

# Sky Hi Bar & Grill

It's All About Being Sociable in Columbia

"So who are you?" I was asked, as I was in mid-bite of a piece of medium rare beefsteak smudged with bleu cheese crumbles. I laid my fork down on the plate next to my notebook and pen and stared eye to eye into the face of Jim Steele, the owner of the Sky Hi Bar & Grill. You see, anyone taking notes and photos of the food served makes restaurant owners nervous. I could be a stealth health food inspector or worse: a restaurant reviewer. Busted, though I was very obvious in this case being seated at the bar, I explained that I was here to review his restaurant. In a business with so many variables where things could head south and knowing the power of the printed word, he probably wished I had gotten lost in the student-housing complex up the hill.

I told him not to worry because I didn't write about any restaurant unless I wanted others to come and experience the food, the ambience or hopefully, both. I don't look for problems because I don't expect them. I have the eyes, ears and taste buds of their customers. Any nit-picking is just my own opinion.

That's what made my evening here at the Sky Hi so interesting because it got me to thinking about how much Columbia's restaurant scene has changed whether it was due to a few creative individuals pushing the envelope or simple hospitality business evolution moving in a positive direction.

Columbia has always had decent mom and pop's and family casual dining represented by popular franchise restaurants. I returned to the area after 25 years

and I noticed that there is a new contingency of owners that are testing the waters with seasonal and international food in places with big city-style interior design. The emphasis however is not so much the restaurant interiors as the quality of the food. The awareness bar has been raised. With the advent of The Food Network showcasing vivacious chefs that teach us about good food and how to cook it creates a nat-



The retro sign of the Sky Hi Bar & Grill on old Business Hwy 63 (photo: LDW)

ural foods market that influences vegetable and meat producers. We also have better quality food distribution with local farmers markets and enterprising grocery chains that bring us things like pecorino romano cheese, made from sheep, to our small towns.

The Sky Hi Bar and Grill was named after the Sky Hi Drive Inn that was located on old Business Hwy. 63 south of Columbia. As you drive south from Stadium Boulevard on old Bus. Hwy 63, past the Dept. of Conservation Regional Office on the left, you'll notice the restaurant in the small Grindstone Plaza Shopping Center on the right. Upon entering,

the first thing you notice is the bar. It's long and I would call it the focal point disregarding a modern flat serpentine sculpture hanging over the dining room area. The interior is decidedly whisper cool metro with a black ceiling and dark blue walls with shiny stamped metal kick borders. There is black iron and leather seating and tables with a neutral stained concrete floor. The stainless steel bar is long (40 feet?) and signals serious cocktails served here. Overhead pendant lighting runs parallel with the bar for subtle direct lighting. Scanning the back bar I noticed eight different flavored SKYY vodka bottles open, single malt

Makers Mark bourbon and an order of home style chips while I study the menu. The Sky Hi has been voted "Best Bar Food," so I figured there must be a focus on "fresh" and "quality" as opposed to pub grub. The wings are a case in point ("Best Wings in Columbia"). They're Thai-curry glazed, but also served as traditional or BBQ style with bleu cheese dressing. There is also a peanut ginger dressing for something different. These run from \$7.75 to \$10.25 for jumbo wings. There is a hummus and cheese platter served with antipasto and flatbread for \$7.75 and a three-cheese artichoke dip for the same price. The drink arrived quickly and was a generous pour. The chips arrived shortly thereafter and I found them quite good. Not too salty and virtually no grease. Kudos to the fry chef.

More patrons were arriving and most of these were middle-aged or a bit older like myself. I noticed the owner, Mr. Steele, at the end of the bar sampling wines with another gentleman so I thought I would try a glass as well. I studied the wine list, but there are so many boutique wines today that most are unknown to many and require direction from someone that knows and has tasted the wine. I ordered a Long Boat Sauvignon blanc. When it arrived, I swirled the pale liquid and sniffed deeply. Wow, was it aromatic! Lots of pineapple and citrus. It was very good. I longed for an appetizer to go with this particular wine, but didn't find one. I suppose the shrimp cocktail without the spiced cocktail sauce for \$8.75 would have worked, but not really. I needed some oysters, grouper bites or even a little meat filled dumpling. I settled on the House Salad for \$6.25. It was chopped romaine and possibly butter lettuce with corn and tomatoes for color with a very good cucumber dill dressing, which is the house dressing. I added a piece of grilled salmon

scotches, top shelf bourbons and southern whiskies. It looked like there may have been about 25 bottles of wine opened for "by the glass" orders, signifying great choices.

The only thing I found a bit odd about the interior design was the presence of Mizzou Tiger memorabilia placed here and there. I guess being a college town, there's no escaping this influence, but given the cool ambience of the space, this addition clashes. The décor is not a sports bar, even though there are ample flat screen TVs scattered around for quiet watching. I settle in at the bar and order a



The pizza margherita (photo: LDW)

for an extra \$4. It comes with seasoned cheesy foccacia bread. The lightly seasoned salmon was not overcooked. It was moist and full of flavor and complimented the cucumber dill dressing perfectly.

The bar area was starting to fill up and due to all the hard surfaces in the space, it was getting a little loud or lively depending on your viewpoint. I noticed that very few people sat in the main dining area even though it was probably the dining hour. This area is wide and open and is illuminated by large arched windows and overhead recessed lighting. One of the attractions of this restaurant is the brick oven featured prominently in the front at my end of the bar. This night it was not used for cooking but they had the gas jets lit for ambience. I was told that they have another one in the kitchen where they cook pizzas and calzones. I was disappointed they weren't wood fired, but they are great for baking. I ordered a margherita pizza not quite knowing what to expect. Pizza in the States can mean anything. Sky Hi's pizza would be similar to what I would term a California gourmet pizza, in the mode of Wolfgang Puck. They are made on a 12" flatbread crust. The ingredients are quality

and it tasted fresh. The fact that this was a white pizza with slices of February tomatoes dampened my enthusiasm for a real pizza margherita which is made with freshly squeezed tomato juice, a little mozzarella, just a dash of salt, some olive oil and a couple fresh basil leaves. I couldn't taste the basil or tomato juice acidity. What I thought I tasted, was oregano in the dry sprinkled form, but no basil. What I got was a less seasoned cheesy flatbread. Next time, I'll try the Sausage Three-some which is chorizo, andouille and Italian sausage with ricotta, provolone, mushrooms and herbs for \$14.25

Next up for an entrée was The Steak House, which is a four ounce piece of Black Angus served with a lettuce wedge, chopped bacon, bleu cheese crumbles and



The Steak House entrée with bleu cheese crumbles and Angus beef (photo: LDW)

dressing and diced tomatoes for \$10.25. The steak was grilled perfectly medium. With the addition of crumbled bacon and blue cheese, you get a mouthful of explosions. Strong flavors all, but working together nicely. The diced tomatoes and lettuce are the foil to bring you back down to earth.

I had begun visiting with a guy sitting next to me who is originally from Long Island and currently teaches at MU. He is a regular here and it was obvious he loved

it. I asked him what he liked most about the place and he cited the décor and well made drinks. "It's similar to what you find in New York," he said. He didn't state it but I got the idea he liked that it was a well-behaved civil and interesting crowd that frequents the place. It's a place you can come and melt into the understated sophistication. He mentioned what I had heard before: "it's got really great bar food." O.K. I was starting to get it. This explained the very reasonable prices and proportions on the plate. You can get a grilled chicken breast with smoked bacon, caramelized onions, peppers, herbed mayo and provolone cheese for \$8.25. You can get a panko crusted grouper served with cole slaw and home-style chips for \$8.25, and so on.

The concept really is geared toward

the bar and the social mingling that entails such places. The large dining area on the other side of the bar is available for a bit of privacy, but is probably considered an

afterthought by most patrons. The kitchen is not really open to diner viewing, aside from a large order expediting window, but it's obvious that counter service is the place to be and maybe that is what was always intended. After all, the more interaction the bartenders and servers have with their customers, the better the service and the more they'll sell. The idea is to see that everyone has a good time with a busy cash register as the proof of that enthusiasm. The service was excellent and people were having fun

and relaxing, engaged in conversations that left their work day far behind.

This bar and smaller portion concept is actually a major trend across the U.S., but some chains like Houston's have been doing it for years. Some of the entrees and even the pizzas could actually feed two people depending on the appetites. I forgot to mention that there is a penne or linguini pasta on the menu with your choice of homemade sauces like marinara, pesto, roasted garlic cream, and olive oil and herbs. This is served with a Caesar or House salad for \$10.95. I didn't have room for dessert, but there were about eight on the menu such as caramel fudge pecan cake and fried cheesecake with ice cream and berry sauce for \$5.

Owner Jim Steele mentioned that he comes into this restaurant business from the hospitality side in the health care industry, so he's no stranger when it comes to all the skills it takes to run a restaurant like ordering, menu mapping, dealing with labor, cooking appliances, regulations, etc. He's doing most things right and the little things like reconfiguring the pizza margherita can easily be changed should he want to. The Sky Hi Bar and Grill is not daring. They do a great job of presenting familiar food that is fresh and of quality within a concept that wasn't clear to me initially. A top of the line bar menu coupled with big city ambience achieves a place at the table of fun restaurants to experience within Columbia's restaurant mix.

~John Buckner

**The Sky Hi Bar & Grill**  
**573-442-8080**  
**2513 Grindstone Plaza**  
**Old Hwy 63 South**  
**Columbia**