

IT'S EASY TO COME HOME TO A NEW SCENE

MOIRA MULDOON

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Austin, as we all know, is a fabulous town. It's fun and funky, low-key and easy to live in. And the breakfast tacos can't be beat. I get a little bummed out sometimes by the edge of transience, which is inevitable in college towns full of overeducated, crazy-smart people who find jobs in other cities — people come and go so fast. Why can't we all stay and play in Austin? But those who slink away to gainful employment do come back to visit. And then we denizens can take them to new bars.

My fabulous and exceedingly educated friend Briante, who recently moved to teach at the University of Texas at Dallas, came back last week. We attempted to eat at the Clay Pit (way too busy), wandered our way down to Opal Divine's and then ended the night at the spanking-new Key Bar, located catty-cornered to Opal's, where the old key shop used to be.

I'd first gone to the Key Bar because, well, it was new and I'd heard about Popsicle martinis. It's still new — it's only been open since Aug. 11— and the Popsicle martinis are not to be undertaken on an empty stomach. The "Popsicle" part of the equation comprises an ice cube-shaped/sized concoction of fruit juice, frozen with a Popsicle stick in it. A glass of alcoholic lemonade or limeade is poured, the Popsicle is dropped in, and voila — a martini that only gets tastier as the "ice cube" melts. Happy hour runs till 9 p.m., during which all four standard versions and the one rotating version of the martinis are \$8, instead of \$12. (Other drinks are discounted, too.)

One of the things I really enjoy about the Key Bar is its Texas summer friendliness. The misters work. The fans are plentiful. Screens drop to block the sun. Though the entire bar is essentially a covered patio, and though it was a jillion degrees outside, I was comfortable. Actually comfortable.

The bar is divided up into a couple of areas. The zen, vaguely Hotel San José-like rock garden is open — no rooftop. The chairs are deep magenta and comfortably plastic, and the tables are concrete. I half-proudly, half-freakishly told Briante that I understood exactly what the structure and support underlying the long wooden bench was like, because I'm learning how to build such things. And we both agreed that the black bamboo growing behind the bench and separating it from the business next door added a textured lushness.

The main bar area has long tables, little tables and quick access to the main bar. The staff drops screens when the sun's low, and though you might still be blinded temporarily if you look west around 7:15 p.m., the screens help you stay away from permanent eye damage. And come fall and winter, the heat lamps and panels will go on.

The third and final section of the bar looks like the go-to section when it storms or you have a hankering for a more enclosed space: It has a proper roof, air conditioning and big ol' garage doors that can be closed.

But the doors likely will still be open when Briante comes back for MacArthur genius grant winner and poet C.D. Wright's reading at the Katherine Anne Porter House at the end of October. If we're lucky, Wright will read from "Deepstep Come Shining," and we'll get to hear how she says, "There are enough signs. Of the lack of tenderness in the / world. And yet. And yet. All you have to do is ask." Or perhaps: "Here an hour follows an hour / One glass of wine deserves more" from "Girl Friend Poem #2." And then afterward, I'll meet Briante somewhere, the Key Bar or Betsy's or one of the other new places that have already sprung up in her absence and we'll see the city differently, noting the subtle constancy of change.

bargirl@covad.net

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Key Bar. 617 W. Sixth St. 236-9389.