

Packing 'em in Midnight Sun Brewery's eatery proves to be a popular place

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Usually restaurants create wine and beer lists to complement their dishes, but what happens when the beer comes first?

The Midnight Sun Brewery opened its Southside location and new restaurant, the Loft, after 14 years of operating solely as a brewery.

The restaurant does feel like a loft, and its minimalist dining room was packed every time I visited, during both lunch and dinner. I haven't decided yet if this is in spite or because of the Loft's limitations. The Midnight Sun has a brewery license instead of a bar or restaurant license, so there are restrictions on the space's hours and the amount of alcohol allotted per guest. The brewery is open daily from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and drinks are limited to 32 ounces per person, so the Loft offers brews in either 6-ounce or 12-ounce servings.

What makes the Loft's menu particularly special are the dishes prepared with Midnight Sun's beers. The menu's selection, notated with suggestions for tasteful beer combining, is composed primarily of slow-food sandwiches and salads.

The pork carnitas sandwich (\$10) has mouthwatering pulled pork piled with coleslaw on thick French bread. The oversized sandwich comes with a side of chips and you can add a size of orzo pasta or slaw for \$2 more. The Reubenini (\$12) comes on rye bread with beer-braised corned beef, provolone cheese, cabbage and mustard. It's perfect with a beer (or several; the Reubenini is also enormous).

A Field of Hops Salad (\$6 small, \$8 regular) can include an optional topping of smoked salmon or roasted chicken (\$10 small, \$14 regular). It's piled high with greens and served with a healthy amount of hop-infused vinaigrette, so you'll most likely take some home with you or share with your table-mates.

The Brewery also runs daily specials tied in to a schedule of themes. If you end up at the loft on a Monday, you can take advantage of the Brew Dawg Monday special, some type of tubed meat boiled in beer, grilled and served on a French roll (\$10). Taco Tuesday is definitely a favorite of the regulars I talked to, even though it's a little pricey at \$12. I had no complaints when served my special of alder-planked shrimp on corn tortillas with chipotle sauce and crunchy slaw--it was a delightful fusion of South and Southwest flavors with just a little extra kick to complement my Double IPA. Wild AK Wednesdays feature a dish built with Alaska seafood, meats, poultry, cheeses or produce. Posole Thursdays showcase a Mexican soup made with chilies, pork and hominy. Fake 'n bake Fridays are about baked pastas so tasty you might be faked into thinking your own mother made them.

Although the sandwiches, specials and salads were delicious, the smaller dishes most reminiscent of bar food are definitely the restaurant's strength. The soft pretzel sticks served with beer-infused stone-ground mustard (\$4) and salmon poke served on cucumber rounds (\$12), were memorable foods that made for the perfect portion of flavor and salt to accompany a cold glass of beer, which I assume, is a driving force in many diner's visit to the Loft. A small cup of cheddar ale soup (\$5) is served in a large mug with a choice of toppings including garlic croutons, Spanish chorizo, spiced nuts or broccoli. It isn't an overly thick soup, so it makes for a nice light lunch or dinner.

The Loft doesn't have a dessert menu, but prepares one or two weekly specials. I can't guarantee that the banana-coconut cream pie (\$6) I tried last week will be there when you visit, but if it is, you should definitely try it, perhaps with a cup of fresh brewed K Bay coffee (\$3).

The Loft also serves brunch from 11a.m to 3 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. The menu includes huevos rancheros (\$12), Belgian waffles infused with beer (\$10), green chili hash (\$12), and the Handwich (\$12) - two English muffin sandwiches prepared with local eggs, brown sugar pepper bacon, arugula and cilantro-chili dressing.

Although the Loft's focus is largely on beer, it doesn't feel like a bar. It's a venue for exploring and appreciating good beer and food. The atmosphere is bright, welcoming and even friendly to non-drinkers. Whether you're in the mood for a hearty lunch for a good price, some appetizers to share among friends with a few beers, or just an atmosphere designed to take the edge off, Midnight Sun Brewery's Loft is a place you ought to try.

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