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Gershwin's on Granby Street offers a sophisticated dining experience

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It is hard to believe there was a time I would regularly travel through a tunnel, sometimes 45 minutes or more, for an evening out.

It was the early 2000s. I lived in Newport News, and a few times a month, a couple of my girlfriends and I – a gaggle of Carrie Bradshaw wannabes – would head to Norfolk's Granby Street, dine at Havana, drink at Club Soda and end our evening at Empire Little Bar Bistro.

Since then, aside from a couple of trips to Luce, one lunch at Field Guide and an attempted visit to The Grilled Cheese Bistro, I haven't spent much time on Granby, even after moving back to Virginia Beach in 2008.

It is unfortunate because I'm certain I'm missing out on some gems. Take Gershwin's. I likely would not have walked in, despite its catchy vintage marquee-letter lights and live music that can be heard on the sidewalk, but I had just happened to be flipping through a pile of old magazines and landed on an article praising Gershwin's smoked whiskey drinks.

My boyfriend is a bourbon man and had never sipped such a libation. So, on a dark and stormy evening, we made our way to Gershwin's, located next to the Roper Performing Arts Center in the space previously occupied by Velvet Lounge. This 2½-year-old establishment evokes 1930s Manhattan and is an adventure in dining.



Chris Carpenter's Grand Illumination at Gershwin's in downtown Norfolk. Makers Mark smoked with cherry wood. Photographed Tuesday, December 13, 2016. Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot

Just past the baby grand piano, where the entertainment goes down on a nightly basis, a tuxedo-clad server named Candida greeted us, walking us the length of the narrow space, past an unusually long, marble-topped bar, to a table in the back. We were one of just two parties and assumed the combination of Tuesday, rain, chilly air and the holidays was the reason behind the slow business.

Candida filled our water glasses and delivered bread and butter while we soaked up the surroundings – gold-leaf wallpaper, bold black accents, shimmering crystal chandeliers, and big, bold mirrors and artwork – and salivated over the drink menu. Divided into three sections – cocktails, infused cocktails and classic cocktails – it lists a couple of dozen libations, many named after local notables (think Hugh Copeland, founder and artistic director of The Hurrah Players, and Claus Ihlemann, founder and president of Decorum Furniture).

We ordered Chris Carpenter's Grand Illumination (\$10), which was the motivation behind the trip, and Leslie's Blueberry Margarita (\$10).

For the Grand Illumination, Candida rolled a cart to our table, and walked us through the process.

First, she wet a sliver of orange rind with bitters, torched it slightly, set it aside until it cooled and then dropped it into a whiskey glass occupied by a single, golf ball-sized ice cube. Larger ice melts more slowly, which results in a less watered-down drink. Smart.

Next, she piled a handful of cherry wood chips atop a cocktail strainer that rested on another glass – this one filled with Maker’s Mark, my man’s second favorite brown liquor (behind Woodford Reserve) – and set the chips ablaze. If the cherry wood-smoked Maker’s doesn’t light your fire, Candida explained, Gershwin’s offers four other types of wood: pecan, hickory, apple and mesquite. They can be used with any whiskey, be it Irish or scotch, bourbon or a blend.

Once the flames subsided and the chips began to smolder, she placed a cocktail shaker over the top, allowing the bourbon to absorb the smoke. Within a minute, she poured the whiskey over the ice.

The resulting taste? Earthy and spicy with hints of caramel. It was the perfect comfort drink for a cold and rainy night.

And although there was no associated show, my margarita – a refreshing concoction of tequila, muddled blueberries and limes, triple sec and sour mix – was just as delish. It was tart with a hint of sweet, and packed a punch.

For an appetizer, Candida recommended the fried calamari (\$11) or pimento cheese (\$9). We settled on the latter, two ice cream scoop-sized globs of “Carolina caviar” served with celery, toast points and fried pickles. It was rich and creamy, and we absolutely adored the fried pickle slices. What an innovative delivery platform.

For the next round, my date went with Drew’s Bourbon Flight (\$18), which consists of three shot glasses on a wooden tray marked with the contents of each: Bernheim’s Original, Larceny and Elijah Craig. I tried Jenny’s Moscow Mule (\$9), vodka, lime, sprig of mint and ginger beer. No complaints, except with full bellies and a drive home ahead, we knew we were enjoying our last round.



Shrimp & Grits at Gershwin's in downtown Norfolk. Jumbo shrimp, andouille sausage, tomatoes, green onions and stone ground grits with Low Country Gravy. Photographed Tuesday, December 13, 2016.
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The menu was short. Entree choices include two seafood dishes, and one steak, one pork, one chicken and one veggie main, and the specials list is shorter. Yet we had a hard time making a decision. He chose the shrimp and grits (\$21) over a seafood pasta special. I passed up a chicken piccata special and the North Atlantic salmon for the steak au poivre (\$27), a French dish that consists of a steak – typically a filet – coated with cracked peppercorns and then cooked.

Gershwin's uses a New York strip, which is my favorite cut of beef. Yay!

With four jumbo shrimp and twice that many slices of andouille sausage, diced tomatoes, green onions and stone ground grits topped with a creamy gravy, the shrimp and grits satisfied my Southern-born boyfriend. Candida was shocked that he finished the whole bowl.

The steak au poivre was equally impressive. Served with pommes frites – thick-cut fries topped with parmesan – and sauteed spinach, the strip was cooked to a beautiful medium rare and covered with a peppercorn cream sauce.

There was no room for dessert, another drink or a dessert-like drink, although the 50 Shades of Happy (\$10) (Bailey's, vodka, Godiva and Chambord) sounded like a fine nightcap. We took home the limoncello cake and red velvet cake (\$6 each), the seasonal salad (\$8), a kale salad with sliced apples, dried cranberries and a lemon vinaigrette. All were as tasty as the rest of our meal.

Gershwin's was a surprise hit for a reasonable price, which included built-in entertainment, both by way of the live music and cocktail shows. It has inspired me to work on getting my Granby Street groove back.