

barrooms) in Cincinnati



Keith Pandolfi

Cincinnati Enquirer

Published 10:15 p.m. ET Jan. 3, 2024 | Updated 1:41 p.m. ET Aug. 20, 2024

I've always judged a restaurant as much – if not more – by the atmosphere it presents as the food it serves. Are the lights soft enough? Is the music in tune with the vibe? And, most importantly, are there booths?

Going back through the restaurants I've covered during the past few years, I came up with 25 of my favorite dining rooms and barrooms. Some are modern and some are classic. Some are shiny and some are battered. No matter, these are the places where the feel of the room equals or occasionally surpasses the quality of the food.

The Blind Lemon, Mount Adams

For my money, the most beautiful bar in America – with its presidential memorabilia, fireplace and cozy tables and booths. Acoustic guitar players sing yacht rock from an outdoor patio while you sit inside with your steady under Tiffany lighting and framed photos of Ronald Reagan in a tuxedo and Gary Sandy in a cowboy hat.

Five on Vine, Over-the-Rhine

Elegant, dimly lit with cushy high-backed banquettes and quiet conversations. Just standing outside and looking at the dining room and adjacent kitchen is an experience in and of itself.

Need a break? Play the USA TODAY Daily Crossword Puzzle.

Jeff Ruby's, Downtown

I gasped the first time I walked into Jeff Ruby's new Fountain Square dining room with its luxurious art deco-style booths, antique chandeliers, high-lacquered wood paneling and palm trees planted inside silver urns. It's pure Jeff Ruby in the best way possible.

And if this restaurant were in Brooklyn or Vegas, I guarantee it would be world-renowned. Maury's reminds you of your grandparents and your great uncles, your childhood and what restaurants felt like before the age of "living walls" and light industrial chic.

Le Bar a Boeuf, East Walnut Hills

Sure, it's located in a condo building, but the fireplace, ambiance and service make this one of the most comforting dining rooms in town. Views of downtown add to the experience. Photos of the late Jean-Robert de Cavel might make you teary, but this place is a perfect reminder of his spirit. The great chef's collection of nutcrackers stands at attention behind the bar as if they're still awaiting his arrival.

The National Exemplar, Mariemont

Evoking a Ralph Lauren-era 1980s, the Exemplar, located inside the Mariemont Inn, is preppy, warm and timeless. Grab a nice Polo next door at Trevor Furbay (the best men's clothier in town) before enjoying a bowl of Hungarian mushroom soup next to a Citizen Kane-like fireplace.

Razzo, Pendleton

A brand new spot that already looks like a classic, Razzo recalls those classic Italian cafes you've either been to or read about in magazines. Cherry wainscoting, framed Cinzano ads and Italian travel prints decorate the walls, and a sleek neon red sign announces the name of the restaurant (razzo is the Italian word for rocket) above the bar. An elegant addition to the already gorgeous block of Pendleton it occupies.

Scotti's, Downtown

You will never, ever, ever find a dining room like this one, with its fever-dream mosaic walls, opera music on repeat, red-checkered tablecloths and wax-covered Chianti bottles. Scotti's opened in 1912 and, a century later, remains among Cincinnati's most unique restaurants.

Socks-themed restaurant has battered wood floors, enormous windows, tin ceilings and vintage lighting. It all adds up to a very Kentucky tavern-like feel that makes you want to stick around all day sipping as much good bourbon as humanly possible.

Oriental Wok, Fort Mitchell

In the best way possible, Oriental Wok's Fort Mitchell location reminds me of the resort hotels of the 1980s, with its faux balconies and enormous, banquet-hall-sized chandelier. But it's also a reminder of what Chinese restaurant dining felt like during the Carter and Reagan eras, complete with red lanterns, illuminated cherry trees and fish ponds galore.

Zip's Cafe, Mount Lookout

The perfect spot to nestle into a beat-up booth for a burger on a cold winter's day. Yes, there are those toy trains running along the ceiling in the front dining room, but the rear saloon – where regulars pack in to talk, watch sports and eat some of the best grub – is just as magical.

Herb & Thelma's, Covington

Like Zip's, but with a Southern twist. A screen door leads you into a small, convivial dining room decorated with vintage Wiedemann signs featuring equine Derby scenes and display cases filled with antique beer bottles and baseballs. Yes, the burgers are delicious, but don't shy away from the soups.

The Greyhound Tavern, Fort Mitchell

The dining rooms, with their antiques and pastel-printed wallpaper, give the place a cheery nostalgic vibe that can make every visit feel like Easter Sunday. A more casual atmosphere can be found in the wood-paneled tavern room where men and women in polo shirts and button-downs drink frosty glasses of beer, watch sports and comfort old friends with bear hugs or simple pats on the back beneath the soft glow of deer-antler chandeliers and schoolhouse lights.

Curtained windows look out onto a historic Cincinnati alleyway, and there's always an obscure song playing that, even if you've never heard it before, quickly becomes a favorite. Why? Because it reminds you of being here.

Pepp & Dolores, Over-the-Rhine

This is 21st-century Italian American decor done right. A classic dining room that sets the tone for a big plate of pasta with a negroni on the side.

Aglamesis Brothers, Oakley

It's so nostalgic it almost makes you cry.

The Anchor Grill, Covington

If Tom Waits opened a nautical-themed diner, this would be it.

Mount Adams Bar & Grill, Mount Adams

Along with Arnold's, this is the most Cincinnati bar in Cincinnati. Memorabilia galore, regulars from the nearby Playhouse in the Park, great bartenders and good food.

Arnold's, Downtown

The wood screen door, the battered bar and the timeless atmosphere make this one of my favorites. It's the kind of bar that lets you live out your saddest thoughts and your saddest songs. It's the kind of bar where you celebrate your candidate's win on the city council and pray to God he or she won't let you down. It might not be where players from the Reds or the Bengals hang out, but it's where the fans of those teams have long sat at the bar and read about them in the local paper.

The Bar at Palm Court, Downtown

Perhaps the most beautiful cocktail lounge in the Midwest. The art nouveau-style room with its sky-high ceilings makes you feel like you've walked into another era. F. Scott Fitzgerald

York Street is decorated with travel trunks and Pez dispensers, lava lamps and leather-bound novels, kitschy glassware and wooden signs. Many of the items are housed in glass-fronted cabinets leftover from when this Queen Anne-style building, erected in the 1880s, served as a pharmacy.

Highland Coffee House, Corryville

Like the best restaurants and cafes, Highland seems like it's always been here – as if the plants hanging in the windows were placed there at the beginning of time by God himself – as if the periodic table hanging on the wall was the first one ever created. There's an Oxford English Dictionary in the back and the smell of cinnamon and espresso reminds you of a short story you read a long time ago, but can no longer recall.

Fireside Pizza, Walnut Hills

This dining room, located inside a restored 1869 firehouse, has exposed brick walls, high ceilings and folk-art paintings by local artist Brent Naughton. The twinkle lights make it feel like "Rescue Me" and "Gilmore Girls" got hitched and moved to Walnut Hills.

The Turf Club, Linwood

The neon signs that surround you make the Turf Club feel like a celebration on any day of the week. The burgers are both inventive and delicious, and the Great Lakes Dortmunder Gold is served ice cold.

Blue Jay Restaurant, Northside

There's a reason movie scouts love this place (see Robert Redford's *The Old Man & the Gun*). Diners like this are hard to find these days. There's faux paneling and faux brick, booths where families come together over three-ways and burgers, and counter stools where regulars dine on coffee and eggs. Picture in your head a diner. The Blue Jay is exactly what you'll see.