

NEW BELMONT IS THREE TIMES A CHARM

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Wednesday, about 9:30 or 10 p.m.

Anina, Ann-Marie and I enter the Belmont (open since Sept. 1) through the arched stone gate on West Sixth Street, pass through the downstairs patio, and climb the two short flights to the upstairs lounge. It's a whiskey and bourbon kind of night — work was brutal for all of us and nothing warms the gut like whiskey.

We pass by a number of people in their 30s and 40s, and sit at one of the four-person tables overlooking the downstairs patio. Food, we learn from our helpful, pleasant waitress, is not available upstairs, but a Manhattan is.

Ann-Marie and I both indulge while confessing to an irresponsible urge to spend hours beneath the white umbrella guarding our table and drink too much. There's something about the cool night air and the fact that the upstairs patio looks like an upscale pool lounge at a Vegas hotel — minus the pool. The crisp line of the lounge chairs, the gray-whiteness of the concrete; it kept me wanting to stay up the way the oxygen in casinos keeps me going for hours. Heroically, we resist, and by 11 p.m., we're all behaving like adults and heading home. Ann-Marie stops to tell a patron that he looks like Matthew McConaughey; the comment makes his night.

Friday, midnight

The guys in line in front of us speak voluminously about which college football teams are lame. Unbidden, I hear the Notre Dame expletive-laden parody of the Michigan fight song in my head. My boyfriend and I are not line-waiters, ordinarily, but the bouncer has said the wait is only five to seven minutes.

It turns out to be more like 10, but it's not bad. Perhaps the threatening rain has something to do with the number of people exiting. Inside, there's actually room to walk around the downstairs patio, to sit at one of the tables with umbrellas near a palm tree. We head to the bar and get into exactly the wrong line for a drink — the girl at the bar is feeling chatty, and the guy behind her is having trouble with his credit card.

The staff, consummately professional, is courteous and efficient, and working to hurry them along. (Seriously, who chats with a busy bartender at midnight Friday?) I opt for another Manhattan, John has a beer and we sit. The thunder rumbles; I worry that shoulder-baring silks and satins that clumps of twenty- and thirtysomething women are wearing will get wrecked. I text friends Dan and Matt to tell them there's a line and that it's not long. Neither ends up showing.

Tuesday, about 5:30 p.m.

I've got an hour before my friend Brian is supposed to show, then 40 minutes to chat with him before I head to swim practice. On my way to the Dakota Lounge, the Rat-Pack bar attached to the very Sinatra dining room, I run into my XL editor. "You're not the only

one who goes out,” he quips, as he heads off to meet friends. The Lounge is mostly empty — it’s so lovely out that few opt for the dark wood gloss of the Belmont’s indoor bar.

I order a small salad with some chicken — appetizers are half-price during happy hour (3 to 7 p.m.) and I’m hungry. I sit not far from the entrance, where a little natural light seeps in, and read. In some joints, when the bar is slow, bartenders wash dishes, read books, restock — and end up being surprisingly slow in caring for patrons.

Not the case at the Belmont; the waiter is thoughtful and attentive, clearing plates as I finish and refilling my water just before it’s empty. Brian calls; he’s running late. We decide to meet on the patio and catch the last of the light. I head up, order him a drink and wait.

Caption: Bret Brookshire AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The Belmont has only been open since September, but it's established itself as a top-notch night spot.