



The fried chicken, featuring a crisp buttermilk crust, is a hefty portion served with mustardy potato salad.

Head North

To the North Quarter Tavern, that is, where Chef Matt Wall raises the bar on bar food.

BY JOSEPH HAYES

NORTH QUARTER TAVERN

861 N. Orange Ave.
Orlando
407-757-0930
northquartertavern.com
Menu: \$8-\$18

IN ADDITION TO guiding the vision of Creative Village and the rebirth of Thornton Park, developer Craig Ustler has helped lead many a culinary venture over the past couple of decades. He's been connected to the companies that created Kres Chophouse, Cityfish, HUE, Citrus, Soco and Baery, and you have to admire a guy who likes good food so much he's willing to build all those restaurants to get it.

One of his most recent offerings to Orlando's palate is the North Quarter Tavern, in the spanking new Nora apartments, one of several complexes transforming the part of downtown Orange Avenue that tried out Uptown as a name before settling on North Quarter. The namesake Tavern has taken on the task of elevating bar food as its mission, and under the helm of Chef Matt Wall it looks like the challenge has been met.

The cozy North Quarter and its even cozier companion, the Bar Room, has a sociable feel, with tables set around a central bar, big screen sports-bearing TVs

thankfully hidden within the bar's ceiling space. Red and blue dominate, and there's a large windowed patio that offers ample light inside the restaurant and outdoor seating along Orange Avenue. Its driveway mate is Citrus, which has made a name for itself as a hotspot for the established powerful and young urban crowds, thanks largely to the talents of Chef Wall, who spent five years in its kitchen and now has different plans for the Tavern.

Wall, 35, says he wants to take laid-back food to a new place. "I'm looking to cook something more casual and less expensive than at Citrus," he says. "I want to make the best \$15 food in the city."

Even though Wall grew up in West Palm Beach, the unexpected Midwestern touches on the menu—Chicago beef, poutine, a most un-deli-like Reuben sandwich—are reflections of Wall's ideal bar food. "What do I want to eat with a beer?" he asks. "Things like poutine from Montreal or bratwurst from Milwaukee, those are already great dishes," he says. "I just want to make the best possible representation of them." His

poutine (\$10) smothers house-cut fries with a sinfully rich duck gravy, slices of smoked beef and pork, and the obligatory cheese curds. The same duck gravy shows up on a massive serving of meatloaf (\$16) that defines comfort food, the lush tomato-glazed blend of meats accompanied by "smashed" potatoes.

Almost as large is the fried chicken (\$15), beer-brined dark meat dredged in a buttermilk crust so crisp it shatters, splashed with house-made hot sauce and a mustardy chunk potato salad.

Wall realizes that even bad bar food has its fans. "Every bar has the same crappy tub of food service smoked fish dip," Wall says, "and even that tastes good. So think how great it can be to smoke the best fish available that day, in-house, make the mayo, make the pickles—do it like a chef." The \$10 jar of the Tavern's dip is enough for the table and a good sandwich the next day (trust me).

Wall's version of a Reuben sandwich (\$15) continues the hand-made theme. Thick slices of corned beef brisket cured in-house for 14 days is packed into fresh rye and layered with the Tavern's own Swiss cheese, Russian dressing and house-fermented sauerkraut. Even the mustard is made here.

Wall's plan for North Quarter sounds both grandiose and simple. "My goal is to make great American bar food," he says. "Made by a chef." He seems to be just the chef to do it. ☐

Just a Nibble

Wall says he opened the Tavern's kitchen with just a notebook and ideas. Now those ideas have sprouted as house-made... everything. They include condiments, excellent bread and butter pickles, and an ever-changing spread of in-house charcuterie. Most are available as a board (\$14) featuring capocollo, duck ham, mortadella, Vermont cheddar, Gorgonzola, pepperoni and pickled vegetables, all superb.