

Barnett on Business Travel: Ex-Los Angeles 'Valley Boy' creates stylish saloon in Mississippi

by *Chris_Barnett*

Transplanted Los Angeles "Valley Boy" Skip Nessel claims he designed Elixir, his martini bar and restaurant in Jackson, Miss., "to feel like I was at very cool cocktail party with all my friends." He apparently has many pals, and Elixir makes new ones daily thanks to head bartender Cody Allen's photographic memory.

"Cody meets you once," he says, "and never forgets your name or favorite drink."

Elixir (www.elixirms.com) almost defies description. Tucked away in a strip mall in downtown Jackson, it's a seamless blur of warm browns, beiges, chenille cloaked banquettes, faux leopard skin booths and pillows, tangerine gossamer and shimmery gauzy drapes. You could be in Manhattan's Upper East Side, West Hollywood, Calif., Amsterdam, the Netherlands, Paris, Tunisia, Prague, Czech Republic. It's equal parts: '30s, '40s moderne and 2007 contemporary.

The man has style. Nessel, in his days as a lighting and furniture designer, rambled the world in search of "cool, provocative, retrofusion salons, saloons and bistros."

Upstairs is the restaurant and a kitchen with a gaggle of chefs; downstairs is a mahogany bar adorned on top with a hand-painted swirling cartouche and lined with 14 leather-topped stools. Behind the bar is a mirrored wall of mosaic glass with ornate hand-blown bottles interspersed between premium liquors.

"A great bar has a lot of little surprises," Nessel opines. "Try one of our house cocktails and if you don't like it, don't pay and we'll make you another one."

It's hard not to like Cody's Mississippi Martini-vodka infused with tea, twist of lemon, pinch of sugar, shaken, garnished with sprig of fresh spearmint, fairly priced at \$8.

The Martini Vienna is a tasty new one on me: Vodka, white creme de cacao, Godiva white chocolate, garnished strips of chocolate. The Skip and Cody Show doesn't just cater to the sweet tooth.

"We're old school," smiles Nessel. "Our dry-as-dust Gibson is gin, tiny drop of vermouth and an onion (\$8) or try it as Grey Goose vodka martini with an olive and onion."

Small batch bourbons like Booker's and Basil Hayden, served neat or on the rocks, are hot here as well. Sommelier Grady Griffen has an amazing list of 25 wines by the glass, from \$6 to \$11. "These are 'new world' wines from New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, Chile, even Oregon plus California."

Missing but not missed: pricey French wines at huge markups and Mississippi muscadine, a sweet wine from grapes grown in Natchez, Miss. Oddly, Jacksonians don't fancy beer and the selection - a few Buds, Millers and an Amstel Light - is meager.

Nessel's robust California personality goes down easily in Mississippi's capital city judging from his clientele. It's packed with local and visiting pols (state senators, lobbyists, staffers), lawyers, bankers, doctors, pharmaceutical execs, secretaries, grad students, designers and well-traveled locals.

"Don't ask me why but we go through a lot of champagne," says the host who cuts a wide swath around town in his Mercedes 430 convertible."

If you're traveling solo, particularly if you're a woman, Elixir is a welcoming oasis.

"This is the South," says Nessel. "We treat women like they're our little sisters and if they're alone, we walk them out to their car."

Anyone can eat at the mahogany bar and not just buffalo wings or popcorn shrimp. Cody, himself a great schmoozer, will set you up with linen and serve a dinner for one of grilled Moroccan lamb chops, dusted with North African spices and served with a candied mint aioli, \$28. The crispy red snapper comes with a lemon and herb risotto, oven dried tomatoes and roasted tomatoes in olive oil, \$21.

There's no live music. Nessel mixes and records his own tapes "everything from rockabilly to cheesy French show music." No happy hour either but the bar "bites" are worth the \$8 tariff. Especially those crawfish wontons-deep fried with "strawberry red" pepper sauce.

Lest you think Jackson's lost it's wonderful Southern traditions and characters, check out Jeff Good's Bravo Italian Restaurant and Bar (www.bravobuzz.com) with a martini and cocktail list that would put any 'northern' saloon to shame. One drink not on the menu is the official drink of Jackson's world-famous sweet potato queens - a potion with magical powers and a spicy name that would raise eyebrows to the moon if I repeated it here.

It's also the favored love potion of local humorist Jill Connor Browne, who anointed herself Miss Sweet Potato Queen to cure a bad case of the blues, rode in the back of a pickup truck in the local St. Paddy's Day Parade ("it's the fourth-biggest in the U.S. because anyone can get out and march in it"), and went on to write seven successful, funny books (e.g., "The Sweet Potato Queen's Book on Love.")

A droll, native daughter with 5,200 fan club chapters in 20 countries, Browne describes the drink as a shot (1 1/2 ounces) of Absolut Kurant vodka, half shot (1/2 ounce) of triple sec and a dash of Rose's lime juice.

The price? "Heck, I don't know," she says. "I've never paid for one."

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time and money.

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