



Local Success, Global Appeal: Exploring The Imperial at Washburn Imports

The sustainable charm of Winter Park, Florida, can be attributed to its local success and global appeal. The same can be said about John Washburn and his latest endeavor, The Imperial at Washburn Imports.

Ensnconced on Morse Boulevard between Park Avenue and the scenic boat tour, the Imperial brings new depth to our downtown vibrancy. The Emporium and its nighttime bar cater to our innate wanderlust for something special while maintaining a sense of neighborhood, of home.

From Balinese shores to remote Indian villages, John travels to exotic outposts for wood-carved benches, handmade artifacts and one-of-a-kind furniture pieces—all of which are on display and for sale at Washburn's Imperial. Meandering through colorful enclaves and tiled alcoves is a great way to explore the store's worldly treasures.

When you want to relax with a drink and a share plate, claim a reclaimed wood barstool and peruse the menu. The Imperial in Winter Park serves drinks and food starting weekdays at 5pm, an hour earlier on Fridays, and starting at noon on the weekend. That's right, it's a bar in a furniture store.

The art of the furniture bar none

New to the bistro-bar-and-marketplace concept? Not John Washburn. Winter Park is his third location, poised to share the spotlight with his other ventures, Washburn Imports on North Orange Avenue in trendy Ivanhoe Village and Washburn

Imports on First Street in downtown Sanford. His tangible vision of a "world-class furniture bar" is, well, bar none.

"The idea turned out to be a good one," Washburn admits. "We'd been pretty successful for about 10 years with the original import location. Then, the recession hit and people weren't buying houses or furnishings. So, I decided to put a bar right in the middle of the showroom. People thought I was crazy, but we built it, offered wine and beer, included outdoor garden seating, introduced some music, some local art, and boom, we had a furniture bar."

Washburn repatterned his prototype in Sanford, this time with a more whimsical style and specializing in small-batch distillery beer and craft cocktails. Add local musicians and artists and it's another hangout hit for Central Florida.

Third time's a charm. The Winter Park location emanates a unique panache. With hand-painted floorboards (thanks, Sandy Bonus) and angular Mughal and Moorish details, this furniture bar carries an urban elegance all its own. Be sure to venture to the back patio, especially in the evening under the sparkle of warm yellow Edison bulbs strung like a canopy.





The truth about vermouth

Straddling either side of the enormous carved elephant behind the bar are shelves of sultry wines and sherry and vermouth. Yes, vermouth, front and center.

Unlike the relic of vermouth probably parked in the back of our parents' liquor cabinet, the Imperial carries high-quality sipping vermouth. Originally invented in Italy for medicinal purposes, vermouth is a fortified wine, not a spirit. The beauty of vermouth is its ability to evolve in the bottle as the flavor changes over time. John's talented bar manager, Mike Bass, infused a new layer of creativity with distinct vermouth cocktails. On the backside of the paper bar menu, you'll find stories for each of these concoctions. To stay with our exotic theme, try the Vermut Lacuesta Blanco, an extra dry Spanish vermouth aged in French oak barrels or the Carpano Antica, which offers a fruity finish to its 18th-century heritage.

Speaking of the bar, let's talk about the actual bar. Built of impressive slices of sandstone from Rajasthan, India, the bar top is polished to an understated tint of earthy red. The slabs maintain their roughhewn edges. Underneath, more colorful, hand-painted scrollwork and tile. The elephant represents Ganesha, one of the most worshipped Hindu deities, representing wisdom, beginnings, art, and prosperity.

"I welcome imperfection in general. I want quality and for things to look beautiful and to operate correctly. The world as I've seen it is wonderfully imperfect, and I love that we can capture a little of that in what we do, what we offer."

Fare thee well

Foodies everywhere can (gently) be likened to ants at a picnic, marching toward their passion with gravitas. If you Google Washburn's Imperial in Winter Park, you'll find no menu item unturned or uneaten. Food bloggers and photoggers are industrious in their quest to capture and release flattering words and images of this fare. The Imperial bar menu offers about a dozen gorgeous, sumptuous small plates.

Executive chef Dave Kirsch brings to life an awesome sharing menu with the same artistry as his surroundings. Formerly at Dexter's Orlando and Raglan Road in Disney Springs, Kirsch is responsible for the wildly popular Imperial flatbreads with duck and brie and the PEI mussels in sherry and tomato broth. Other favorites are the shrimp cake sliders and the pork belly bao with candied jalapenos.

Why here, why now?

Before the doors even opened, The Imperial became an instant classic. And, it's no wonder. Humbly at the center of it all is John Washburn, continuing to create what works. Whether he's regaling his recent acquisitions voyage, describing the new wine like a poet or inviting you to sit on a funky piece of furniture, John's the real deal. A native Winter Parker (and my childhood friend), John is a high-energy, low-key kind of guy, and there is no vaccination for his contagious smile.

"I wanted to design something here in town for my friends, my neighbors. Over the years, a lot of folks have said that when they get home after a long day at work, they don't always want to get in the car again. The Winter Park store is my answer to that. We're right off the main drag, it's walkable, and it's geared toward locals who want a place to gather, maybe for drinks or before heading to dinner elsewhere. It's the kind of place I'd want to hang out."

Way to go, John.

By Suzie "ZQ" Taylor

For more information

The Imperial at Washburn Imports

170 Morse Blvd, Winter Park

32789

Emporium open daily 10 am – 6pm

Bar open Monday - Thursday 5pm,

Friday 4pm and weekends at noon

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www.imperialwinebar.com

