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## Drink your lunch at Valentino

By GREG MORAGO Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

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There are jokes about libidinous diners who prefer to drink their dinner or quaff their lunch.

But man does not live by martini alone (nor should he). It is, however, possible to sip a sandwich or gulp a seafood bar at Valentino Houston & Vin Bar. That's because the handsome bar within this chic restaurant has devised a food-based cocktail menu with drinks unlike any other hooch hangout in Houston.

Example: the BLTini is a Grey Goose vodka martini made with clarified heirloom tomato juice shaken with chives and garnished with romaine lettuce and crisp bacon. The Cure is an adventure into the inner sanctum of the salumeria: Tito's vodka that has been cold smoked and served with a skewer of cured meats and fresh mozzarella with crostini on the side.

Yum? You bet. The cocktails don't pretend to take the place of an actual meal but it's fun to think of these crafty concoctions as a potent salad in a martini glass.

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Try a lot different. The bar's Oyster Tree is like a shellfish platter presented as a series of cocktails — a dozen oysters you're not likely to ever forget. The "tree" (which can be ordered in a dozen or half dozen) features miniature cocktails composed of a freshly shucked oyster over which chilled Stoli Elit vodka has been poured and decorated with raspberry coulis and fresh raspberry.

"It's surprising. When people see it then other people want it and start to order it," Dorrian said. "It works. It works really well."

The Oyster Tree (\$150 for a dozen) has a sibling even more rich. The Elite Libation (\$300) is a dozen cocktails featuring golden osetra caviar nestled in Stoli Elit vodka, served with sour cream, chives and shallots on the side.



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An Oyster Tree drink at Valentino, a new restaurant within the Hotel Derek, is part of an exciting cocktail menu.

Yes, you can drink your dinner at the Vin Bar, but we urge you to at least try the little bites of crudo (raw fish) or the cheese and salumi platters. Think of the Vin Bar's noshes as Italian tapas, said executive chef Cunninghame West, who recently updated the menu to feature 20 to 30 small plates for less than \$10.

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You don't have to twist our arm to get us to Valentino for the city's most foodie-focused cocktails and snacks. We're so there.

*Valentino Houston & Vin Bar is at 2525A West Loop South in the Hotel Derek, 713-850-9200; ValentinoRestaurantGroup.com.*