

## Take the Cake

### Whiskey Cake

3601 Dallas Parkway, Plano, 972-993-2253, [www.whiskey-cake.com](http://www.whiskey-cake.com). Open 11a.m.-midnight Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-2 a.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-2 a.m., Saturday and 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday.\$\$

**W**hiskey Cake, the impressively thought-out pub by the Tollway in Plano, was designed for drinkers who don't laugh when their bartenders spritz their cocktails with atomized oils and diners who don't berate their servers when they learn their lukewarm tomato soup isn't eligible for a quick nuke, because the kitchen doesn't have a microwave. It wasn't designed for the beer-drinking traditionalists who used to swig frosted mugs of Miller Lite at the Plano Tavern, which previously occupied the building.

But when Whiskey Cake opened, Tavern vets flocked to it, grateful to have their neighborhood bar back. The cracks and snaps that soon thereafter reverberated through the room were the sounds of those old-timers whipping their necks around at the sight of the new restaurant's savvy menu of trendy pub grub. Looking for Plano Tavern's chili con queso or fried calamari? Afraid you'll have to make do with hummus plated with wedges of grilled pita and blistered oven-roasted tomatoes, or perhaps the Texas blue crab cakes.

"This place used to be better," grumbled a former Plano Tavern regular sitting alongside me at the crescent-shaped bar.

My bar neighbor didn't strike me as the barbecue banh mi type. Over the course of two cocktails, I learned he liked beer, guns and tax cuts. He was pained by the shootings in Tucson, because the tragedy could cost a deserving astronaut the chance to go to space, and was appalled by Obama's Marxist tendencies. Like most of the drinkers who'd managed to snare a bar stool that night, he didn't have any intention of ordering a fancy-schmancy cocktail, especially one made with brown liquor.

But he needed something to pad his belly for more beer-drinking, so he and a friend went halves on a platter of cheeses and house-cured meats. He loved it, and was equally taken by one of my deviled eggs, a trough of firm egg white heaped with a mustardy filling and garnished with translucent curlicues of salty gravlax. By the time I was called to a table, he seemed to have taken the



Whiskey Cake gets a lot more right than just booze and dessert.

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restaurant off his long list of scorn-worthy targets. It's hard to resist Whiskey Cake.

I know, because I wasn't sure I'd like it either. The restaurant seems so franchise-ready that I was surprised there wasn't a sales office out front. The room partitions made from neat stacks of logs, the cow pictures in the entry breezeway, the wingback chairs in the scattered lounge areas and the clear Edison bulbs suspended from cables don't point to any individual personality. Which doesn't mean the brick-walled warehouse of a room isn't impressive: The high ceiling and crook-necked double lamps on the bar give the restaurant the feel of a history museum's Gilded Age streetscape, minus the barber shop.

Still, I wondered if a restaurant with such a distinctly corporate vibe could make good on its locavore promise. As servers are quick to tell their guests—even the ones who answer the standard "Have you dined with us before?" greeting in the affirmative—that Whiskey Cake makes everything from scratch. That appears to be largely true, although our server told us the kitchen couldn't take credit for the ketchup and a few other accoutrements; the restaurant's wisely outsourced its breads to Empire Baking Co.

Considering the scope of its ambitions, Whiskey Cake does an admirable job. I didn't eat or drink anything there that I'd classify as exceptional, but I found the vast majority of food satisfy-

Whiskey Cake	
Beef jerky.....	\$6
Fried green tomatoes...	\$8
Deviled eggs .....	\$5
Hummus .....	\$6
Mussels.....	\$12
Pork sliders .....	\$10
Bacon and egg salad....	\$9
Hot pastrami melt.....	\$11
Holmes farm bird .....	\$14
Top sirloin.....	\$18
Whiskey cake.....	\$7

ing. Just like my buddy at the bar, I was ultimately won over.

Fortunately for Whiskey Cake, the restaurant rarely has to deal with skeptics like my curmudgeonly bar neighbor and me. The place is nearly always packed—as a restaurant whose name guarantees booze and pastry is bound to be. The crowds mean long table waits and improvised communal seating arrangements in the bar area that make more sense to haggard hostesses than paying guests. But the traffic also creates an appealing buzz, intermittently shattered by bartenders vigorously shaking whiskey sours.

I had a fine New York Sour at Whiskey Cake, a beautifully balanced elixir of rye, raw egg, lemon juice, simple syrup and red wine. Whiskey Cake is justly proud of its cocktail program, but I wish its drinks list was a bit braver. I appreciate the impulse not to overwhelm customers who ask whether a Sazerac's a beer, yet hate to see so much fresh fruit and correct bartending technique spent on such a narrow selection of simple cocktails, most of which would get ordered even if they didn't appear on the menu. There's a margarita, a Manhattan, an old-fashioned and a half-dozen other classics prepared the usual way. Resurrecting the New York Sour—a 19th-century favorite—strikes me as the perfect way to stretch drinkers' horizons without resorting to frivolity. More, please.

Expanding the bourbon list would

help too. Shouldn't a restaurant that pastes the word "whiskey" on its shingle serve bourbons I can't find elsewhere? Where's the Jefferson's Reserve, the Noah's Mill, the Pappy Van Winkle? And why does the bar persist in bunching together its Tennessee whiskeys, Scotches, Canadian whiskeys and bourbons under a single heading? Such a strategy might be defensible if the list was annotated: Every beer gets a brief description, while whiskeys are identified by price alone. Woe to the uninformed drinker trying to decide between the \$8 Buffalo Trace White Dog and the \$8 Basil Hayden's.

But the bar's minor flaws are made up for by a brilliant bar snack: Beef jerky, supple as fruit leather and engraved with the most pleasing sweet heat. The tender strips are better marbled than most jerky, and so exude a wonderful beefiness.

Official starters are more elaborate, including fried green tomatoes with disconcertingly cakey breading and a trio of pulled pork sliders sprouting tentacles of fried onion and speared with pickle-topped sticks. The handsome sandwiches are perched on a brick. They're not bad: The pork's fairly bland, but a crisp slaw of carrots and purple cabbage provides a nice snap.

Whiskey Cake's at its best when it sticks to basic bar food. A sirloin steak was drowned out by the stench of mesquite smoke, while a much-touted roasted half-chicken was terribly dry (although the sweet potato fennel hash that accompanied it was a wintry revelation).

I much preferred a rather manly rendition of steamed plump mussels, tossed with smoked chili butter and hunks of Cajun ham. While house-cured pastrami had a strange, pickling lime tang, the sandwich was nicely proportioned, and featured a forthright whole grain mustard that could ennoble most any cold cut. Mustard also played a supporting role in the vinaigrette aboard an excellent frisee salad topped with hunks of bacon and a sunny-side up egg.

For dessert, of course, there's whiskey cake, a stout, pecan-studded toffee cake that tastes like something Dickens might have eaten to celebrate the publication of *Punch Magazine*. I mean no offense when I say the cake has the texture and appearance of meatloaf, bathed in bourbon Anglaise sauce and crowned with whipped cream. I really liked it. I generally don't care for sweets, but it's nearly impossible to avoid succumbing to the charms of whiskey cake—and Whiskey Cake.

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