

APPLE BAR IS NICE TO THE CORE

Moira Muldoon

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Here, in a nutshell, is what I have to say about the new Apple Bar: It's fine. A ringing endorsement, I know. But really, Apple Bar was a perfectly fine place to hang out, one that excited neither delight nor approbation but rather a kind of contented neutrality. I'd heard Apple Bar described as a New York City kind of place, and it was, in fact, small and cozy and big-city vertical (there's an upstairs and a downstairs) rather than wide-open-Texas horizontal. Big art hangs on the walls. The lights are dim (and get dimmer, if you ask nicely). Little love seats and high stools are artfully placed. Bartenders concoct on both floors, and on weekend nights servers will carry your drinks the 10 feet from the bar to the couch or stool you occupy. I'm not sure which of the above qualities makes the bar New York-ish, but my two born-and-raised New Yorker friends agreed the bar was sort of New York-y except 1) the people seemed all wrong for a New York bar (maybe because they were Austinites) and 2) the art felt very Austin (I have no idea what Austin art feels like). The result: sort of Austin, sort of New York. I think.

Apple Bar is a martini bar, and the specialty drinks are in the process of changing. The bartender kindly warned me off a drink called the Journalist, apparently because it was rotten and soon leaving the menu. (No comment.) The signature Apple Bar martini is way too sweet for anyone who makes a habit of drinking whiskey (i.e., me), as is the spiffy blue drink the bartender recommended. But when he realized it was not to my liking, he traded it out for a Manhattan that nearly made my hair stand on end. (I did, however, drink it. And then began to swing my ponytail around in a fashion my friends informed me is customary when I drink fire water.)

What I didn't do, and would have liked to do, was sit by the window upstairs around sunset; I imagine that's really pleasant. But Apple Bar is closed Monday and Tuesday nights (my preferred cocktail hour days), so I didn't get the chance. Looks nice though. So do the people. Look nice, I mean. The weeknights I went in, Apple Bar wasn't particularly crowded; most of the clientele seemed to be the owners' or bartenders' friends, given that they were all chatting together. Weekends drew bigger crowds of fitted silk sweaters (guys) and almost fabulous shoes (girls). The crowding, however, felt like New York weather: Wait a minute and it'll change. It was amazing how quickly the bar would fill up and empty and fill up and empty. Even at its most crowded though, my friend and I could carry on conversations without shouting, which I always appreciate. Granted, we were huddled up in an upstairs loveseat, so we should have been able to hear each other. But still, it was nice.

I realize I've used the word "nice" three or four times so far, along with "pleasant," and "content." And that's kind of the point. Apple Bar's fine. But I think what my buddy was saying about the people being not New York-ish is important. I'd love to see an urban and urbane bar in Austin that drew a more diverse clientele. What I love about semi-swanky bars in San Francisco or Chicago is that people with purple hair are a half-a-table away from softly highlighted blondes.

Not that Apple Bar should be held responsible for not being the Central Market of bars. It's a nice place to go if you're tired of the Lounge or Kenichi or the Brown Bar. Which isn't a bad thing, but isn't very exciting either.

bargirl@covad.net

Apple Bar: 120 W. Fifth St.; 322-9291

Hours: 4 p.m.-2a.m. Thursday-Saturday; 4 p.m.-midnight Sunday and Wednesday