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## Stepped-up bar eats

The subterranean 12 Steps Down got a real chef to come down and fine-tune the grub.



By Rick Nichols

Inquirer Food Columnist

The bar officially called 12 Steps Down Group Therapy Bar - 12 Steps Down, to its devoted patrons - is exactly 12 steps down from the northeast corner of Ninth and Christian, which if you know anything about the geography of the Italian Market, is the equivalent of Hollywood and Vine.

It is the kind of place where on Quizzo night, someone at the bar (which is smoky and underground and close) will bellow after a question announced by the Quizzo Master: "When you ask who said: 'How do they expect a one-party system to work in a country with 246 cheeses?', do you want *both* the people who it is attributed to?" (That would be Charles de Gaulle, and running a very distant, shaky second, Winston Churchill.)

This is a subterranean scene. A rather wholesome dive bar. There's a young, good-natured crowd, given to shooting pool and glancing at Phillies games on the TVs, a far cry from the day when "underworld" could have been applied to the older, less-good-natured figures on the stools.

It is windowless, and yes, smoky, because its food sales account for less than 20 percent of its revenue (a comment on the quantity of drinking rather than the surprising quality of the food), permitting it to obtain an exemption from the city's no-smoking rules: If smoking offends, this is not - I repeat *not* - the place for you.

I never felt inclined to drop down myself. But I'd heard something that intrigued me. Charlotte Calmels, who with her husband Pierre has opened the estimable French bistro Bibou a few blocks south on Eighth Street, told me they'd been popping in for a late-night bite and beer after closing.

"At 12 Steps Down?" I asked. "Do they even have food?" Well, yes, again, they do - and as bar food goes - that's *bar* food, not gastropub food - it is astonishingly better than your standard bar fare.

The chicken fingers? Exquisitely tender, juicy (they're marinated overnight in lime and garlic), lightly crusted in beer batter hinting of Pabst Blue Ribbon, served with smoky ketchup and a lemony aioli. Asian-style chicken and cashews, tangy-sweet, served with iceberg lettuce leaves for wrapping. Good, crisp, hand-cut-daily fries; not limp, not mealy. And so on.

What gives? I asked the bartender who'd handed me the menu scrawled on a grease-stained paper bag. A real chef had helped out with the food, he said. He'd lived somewhere nearby: For 12 Steps' kitchen, geography would soon become destiny.

The chef, it turns out, was Michael Solomonov, a Vetri veteran, who nowadays is winning national plaudits for his Israeli-themed restaurant Zahav in Society Hill.

A couple of years ago, though, he was all but living at 12 Steps Down, his home away from his single-guy apartment at the time, a half-block away on South Ninth Street.

He'd developed a fondness for its meatballs and, to an extent, the roast pork sandwich. But there was common agreement that the rest of the food was, well, not stuff that you'd want to regularly consume sober.

So when Zahav's opening was delayed last year, and Solomonov needed to find jobs for a couple of chefs he'd already hired, he struck a deal with the bar's owner, Danielle Renzulli: If she'd hire on his chefs temporarily, he'd redesign the menu and have his guys train their eventual replacements.

"He even gave us a couple of tips that really improved the fries," Renzulli said. (He told them to blanch the sliced potatoes first, let them rest at room temperature, then hit them with higher-heat frying just before serving, the classic French technique for crispy frites.)

Last week, most of his dishes were still on the menu - mango-barbecue-sauced chicken wings, beef and feta burgers with roasted tomato and pickled onion, chicken Cobb sandwich (with bacon and bleu cheese), crispy calamari salad with carrot-miso dressing.

But there were blackboard specials, too, including four-cheese grilled cheese sliders and a post-Solomonov addition - cook Sterling Dimeral's homemade, buttermilk-battered corn dogs.

The guy sitting on the next stool was stricken that I hadn't ordered them: "These corn dogs are to state-fair corn dogs," he said, searching for the words, "like, uh, Duesenbergs are, ah, to a car show."

I came back a couple of nights later.

And you know what?

They really are.

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## 12 Steps Down Group Therapy Bar

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