

FOOD DRINK TREND

BY AMANDA McCLEMENTS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAY McLACHLAN



Belly up: Dining at the bar at Palena in Cleveland Park.

RAISING THE BAR *Some of the best eating in the city can be found when you slide onto a stool*

If reserving a table at an upscale restaurant is like proposing marriage, then grabbing a seat at its bar is like having a one-night stand. What a meal at the bar may lack in foreplay and finesse, it makes up for in spontaneity and freedom. Freedom from reservations, freedom from a lengthy time commitment and freedom to eat as little (or as much) as you want.

Lucky for diners, chefs are taking note and are paying more attention to the bar patron. In turn, more patrons are turning to the bar. It's a trend taking root across the country and beyond. At the far end of the spectrum are chefs who have taken the concept to the extreme by making the bar the focus—or the only seating option—in a restaurant. At the 20-seat Canteen in San Francisco, chef/owner Dennis Leary runs the show, diner-style, from behind a small counter. Even French master Joel Robuchon traded the traditional fine-dining formula for a counter-driven experience at L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon, first in Paris and now also in Vegas. In Washington, we have trendsetting chef Jose Andres and team to thank for our first counter-only divine-dining experience: minibar inside Café Atlantico (405 8th St., NW, 202.393.0812). A meal at minibar does require foresight—its six seats typically book up a month out—but the parade of 35 or so tiny bites plays to those with commitment-averse taste buds. Andres plans to expand on that intimate concept with a new project tentatively called Bar Jose. "Picture minibar-goes-traditional with pure, simple foods—the very best hams, seafood, wines, all elegantly presented," says partner Rob Wilder. The new restaurant, possibly opening next year, is expected to offer mostly bar seating.

"Dining in the bar is one of my favorite ways to enjoy a restaurant," says chef Peter Smith, who just opened PS 7's in Penn Quarter (777 I St., NW, 202.742.8550). "The service is more intimate and often more attentive

out of sheer proximity to your bartender." At PS 7's, Smith and architect Griz Dwight opted to completely separate the bar and lounge area from the main dining rooms. Smith says he's hoping to "create a lively and sophisticated bar scene where guests will be equally comfortable having dinner, a cocktail before being seated, or a drink after work."

PS 7's bar itself is an attention-grabber, its top constructed from lava rock coated with a brilliant yellow glaze. But Smith's bar menu is also a draw, with dishes like veal cheek chips, braised and deep fried with malted rosemary and cherry white balsamic vinegar, and tuna tartar sliders on Parker House rolls. "We expect that our guests will come to regard the bar at PS 7's to be a destination that is just as desirable as our dining room for all the same, and distinct, reasons," he says.

At some of the city's most established players, regulars and those in the know have long been drawn to the bar—and the perks dining there affords. Take Palena's bar (3529 Connecticut Ave., NW, 202.537.9250), which woos customers with chef Frank Ruta's inexpensive café menu. But guests also have the freedom to order a la carte from the more formal dining room's prix fixe menu. And at the seductive bar at CityZen (Mandarin Oriental, 1330 Maryland Ave., SW, 202.787.6006), patrons can dine on a three-course menu for the bargain price of about \$45—in the dining room, the same menu would cost \$75. Chef Eric Ziebold picks a handful of dishes off the regular dining room menu each night to offer at the bar.

And therein lies the beauty of dining at an upscale restaurant's bar—you get to enjoy the cooking of great chefs without all the strings attached. But who knows, maybe next time you'll take things to the next level and commit to a whole table. ■