

Barnett on Business Travel: Metropolitan Cafe dazzles Cleveland

by *Chris_Barnett*

Table 17 in the saloon side of the Metropolitan Cafe is the best perch in all of Cleveland for people watching, especially on a late summer day, locals insist. But it's a tough seat to snag. Floor to ceiling windows look out on West 6th and St. Clair in the buzzing downtown Warehouse District.

"It's the hottest corner in the city and this is the best bar, bar none," says banker Ken Ake who's sharing Oregon pinot noirs with a stunning woman, no doubt discussing Fed policy and the melting mortgage loan market.

It gets even better if you can commandeer this prime vantage point for a couple hours starting around 4:30 p.m. weekdays. That's when the barkeeps slash prices on a dozen signature martinis - from \$10 and \$12 to \$4 flat. If my math is right, that's 70 percent off, making it quite possibly the best-priced premium pour on planet Earth.

New general manager Jason Crawford doesn't scrimp on imagination or ingredients. Consider the Espresso Martini. Into the shaker go a couple of hefty shots of Van Gogh double espresso vodka, followed by a shot of Smirnoff vanilla vodka and then Bailey's Irish Cream. I'd put down a Lincoln for that alone. But at \$4 apiece, you could host a private cocktail party aux deux, leave a 25 percent tip and walk away with a bargain. Want a bigger party? Jason will rig it for eight.

Known simply as the Metro Cafe (1352 W. 6th; 216-241-1300), this urban oasis is a nice mix of cool and style that doesn't spill over into hipper-than-thou 'tude. Angela Facciolini, for example, is the kind of bartender who just makes your day, especially if you're an out-of-towner. A pro mixologist, she's smart - she's working on her Masters - and brimming with personality. Angela's also a superfan of the Metro without sounding canned or contrived.

"We get the nicest people in here," she says, "and we have a great rapport and good fun with them."

Metro treats them well. Besides the bargain-priced martini happy hours, a full 50 wines flow by the glass. A refreshing choice is the Hogue Riesling from Washington's Columbia Valley for \$7 a glass. For a bold cabernet sauvignon, try the B.R. Cohn 2004 Silver Label from Sonoma, Calif., \$10. John Poggemeyer, a former Napa Valley resident, does the buying and offers up gems like a dry, delicious Matua New Zealand sauvignon blanc for \$7 a glass.

Draught beer lovers better go elsewhere because there are no taps in the Metro. The favorite hometown brewed suds, Great Lakes Dortmunder, comes in a bottle with a chilled glass for \$5 and the Holy Moses

spiced wheat ale is on ice. There's the usual lineup of Amstel, Miller and Bud Light, also in bottles. That's odd, I thought, because Cleveland is still nutty over its sports teams and a mug of foam here seems as natural as a double, double grande latte in Seattle.

"City's changed," says Angela. In many bars, pro athletes often huddle by themselves in a corner, behind a heavily guarded velvet rope. At the Metro, King James - aka LeBron of the Cleveland Cavaliers - drops by after a game and prefers the view from Table 17.

"He's friendly and approachable and doesn't drink," she says. "And when the Yankees are in town to play the Indians, shortstop Derek Jeter and catcher Jorge Posada are in every night and very cool."

When Denzel Washington was in town shooting a movie, he'd come in for a nibble and to chase his thirst. "Simply one of the nicest guys I've ever met," adds Angela. Other drop-ins: U2, Sting, Jerry Seinfeld - the list goes on.

Metro Cafe is a pretty hang-loose place. Anything on the menu is served at the bar. Favorite appetizers include a lobster pizza, \$15, homemade crab cakes, \$11, and sesame crusted Ahi tuna with seaweed salad and fried won ton, \$12. Don't expect trail mix, bar nuts or pretzels.

This is a good time to visit the Metro Cafe. Food and drinks are served al fresco on a patio that fronts the building. Metro has a deep selection of well-aged scotch and bourbon whiskies, but Angela's own creation caresses my palate. She calls it the Castaway and it's designed to turn Cleveland into a tropical island - in your mind at least. She's married Smirnoff vanilla vodka, Parrot Bay coconut rum and pineapple juice with orange slices squeezed and cast adrift on top of the drink. Price: \$10. Taste: priceless.

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

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