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OPAL'S SETS UP SHOP NORTH -- AND IT'S DIVINE

A GIRL WALKS INTO A BAR . . .

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For the longest time, when people talked about what Austin used to be like, I couldn't comment. I was a newcomer who had never made it to Liberty Lunch and couldn't remember a time when MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1) wasn't full of traffic. But now that I've been here for seven years, I can remember when things were different. I can talk about the Red Scoot in its pre-hipster days, when it was really a Tejano bar, or when Moonshine was the elegant and high-class Emilia's.

I remember when cigarette smoke was the official decor at the Deep Eddy Caberet - heck, I remember smoking there. And now, the Red Scoot Inn is very cool and run by the Longbranch folks, the old Ninfa's is the lovely decked Union Park, and the Sea Island Shrimp House is a new Opal's.

The new Opal Divine's Marina, which opened at the beginning of the year, is so shiny and clean you could upgrade a laptop on its tables. I've heard that it's packed on weekend nights (my friends who work at Dell are tickled pink by it), but when I stopped in for an early weeknight happy hour, the place was quiet enough that our server was almost (not really) irritating in how frequently she checked on us.

Opal's is taking over the north-south line of Austin, with the original windy, woody joint on West Sixth Street, the fabulously bedecked version on South Congress Avenue, and now, the spit-and-polished north version. Ceilings are almost 20 feet high and cedar-beamed, floors are stained concrete, and the joint is so close to Fry's Electronics store that all my geeky friends call it the "Fry's Opal's."

This new Opal's feels more restaurant-y than the other two and has menus with pretty pictures of food, including the new offering mahi mahi; a full bar (including 706 varieties of margaritas, once all 44 tequilas are taken into account); and lots of beer (36 on tap). The outdoor deck seats 74 people; the indoors is roomy and spacious, with a capacity of 125.

The whole place has a very "suburban Opal's" feel - and I don't mean that in a condescending way. Rather, the high ceilings and the just-off-the-freeway location make it feel suburban. But it retains a quiriness that keeps it from feeling like a national chain restaurant/bar- much of the beer is still local (eight from the Austin area; three more from Texas), and there's some indefinable Opal's-ness to it that feels very core Austin, even if it's closer to the city's edges.

We crossed those city edges some days ago and ventured out into the Hill Country. Wine tasting out there is a different experience than in Sonoma or Napa, Calif., but it's just about as much fun. We had an especially good time at Becker Vineyards, walking

through the lavender, sampling vintages and nibbling some imported cheeses available during the "Wine and Wildflowers" festival (which we happened on). But definitely the best wine we had was an ordinary Piper Sonoma sparkling wine, served before dinner at the Herb Farm in Fredericksburg. Everything tastes good when you've got something to celebrate. And because my lovely boyfriend proposed that day, we celebrated. The bubbles tasted good.