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## Bar Brigade

Two veteran restaurateurs join forces to give St. Kate's neighbors a special spot to sup



**Dennis  
Monroe**

**T**HE TWIN CITIES HAS HAD HIT after hit of solid neighborhood restaurants by good chefs, and I believe Bar Brigade will be yet another of those hits for St. Paul.

Neighborhoods help define a restaurant so there should be a shared vibe, but not every chef listens. Fortunately, JD Fratzke and Matty O'Reilly, both veterans of the Twin Cities food scene, are the exceptions.

Fratzke told me during a recent visit, "We want the neighbors to tell us what kind of restaurant they want." Since opening their doors, the owners have been working toward that end, verified by the good press they're receiving and filled dining room. I believe Fratzke and O'Reilly have hit on something that will work financially. The only problem I see is that you have two talented guys, and supporting two talented guys with 40 seats and around 1,000 square feet is not going to make them rich. But fortunately Bar Brigade is not their first rodeo, nor their only one. Both have irons in other hot restaurants. Fratzke is best known for his successful Strip Club Meat & Fish and O'Reilly is the owner of Republic and Red River Kitchen. The duo also recently opened casual pizza spot, Delicata, in the former Java Train/Como Park Grill space.

To me, Bar Brigade is a cross between

Revival and St. Genevieve. It has a little bit of everything, yet still has a certain comfort level to it. It is located at 470 Cleveland Avenue South, a neighborhood near St. Catherine University. In fact, the end of their block overlooks the dramatic, wooded entrance to the university.

The restaurant is not well marked. Even though we knew the location, it took us a few illegal U-turns to find it. The outside is unassuming, but as you walk inside you're hit with its well-worn charm. I would call it a French bistro with a peasant flavor. The dishes are meant to be humble, Fratzke told me, such as cream of garlic soup from an old, old recipe (it was delicious). O'Reilly described it as a French tavern. He said that as he looked around, he saw that too many restaurants exceeded the price point the neighborhood could support, so he wanted to create a true neighborhood restaurant that had true neighborhood pricing.

Another attribute he thought important was to be unique, and not like the burger and pizza places around, which have the right pricing but the wrong concept. Since he lives near the restaurant, he has his finger on the pulse.

This was one restaurant that made me glad that I am getting up in years. Although I don't like going down steep stairs for the restroom, the hand-painted mural on the walls leading down the stairs was a hidden gem (see page 9 for a story on the mural artist). It was like discovering an unadvertised special on the menu that becomes your favorite dish.



**A tribute to Hemingway's *A Movable Feast* greets customers as they go downstairs to the restroom.**

### Revenue

Looking at potential revenue, with 40 seats and two turns, Fratzke put the check averages falling in around \$35. I think it could be a little higher, say \$40. They have a nice, but moderate, wine selection that compliments the food. Top-line champagne is \$100. Most of the wines are in the \$20 to \$35 a bottle range, and they have good wines by the glass. They also serve mixed drinks.

The menu pricing for starters runs from \$4 to \$8, from warm rolls to a selection of three raw oysters (which were great). They also have salads in the \$7 to \$9 range. Entrées are in the \$15 to \$18 range, and sides are a bit pricey, from \$6 to \$9. Desserts are \$7 to \$8. Minnesota-friendly prices, which

I advocate. They do not have a lot of high protein costs. The most expensive protein for the menu I sampled would be the braised rabbit.

My suggestion would be to add a couple more safe harbors on the menu; for example, a burger and a filet or steak frites. The steak could be put in the \$25 to \$30 range, and a burger would fit in nicely with their other pricing.

O'Reilly believes that Bar Brigade will far exceed their projections to be more than \$1 million in revenue. For 40 seats, this is very impressive.

There is no place for private dining, which is a problem, and no patio. That limits the dining to inside, which is a drawback.

**Rating:** 2.5 out of 4 stars. The space is awfully small. It would be nice if they could figure out some other profit sources, possibly catering, take-out and come up with simple proprietary products.

#### **Food Costs**

In talking with both Fratzke and O'Reilly, they have been able to keep the food cost low. Part of it is due to 60 percent of the menu being vegetarian. They have no

waste and order what they need for that specific day. They believe that the food cost will be far less than 30 percent, which many restaurants describe as their target.

**Rating:** 4 out of 4 stars.

#### **Labor Costs**

Labor costs are difficult to tell in the early stage of a restaurant. O'Reilly said they had a ways to go when it came to labor. It looked to me like both the kitchen and front of the house were well staffed. The times we dined there, the server was friendly and attentive. It may be difficult to keep it staffed with the kind of personal attention that is necessary since there is a shortage citywide of staff. Another difficulty is the two "marquee players." However, one of my favorite comments from O'Reilly was that they wanted to take a humble approach.

**Rating:** 2.5 out of 4 stars (with an eye to this changing as they get settled in).

#### **Return on Investment and Capital Improvements**

The restaurant space is long and narrow. The bar area has both seats at the bar and high tops. That being said, the

investment they put into these seats was about \$80,000, because of the preexisting facilities. I'll point out O'Reilly is an expert at going into a space and using minimal capital investment to make it attractive and usable. If there is \$1.2 million in revenue, and if we look at a 12 percent all-in operating profit, that's going to give a high return on their investment.

**Rating:** 4 out of 4 stars.

#### **Overall Rating:** 3 out of 4 stars

I believe Bar Brigade will have a good run. It has the right amount of charm, interesting food and neighborhood hang-out vibe. If only a brigade could knock down a wall to make the space seat a few more tables, everyone would benefit. **FSN**

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