

# Taste of the Town

## Sidebar

DERK RICHARDSON



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remember their parents imbibing. That, plus the recession trend of diners maintaining their alcohol consumption while ordering smaller meals at upscale restaurants, has inspired intense focus on cocktail programs. Sidebar's is one of the best.

Owners Barbara Mulas (executive chef), her husband Mark Drazek (pastry chef) and business partner Anne Marie Adrain (general manager) tapped Jonny Raglin of Absinthe Brasserie & Bar in San Francisco as their bar consultant. Raglin learned a fresh-and-seasonal approach to classic cocktails from Dan McCracken at Stars Bar and Dining, and Sidebar's cocktail menu simultaneously pays tribute to past and present. Each drink is offered in "classicist" and "locavore" versions. For a Manhattan (\$9), for instance, you can sip a rendition from Harry Johnson's 1888 *New and Improved Illustrated Bartender's Manual* (rye whiskey, sweet

### One Sure Bet

## Sidebar Does Cocktails and Small Plates Right

Any new Bay Area restaurant worth its salt had better put said salt on the rim of a top-shelf margarita. Better yet, like Sidebar, it should fashion a specialty cocktail list that eclipses recent advances in margarita mixology, digs deeply into the history of libations and keeps abreast of the latest developments in artisan spirits. That strategy makes cocktails the crown jewels at Sidebar, which opened last February on Grand Avenue on Lake Merritt. But a compact, reasonable wine list, smartly conceived lunch, dinner and "in between" menus, and a neighborly tavern ambience all conspire to make this vibrant bar/eatery a sure bet in Oakland's restaurant renaissance.

Just a year ago, wine bars — Franklin Square, Zza's Enoteca, Vine — defined the cutting edge of Oakland dining. But a new wave of innovative bartenders have been teaching old dogs — Manhattans, sidecars, and martinis — new tricks. What had taken root in San Francisco several years ago has blossomed into a widespread, trans-generational East Bay fascination with the old fashioned and zombies that baby boomers

vermouth and Angostura bitters) or one made with St. George single-malt whiskey, house-made sweet vermouth and house-made bitters. The locavore martini uses Junipero Gin or Hangar One Vodka with “a whisper” of Vya dry vermouth, while the classicist (\$9), from *The Bar-Tender’s Guide* by Jerry Thomas, 1862, complicates matters with maraschino liqueur and orange bitters added to the gin and sweet vermouth.

On paper, the inclusion of raspberry syrup, house-made grenadine, pineapple gum and spiced syrup might raise suspicion that such drinks as the Aviation, Clover Club and Zamboanga “Zenie” might come off sweet. But to my palate, the classicist martini, the locavore Manhattan and pisco sour (all \$9) bore out the congenial bartenders’ and servers’ assurances about how carefully the flavors are balanced. And when my wife, Robin, and our friend Nora compared the two versions of the Castle Harbor Special (\$9) and found the classicist (white rum, pineapple juice, lime juice and grenadine) lacking the depth and complexity of the locavore (Charbay Rum, Small Hands pineapple gum, lime juice and house-made grenadine), our server whisked the former back to bar where the tender tweaked it to approximate the latter.

The large, square, *Cheers*-like copper-topped bar sits almost dead center in the restaurant. With overhead cabinetry and seating for 18, it dominates the room, whereas the open kitchen is more or less tucked into the left rear corner, albeit with its own counter and stools. But it’s not as if Mulas and Drazek give short shrift to the food. They operated Zax in San Francisco and Zax Tavern on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley and have developed a winning approach to Mediterranean-based bistro small plates and satisfying main dishes. With the exceptions of a good but unremarkable lemon vinaigrette–drizzled prosciutto carpaccio (\$9) and a somewhat dry cornmeal pound cake for dessert (\$6.50), everything we ordered on our dinner visits I would happily eat again.

Ample portions make such “evening appetizers” as the chopped salad (\$8.50), with romaine, iceberg and radicchio lettuces, garbanzo beans, aged provolone, fennel salami and a creamy herb dressing, and the steamed mussels (\$8.50), in a creamy Pernod-and-tarragon-flavored broth, topped with a jumble of crisp shoestring potatoes, perfect for passing around the table. On the other hand, the trout salad (\$9.50), a freshly-grilled boned filet served with crisp green beans, beet wedges and celery root rémoulade, and the mascarpone-Manchego polenta cake (\$7), two thick triangles with a soufflé-like texture, are so scrumptious that you might have a hard time sharing. I would also be inclined to hoard the chili-and-mustard-spiked deviled eggs (\$7.50) — three halves topped with fresh tiny shrimp, dill and paprika.



Of the evening main dishes — which change occasionally and range from panini (\$7.50) to steak frites (\$23) — the deft juxtaposition of elements and superb preparation of the 7-ounce Niman Ranch hamburger (\$10), the oven-roasted chicken breast (stuffed with fontina and prosciutto, \$16.50), and the grilled Hawaiian swordfish (\$19) bode well for such other choices as stuffed baked pasta shells (\$12.50) and lamb brochettes (\$18). All entrées are plated with sides — thick, baked fries, crisp polenta, spinach, roasted lemon; asparagus, red potatoes, green olive vinaigrette — that round out the dishes and enhance the sense that you’re getting your money’s worth.

Lunchtime sandwiches include Cuban roast pork (\$10), fried fish (\$9) and a smoked ham, turkey and Gruyère Monte Cristo (\$7). Drazek offers a limited variety of desserts, such as a brownie sundae (\$7), profiteroles (\$6.50) and special fruit galettes (\$8). The legendary carryover from Zax — twice-baked goat cheese soufflé (\$8) — is offered on Wednesdays only, which means I’m scheduling a midweek visit soon. But Sidebar is so attractively appointed (a warmly modern feel supported by the color scheme, lighting, artwork, furnishings and tableware) and convivial (friendliness sustained amidst a constant bustle) that it will likely become a foremost hangout any time of day, any day of the week.

**Sidebar.** California-Mediterranean.

Serves lunch 11:30 a.m.–2:30 p.m. Mon.–Fri.; “in-between” menu 3 p.m.–5 p.m. Mon.–Fri.; dinner 5 p.m.–10 p.m. Mon.–Thu., 5 p.m.–10:30 p.m. Fri., 4 p.m.–10:30 p.m. Sat. 542 Grand Ave., Oakland, (510) 452-9500, [www.sidebar-oakland.com](http://www.sidebar-oakland.com). Credit Cards accepted, Full Bar available, Reservations accepted, Wheelchair accessible.