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## CHOW

### Raising the bar

**Downtown restaurateur's third effort mixes Southern flavors, old-school charm**

**S**tepping through the large, deep-set door into the main room of Bill's Towne Lounge, one is immediately transported into another world. Maybe it's the lack of windows, the low lighting or the funky soundtrack blaring through the speakers. Or

story and photo by  
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**Bill's Towne Lounge**  
 135 Main St.  
 487-7031  
 billstownelounge.com

Open for dinner  
 Tuesday-Sunday, lunch  
 and dinner Thursday-Sunday. Happy hour  
 2-6 p.m. Closed  
 Mondays.

perhaps it's the old-school arcade games or the Cajun- and Southern-inspired menu. Whatever the reason, it works.

The original Towne Lounge at 327 Main St. (now part of Chico Children's Museum) was a true drinking establishment, one that opened at 6 a.m. for folks getting off the graveyard shift and was known for its booths lining the walls, pool and shuffleboard, and the liquor license that allowed patrons to purchase six-packs for the road.

I frequented the old spot, opened in 1966, and was sad to see it go six years ago. So, when news hit that downtown restaurateur Will Brady was planning a revival of sorts, I approached it with a combination of excitement and skepticism. I'm happy to report it's fast become one of my favorite new places, and it's not yet reached its full potential.

About a month ago, I started hearing rumblings about the shrimp and grits on Bill's menu. So, as my



Bartender Jason Wooten serves a plate of shrimp and grits at Bill's Towne Lounge.

boyfriend works nights, I decided to treat myself for Valentine's Day dinner. I wasn't alone, either. A smattering of singles lined the bar, while couples retreated to the relative privacy of the high-backed booths.

I ordered a glass of the house Cabernet, which was, despite perhaps betraying the lounge's dive bar roots, quite good. And then, I had to try those shrimp and grits (\$15). My expectations were high—considering the man running the place also owns The Banshee and B Street Public House—and they were easily met. The shrimp were perfectly plump and the bacon jam they're cooked in added a depth of flavor to the bland-in-comparison cheddar grits. The greens were a bit spicy for my palate, but I was more than satisfied without them.

I went back for lunch a few weeks later, craving the gumbo, which my Valentine's Day server had assured me was not spicy. He was right—with the exception of the andouille sausage, which packs a small punch. Since it was lunchtime, I ordered the small version (\$7, versus \$13), and it was the perfect size. Served over rice, the rich gumbo—which also included breaded, fried chunks of chicken—was a winter-perfect

stew consistency.

For my third visit, I went with the Southern fried chicken sandwich (\$12), which comes with slaw. Don't let the simplicity of its description deter you—just chicken, housemade pickles, sauce and bun—as the chicken itself was otherworldly, crunchy on the outside, juicy and tender on the inside, and bursting with flavor.

During that final visit, the kitchen happened to be playing around with different recipes. Brady and a bartender were tasting a bar cheese that I finagled my way in on. Good stuff. As Brady showed me the patio, which is under construction (on the Main Street side of Chico Coffee Co.) and expected to be completed by summertime, he told me he's planning to fill out the Towne Lounge menu with more lunch and appetizer options, particularly those that hit under the \$10 mark. (Maybe add some under-\$5 cocktails, too?!) The patio is set to include a pool table and potentially shuffleboard, bringing a bit more of the old Towne Lounge into the new. Looking forward to it. □