also appealing to choose food from a variety of cultures: burritos at Souza's, dumplings at Peking Duck, lamb gyros at Donny's, and tom kha soup at the wildly popular Tiny Thai.

Still to come? Kenneth Braverman, a principle member of the Winooski Falls redevelopment project, says three new spots are awaiting food-oriented tenants, two at Spinner Place on the other side of the roundabout, and one in a building that is not yet complete. The goal is to fill these spaces with exciting but casual options - cafés and bagel bakeries would fit the bill, he suggests. "We're not looking for super-high-end restaurants," he says, adding that "neighborhood-type convenience" is more important.

Winooski's food scene may be changing, but it's not losing the family-style charm that's been attracting diners for decades. The "mom and pop" places are just getting dressed up a little more for special occasions, and there are a couple of new kids on the block. You can still fill up with a heaping plateful of spaghetti and meatballs at Papa Franks or a juicy burger at McKee's. Great slices and awesome service are available at Donny's, and Sneakers has anything you could possibly want for breakfast.

And for every aficionado sipping an "Aqua Marine" at the 38 Main Street Pub, there are still plenty of folks getting cozy with their bottles of Bud.

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