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CineBistro guide: We walk you through the entire experience

By Wade Tatangelo, Herald-Tribune / Wednesday, February 17, 2016



CineBistro offers a rarity in local entertainment these days: a fresh concept. It's an upscale dinner-and-a-movie destination in Westfield Southgate shopping center unlike anything else in Sarasota, Manatee or Charlotte counties. By now, though, you've probably already heard.

We've written stories about the arrival of Cobb Theaters' line of CineBistros for over two years. Last week, we attended a media event resulting in a two-part front page story basically announcing this past Friday's opening of CineBistro. I returned that first afternoon of business, though, to get the full experience.

For starters, let me say I had my favorite overall movie theater experience, well, ever, and that was while watching a film that didn't exactly thrill me. I'll get to the movie itself, albeit briefly, in a bit. More importantly, let me walk through my afternoon so you, too, can properly enjoy CineBistro.

Let's begin with buying tickets, which cost \$15 and \$12.50 for matinees. Go to CineBistro.com/Sarasota and you can pick the exact seat(s) among those not already reserved for the movie you want to see. Oh, and before purchasing, keep in mind that after 6 p.m. the entire theater, bar and dining room is 21 and up. That's right, adults only.

To enjoy the service at your seat, you're required to arrive 30 minutes prior to the scheduled showtime. I arrived at about 1 p.m. for a 2:30 screening, which I highly recommend. Four smiling women at the concierge desk greeted me and handed over the ticket while also offering an explanation of the CineBistro concept and notifying me of a nearby kiosk where I could retrieve my pre-ordered ticket. Not into the Internet? You can also purchase your ticket at the concierge desk.

I then went to the large, stylish bar surrounded by equaling striking lounge and dining areas, where you can go just to eat or drink and not even bother with seeing a film. I'm greeted by a member of the sizable bartender team mere moments after getting into my stool. There are many nicely priced drinking options, ranging from big pitchers of Bud Light for \$15 to a pint of Tampa-brewed Cigar City Florida Cracker for \$6.50. A glass of a favorite California pinot noir of mine, Meiomi, costs \$11 (glass)/\$41 (bottle) and the Rodney Strong sauvignon blanc I like is \$9.50/\$34.



Drink selections offered by CineBistro in the Westfield Southgate mall. STAFF PHOTO / NICK ADAMS

I'm in the mood, though, for one of the enticing craft cocktail selections and order "Devil's Water" (\$11.50). It's a tall glass filled with a smartly balanced combination of habanero-infused 1800 Silver Tequila, blood orange syrup, white grapefruit juice and muddled mint.

Matching heat with heat, I order the Korean barbecue chicken wings (\$11.50). They're exceptional. Tender and succulent pieces of poultry with a crisp coating and just the right amount of spice. Dipping into the mango-mint sauce is a treat and so is the side of house-made kimchi.

The bar filled up and four millennials next to me downed cocktails while praising the bar and debating if "Deadpool" would live up to what they loved from the comic book. I drained my Devil's Water and ordered the "Smoked Bourbon." It's Buffalo Trace bourbon and a deft touch of vanilla syrup with a block of smoked ice that releases camp-fire flavor as it melts. It's a new personal favorite.

Halfway through my wings I ordered the hummus plate (\$12.50), which is an ideal selection for vegans or anyone else who loves toasted bread with a tapenade deliciously sweetened with caper berries. A voice comes over the house speakers letting you know when it's time to see your movie. The bartender had already swiped my card so then I just tell him to bring me the check. Not finished with your appetizers and drinks at the bar? No biggie. Just bring them in with you to the theater. I leave the wings and hummus to save room for the true dinner and a movie deal ahead but do walk in with a drink.

Ushers help you find your assigned seat and then the wait staff takes your order. You pay with a swipe of the card right at your seat and a 17.5 percent gratuity is added to every check. The money is shared among all the in-theatre staff. This gratuity can be decreased or increased by notifying the server prior to payment.

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CineBistro brings a fresh dinner and a movie concept to Sarasota-Manatee. COURTESY PHOTO / CINEBISTRO

Service is only available until the start of the movie trailers. But, there's a convenient "concession stand" right outside the auditorium door where you can order anything on the menu. I made a mental note of this immediately before entering the auditorium.

The house lights are on as I order the 7-ounce filet (\$29) and the Key lime crème brûlée doughnut (\$9) for dessert while ambient music plays and relaxing images fill the giant screen. Seafood fans might want the seared scallops (\$25) and for vegetarians there is the cauliflower steak (\$16). My food arrives quickly but there's nothing "fast food" about this meal. It's easily on the level, and price, with what you would expect from, say, a respectable national steak house chain. Perhaps equally important, the two dishes and my rocks glass all fit easily on my swivel dining table.

I'm seeing "Hail Caesar!" The lights gradually dim to darkness during the first few minutes of the film. I'm still working on my steak and doughnut and I'm sure other people are still munching, too, but thanks to the volume of the film and the way the seats are designed, you instantly forget you're in a room full of people eating. It's more like you're sitting with a TV tray at home. Speaking of seats, they're leather and totally comfy and with a push of a button basically turn into a recliner complete with foot rest, which I keep up while nibbling at my food throughout the screening.

I like the Coen brothers and their new film "Hail Caesar!" but it's a comedy about the Golden Age of Hollywood with quite a few dull stretches. That's OK. About halfway through the 100-minute movie I step out to the concession stand. But I'm not ordering popcorn or a Coke (both options), I'm getting the "Almond Old Fashioned" (\$12.50) featuring Milagro tequila and agave syrup poured over an ice block infused in-house with amaretto. My top-shelf craft cocktail arrived in less time than I've waited for Twizzlers at other theaters.

The movie ends, I take a couple more bites of my food and walk out a happy customer. I spot some people I know in the lounge area by the bar and chat for a bit while sipping a Diet Coke. We all agree. This is the way to see a movie.

CINEBISTRO AT WESTFIELD SOUTHGATE

3501 S. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota; 941-361-2456; cinebistro.com/sarasota



WADE TATANGELO is staff writer, editor and author of the weekly [Bar Tab](#) column. Have entertainment news or just want to recommend your favorite restaurant/bar? Wade can be reached by [email](#) or call 941-361-4955. Follow him on [Twitter](#) at [@wtatangelo](#) or [Facebook.com/wade.tatangelo](#)

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