

LIQUID LUNCHESES ARE SURE TO SATISFY

Valentino Houston & Vin Bar serves up cocktails with meat on the side

By GREG MORAGO
FOOD EDITOR

THESE 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 presentation 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, 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.

"If you look at most cocktails or martini lists, you're going to recognize names and see small twists to drinks," said general manager Patrick Dorrian. "We want to put something out there a little different."

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



CROWD-PLEASER: The BLTini delights at Valentino.

cocktails featuring golden osetra caviar nestling in Stoli Elit vodka, served with sour cream, chives and shallots on the side.

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 20-30 small plates for under \$10.

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.

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FASHION: Popular with celebrities

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"It's a version of jeans," Dimmock said. "They are so ubiquitous, and a great pair can be as versatile with heels and flats as jeans. They are a real season statement."

Cargo pants are typically relaxed, wider at the hip area, narrow at the ankle with large pockets at the hip or attached to the side of the leg and thigh area. Some styles even have a wide leg to give the pants a more airy look. Young celebrities such as

Rihanna, Hilary Duff and others have been known to go casual in a pair of designer cargo pants.

But they aren't just for 20-somethings and younger, Dimmock said.

"It's like saying jeans are just for young people," she said. "That's not the case. Cargos can be done in a sophisticated way with a tailored jacket and a kitten heel. When you dress them up, it doesn't look like you're trying."

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