



18th & 21st

Stepping Back in Time ... Welcome to The Roaring 2020s

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We're stepping back in time for the third article in our series on Maryland theme bars and restaurants. Long-time industry entrepreneur Steve Wecker opened 18th & 21st in Columbia back in 2018. The supper club is a throwback to the old jazz clubs, supper clubs, and speak-easies of the 1920s and '30s. In fact, the bar and restaurant is named after the Constitutional Amendment that enacted Prohibition and the subsequent Amendment that repealed it. When you step through the door of 18th & 21st, you are immedi-

ately transported back to a bygone time and are subsequently treated to a tailored evening experience of food and cocktails that reflect the feel of the Prohibition era.

But you gotta look for it first!

As was the case with many supper clubs back in the day selling then-illegal hooch, 18th & 21st is actually located in the back of another bar and restaurant that Wecker co-owns called Cured. During a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*, he remarked, "The original concept was one big speak-easy and jazz club. But my son, Stephen who is one of the co-owners

and runs our beverage program, said, 'Why don't we have two concepts? That way, we can appeal to two markets.' We used to say, 'Boomers in the back, Millennials in the front.' But we've actually been seeing great crossover."

Wecker, who is perhaps best known for the Iron Bridge Wine Company in Howard County, continued, "Cured is out front, and it's our corner bar re-imagined. It has a rustic industrial throwback kind of feel to it. But then you walk through, make a left at the rest rooms, and then a right after that

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Steve Wecker, owner, 18th & 21st

to go to the jazz club. You don't really see the club until you open the door and come in. I've had people who have come to Cured four or five times and not even know there's a jazz club in the back! When they finally do go back, they're like, 'Oh my God!'"

That's because they are treated to quite a sight. The theme restaurant features about 85 seats; has Art Deco lighting; feathers in vases; classic booths; and photos of Jean Harlow, Billie Holiday, and other legends on the walls. Teal and copper is the main color scheme, with some purple thrown in. The centerpiece is a spectacular, 40' x 40' skylight of Chicago's Art Deco skyline (the buildings have been shifted around somewhat for dramatic effect) backlit with 10,000 LED lights.

And, of course, there are the drinks. There is a large wall that features nearly 250 whiskeys and ryes. "And it's not the cheap stuff," Wecker said. "We have an unbelievable selection. We draw primarily a cocktails-and-wine crowd, and the cocktails are our takes on the classic Old-Fashioned, the Bombay martini, the Bee's Knees, and so forth. The wine list is very nice, and we have at least six beers on draft."

The menu features such classics as steaks, lobster, and scallops, and the experience is completed with live music. Wecker noted, "We knew from the get-go that we would have live music. We put a lot of money into acoustics. Everything in the place absorbs sound. So, you can be sitting close to the musicians, but still have a con-

versation with your dinner guests. Almost all of our musicians that play here are local. I think we now have a stable of 30 or 40 bands and artists who have told us how much they absolutely love playing here."

He added, "The musicians are background. People don't buy tickets to see a specific act. We're a restaurant first. I've had to tell only a couple of musicians, mostly drummers, that, 'Look, we play with brushes for the first two sets, and then we'll see how things have evolved for the third set.' I had one guy who I told to play with brushes and not sticks call out to the audience early, 'Hey, you all would like me to play with sticks, right?!' And I told our music director, John Chordy Teagle, 'He's done.' And he's never played here since. It's not about the musicians showing off. It's about them being background and providing that other element to an amazing evening."

One of the other challenges that Wecker and his staff have run up against is some regulars have, at times, used 18th & 21st as a sort of personal clubhouse, lingering for a long time and not





ordering much. "It's pretty easy to come back here, order cocktails, and sit for three hours drinking," he said. "We are starting to take some steps to improve that, like adding an automatic 20 percent gratuity. I won't have my staff running around for people all night and then getting stiffed. Most people, though, get what we are doing. It's a supper club. We anticipate that

you will be dining and drinking. And you really don't have to pay \$500 a person to have an incredible experience. Now, if you want to, we're more than happy to make that happen for you!"

One of the great things about 18th & 21st is its flexibility. Wecker and his team can accommodate a large private group and draw curtains closed. Or, they can

cater to a young couple out on their first date. In terms of special events, every year on Dec. 5, 18th and 21st throws a Prohibition Repeal Party. People are encouraged, but not required, to dress up in period attire. During the holidays, the restaurant breaks a bit from its theme to do a "Charlie Brown Christmas" with live Vince Guaraldi jazz music.

Wecker remarked, "You can get great food and drinks in a lot of places. But people are out for an experience. The thing that is bringing people back to 18th & 21st is that experience. We have a hostess who goes by Pepper. She is the vice president of some company locally, but she loves doing this. She has the sequined dresses and the feathers. Pepper greets you, she goes to the door and knocks, and then escorts you in. People have said to me, 'From the moment we walked into the back and Pepper greeted us, then let us in, we were just over the moon!'" ■

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