

RoCA is newest Court Avenue dining destination

Jennifer Miller, jenmille@dmreg.com 11:04 p.m. CDT October 27, 2014



(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

To hear him talk about his latest restaurant project, RoCA, you'd never guess that Jason Kapela's background has little to do with craft cocktails.

"I had no clue how to make craft cocktails three months ago," Kapela said, as he hand-shaped a chunk of clear-as-a-bell ice behind the bar for a Smoking Gun cocktail. The drink is made with whiskey and maple syrup, stirred, poured into a bottle and smoked with a smoke gun packed with apple wood chips. He's all about the art of the cocktail these days, equating it always with the art of cooking.

RoCA (Restaurant on Court Avenue), which opened Oct. 22., lives in the former home of Sbrocco, a Full Court Press-run restaurant and wine bar that closed in March. Kapela is the managing partner of the business, which is owned by commercial real estate brokers Tyler Dingel and Todd Millang, and Brian Martin, a real estate investor and developer. Kapela and executive chef Aaron Holt, who worked at Sbrocco as sous chef to Andrew Meek and then executive chef, created the menus together.

Bringing back the history

Kapela, who is a former owner of Louie's Wine Dive, first worked with the real-estate trio as a consultant after they bought the building with a restaurant in mind.

"Todd tasted a cocktail in Breckenridge and decided right then that he wanted a craft cocktail bar," Kapela said, laughing and gesturing around at the lovingly redone space at 208 Court Ave. The building is one of the area's oldest and dates back to at least 1865.

The front of the building had already collapsed once, Kapela said, so they tore it off and replaced it with a wall of glass to let some light in shotgun-style space. They also carefully peeled all the plaster off the east wall, exposing the 150-year-old brick. The work also exposed a who-knows-how-old bird's nest tucked into a cranny. After cleaning it up a little, they returned it to its nook and coated it all with a preservative. Other exposed holes in the brick hold tea lights. Vintage photos that all picture the building line the walls.

The antique doors that once hung above the bar were built into the front of the bar, and the stained-glass ones are lit from behind. Gone are the booths and the carpet, replaced by high-top tables and dark gray tiles. An enormous new wine rack in which the bottles appear to float, provides a barrier between the dining area and the waiting area (which has been tricked out with a couple of squishy places to land and some vintage stools).

And a mere three days after opening RoCA made another kind of history by hosting The Bachelor, Iowa native Chris Soules, who showed up about 8:30 with his date. A handful of locals were allowed in the restaurant with the couple and were shown in through the back entrance.

The booze

"The building itself is what really got us going," Kapela said, "and everything we're doing in the bar and kitchen is sort of an homage to it."

Both the cocktail menu and the food offer tastes of times gone by. Lovers of classic cocktails will find drinks like Sazerac and Last Word, along with housemade aquavit (a traditional Scandinavian spirit infused with dill and/or caraway and other herbs and spices) that will make an appearance in the First Impression, a cocktail that RoCA's beverage director Brian Lindner calls "vegetal."

For a taste of what fired Millang up and started the whole RoCA project, visitors should try the aptly named Catalyst, a sweet cocktail made with Parfait d'Amour (Lindner describes it as a sort of blue-colored Grand Marnier) and crème de violette. Lindner also makes a fig-infused Bulleit whiskey and RoCA's kitchen provides all the housemade syrups for the bar.

The ice here is nearly as central to the cocktails as the booze. RoCA brings it in from Dubuque in 300-pound blocks of super clear ice. Just like the old days, someone lops off manageable chunks of ice, hauls them upstairs, where they are sawed into chunks slightly bigger than a rocks glass. Those are then chiseled into faceted jewel-like pieces to go into the glasses. Behind the bar, a peg board hung with menacing ice tools is sure to be a conversation piece.

The ice is pure and airless, which means that it is crystal clear. It also means, Kapela said, "that it really doesn't melt and the drinks don't get diluted. It's another step that makes us unique," Holt said. "No one else in town is doing this. But in the bigger cities, there are bars that have an 'ice man' and that's all he does."

Of course, a good old gin and tonic can be had, as well as selection of beers (seven on tap) and over 80 wines, almost all available by the glass, some for as little as \$5.

The food

The RoCA menu is a sort of crazy quilt of interesting “shared plates.” Old-Worldesque escargot, beef carpaccio and oysters “RoCA”feller make an appearance alongside the nouveau-trendy (tempura green beans) the cool-comfort (smothered tots, a tater tot-based version of gravy-soaked poutine) and the hip-ethnic (empanadas and gulf shrimp with Andouille dip).

The shared plates are priced as whole (for four or so people) or half (for two), making it easier to actually share. “I didn’t want to do those little teeny plates with just a couple of bites on them,” Kapela said. He also resisted putting flatbreads on the menu, but practicality won out. “I’ve been trying to distance myself from flatbreads since my days at Bravo. But people love them; they will be the biggest seller on the menu,” he predicted.

If you’re not the sharing type, there are a handful a hearty entrees too, from salmon to steak to roasted chicken, all paired with interesting sides. The whole menu fits on one page, continuing the trend of presenting more pared-down, carefully curated offerings and eschewing the multi-page tomes of yore.

Kapela said when things settle down at RoCA, the next project is to update Shorty’s (the back-door, downstairs bar/eatery) structurally, aesthetically and culinarily. In the meantime, Shorty’s current menu will be produced from the RoCA kitchen (as it was from Sbrocco’s).

Darting from bar to kitchen and this task to that on the day of RoCA’s first dinner service to the public, Kapela said, “We’ll be treating the ingredients (behind the bar) just like we treat the ingredients in the kitchen. And this is exactly the kind of place I want to be doing.”

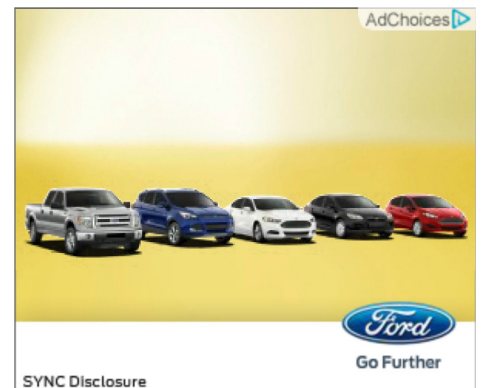
RoCA

FIND IT: 208 Court Ave.

INFO: 515-282-3663; www.rocadsm.com

PLANNED HOURS: 11 a.m.-midnight Tuesday through Friday; 9 a.m.-2 a.m. Saturday; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday. RoCa opened for dinner on Oct. 22. Jason Kapela said they planned to start lunches this week.

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