



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Swig's take on wine-and-cheese pairings includes, from left, artisan bread 'n' brie; fresh mozzarella with basil and tomatoes, balsamic vinaigrette, black pepper and pine nuts; prosciutto-wrapped provolone on top of mesclun greens with cantaloupe and grapes; and goat cheese with savory homemade blueberry sauce and walnuts.

Catch a flight to Swig

Common Market's wine bar offers innovative take on wine and cheese

by Heidi Billotto
heidi@thecharlotteweekly.com

Quite at home in the fun and funky food and retail district of Plaza-Midwood, the Common Market on Commonwealth Avenue is an eclectic neighborhood market, deli and wine shop rolled into one. Swig, the newest part of the market, was created late this summer as a venue to promote the market's wine trade. The market has distinct grocery, deli, wine and seating areas, and yet Swig really has no home of its own.

Swig is really more of a concept than a place. Wednesday through Saturday evenings, wine and cheese offerings are served on the market's small enclosed patio. When the weather fails to cooperate, Swig patrons may sit inside at booths and tables designated earlier for daytime deli customers.

On the Swig menu, wines offered by the glass have been specially selected by Common Market owner Blake Barnes, a self-proclaimed wine geek with a great fondness for small-production, value-sensitive and artisan wines from around the world. His passion for wine began some 10 years ago when he managed Laurel Market in Eastover.

"We (Laurel Market) were just getting into the wine trade then and one of the vendors suggested I attend a tasting at Alston's (now McIntosh's Steak & Seafood). At the time I only drank white zinfandels and Tanqueray," Barnes remarked with a laugh.

But his open mind opened doors, and Barnes continued to take wine-tasting courses to expand his hori-

zons and refine his palate. "I learned to taste instead of just drink," he continued, "and it just grew from there."

Now Barnes describes himself as a "flight guy," referring to the process of tasting wines with similar elements in flights of three to six at a time. The wines in any single flight share some common attribute to justify tasting them together: All may be made from the same grape or blend of grapes, or they may be different wines from the same winemaker or perhaps different wines from the same region of the world. Flights are a good way to sample several wines and compare, and they will soon land on Swig's wine list.

"I just wanted to give us the summer to see how Swig would be received," said Barnes. "We'll switch up the wine list as the weather changes and start adding more and more."

From appearances on opening night, the Swig concept met with a warm reception; nearly 200 Swig enthusiasts filled the patio, market and front porch. The numbers have calmed down since then, but business remains steady. Barnes noted that Swig patrons drop by in waves, with an after-work rush right around 5 p.m. and another surge around 8 p.m., followed by a late-night crowd. Food is served until midnight; wine is poured until the market closes or, as Barnes likes to say, "until they can swig no more."

"We seem to attract a lot of people in the (restaurant) business," he said, attributing his wine-savvy clientele to the fact that he offers many high-end wines at reasonable prices. Swig patrons may also purchase any of the 2,000-plus bottles stocked in Common Market's wine section at regular retail price

and have it opened and served with no additional corkage fee or restaurant markup.

Wild about wine and cheese

The food at Swig is an innovative twist on the wine and cheese concept. The menu, an outgrowth of the market's fine deli fare, is limited to a half-dozen items, all worthy of consideration. The market's award-winning deli serves freshly made sandwiches, salads and soups daily from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m., seven days a week. After hours the deli offers a host of refrigerated premade sandwiches and salads.

Deli manager Bridget Lynch, the creative force behind the Swig menu, proves through the well-executed fare that culinary talent in her family does not belong exclusively to husband Jamie, the executive sous chef at Ballantyne's Table Restaurant. My menu favorites include the seasonal stack of fresh mozzarella, basil and tomatoes on top of garlic toast drizzled with a balsamic vinaigrette, black pepper and pine nuts, as well as the goat cheese with savory homemade blueberry sauce on toast with walnuts. For both offerings, the

SWIG WINE BAR

★★★★ out of 5

Location: Common Market patio,
2007 Commonwealth Ave.

Phone: 704-334-6209

Price range: Wines by the glass, \$6-\$13; food,
\$4.50-\$6.

Hours: Wednesday through Saturday, 5 p.m. until
patrons can swig no more. Common Market is
open Monday through Thursday, 6:30 a.m.-
midnight; Friday, 6:30-2 a.m.; Saturday, 7-2 a.m.;
Sunday, 7 a.m. to midnight.

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Self-proclaimed wine geek Blake Barnes looks for small-production, artisan wines for the wine list at Swig.

toast, like all breads at Common Market, is freshly baked nearby at Nova's Bakery.

Although it doesn't get much better this time of year than fresh tomatoes, basil and mozzarella, the goat cheese offering is a close contender. Tweaked with the taste of fresh rosemary, the

savory blueberry sauce is the perfect foil for the slightly sharp goat cheese it accompanies. Other Swig food offerings include a platter of French brie with Nova's bread, fresh fruit and crackers; the Common Market's homemade hummus served with kalamata olives and tricolored chips; and a salad plate of prosciutto-wrapped Italian provolone with mesclun greens, cantaloupe and grapes. Like the wine-by-the-glass menu, Swig's food menu will change with the seasons.

Heating things up

Barnes is applying for permits to include ovens and a cooktop in the Common Market deli kitchen, enabling Lynch to offer hot items as well as cold salads and cheese plates on the Swig menu.

"With ovens, we also will be able to offer more ready-to-cook prepared items for our deli customers, too," said Lynch, who seemed excited about the creative possibilities.

Swig also has two desserts on the menu: tiramisu and a turtle cheesecake. Both are good but are made off-premises. "When we get the ovens, it will change

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What's cookin'

edited by **Heidi Billotto**
heidi@thecharlotteweekly.com



In mid October, the kitchens of **Cantina 1511** welcome chef Susana Trilling, the foremost authority on Oaxacan cuisine. Trilling runs an esteemed culinary school in Oaxaca, one of the most sophisticated culinary regions in Mexico; and PBS adapted her cookbook, "Seasons of My Heart," into a popular TV series.

Trilling will prepare a five-course traditional Oaxacan dinner Oct. 13 at Cantina's East Boulevard location and Oct. 14 at the restaurant's Rea Road location. The dinner will be paired with wine and mescal. Cost is \$100, plus tax and gratuity, and reservations are required. Both dinners begin at 7 p.m. For the Oct. 13 dinner at 1511 East Blvd., call 704-331-9222. For the Oct. 14 dinner at 7708 Rea Road, call 704-752-9797.



Firehouse Subs recently launched its Home Field Advantage Sweepstakes promo-

tion to provide one sports fan with an entertainment package sure to make his or her home an excellent place to watch the game. Through Dec. 2, customers who purchase a combo meal will receive a randomly coded sticker. Sports fans can visit www.firehousehomefieldadvantage.com, enter the code and learn instantly whether they've won one of many runner-up prizes, which consist of free Firehouse Subs and sub platters.

The grand-prize winner, who will be selected Dec. 16, wins the "ultimate sports fan package," which includes a 50-inch plasma-screen high-definition television, a home theater audio system, a Bassett Classic John Elway Living Room suite and entertainment center, a high-definition digital video recorder, a video game system, games for the gaming system, a season's worth of sub platters and a cable/satellite subscription with a college and professional sports package upgrade. The winner also gets to designate a fire station to receive a matching prize package.

For more information, including a prize list and full official rules, visit www.firehousehomefieldadvantage.com. □

Swig

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everything," Barnes noted. "My goal is to eventually have a completely in-house operation."

As the weather cools, Barnes has plans to install an environmentally friendly, corn-fed stove on the patio to warm the outdoor area.

Plans also are in the works for several wine tastings at Swig, all conducted in cooperation with area restaurants. For

the first event, slated for Thursday, Sept. 28, from 5 to 8 p.m., Swig will serve an array of Italian wines accompanied by food from Pasta & Provisions on Providence Road. The event is free and patrons will enjoy special discounts on wine purchases.

Barnes said Swig's future holds other wine and food collaborative efforts. Several are in the works with neighboring Plaza-Midwood restaurants like Lulu's, Creation and The Penguin. □

