

Review: Louisville's Empire Lounge offers fantastic food in a casual setting

By [Meg Tilton](#)

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Food 4 stars

Service 2½ stars

Ambience 3½ stars

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Louisville's Empire Lounge & Restaurant is something exceptional. Perhaps this isn't a surprise. Executive Chef Jim Cohen has cooked at such well-known establishments as Tante Louise in Denver and the Wildflower at Vail. He's also been nominated for a prestigious James Beard award. Meanwhile, the restaurant's general manager, Brendan McManus, has 25 years of experience working in the business, including almost a decade at the Big Red F chain.

What is perhaps a surprise is the Empire's casual atmosphere and often casual fare. But McManus suspected Louisville was the right location for a neighborhood bar that happened to serve great food. And Cohen has long dreamt of opening a restaurant that was also a community gathering spot.

"We want to have the same techniques and quality that I used at the Wildflower and Tante Louise and translate them for a neighborhood restaurant," he says.

And so they have. At the Empire, even dishes like the BLT stand out. The hickory-smoked bacon. The sweet, ripe tomatoes. The creamy avocado slices sliding around the crisp-but-never-dry toast. It's a terrific concoction, one that epitomizes summer.

This combination of basic but perfect is typical at the Empire, which opened in January on Main Street.

One of the most enticing dishes on the menu is the mac & cheese with pancetta (\$7). Who knew cheddar and Parmigiano-Reggiano could taste so good? Well, they can. The pasta comes in a little pewter pail, with a handle that's useful for grabbing when your dining companion tries to pull the dish toward his or her side of the table.

The cheese plate (\$14) offers another way for cheese-lovers to get their fix. Although purists may claim that cheese is



Brian and Beth Sanders, of Louisville, enjoy dessert and glass of wine at the Empire Lounge in Old Town Louisville.

816 Main St., Louisville 303-665-2521 or www.theempirerestaurant.com. Modern American cuisine, from burgers to fine dining. Dinner hours: Tuesday-Thursday and Sunday, 4-9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 4-10 p.m. "Blunch" served Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Reservations accepted for eight or more. Kid friendly. All major credit cards. Wheelchair accessible. Vegetarian entrées. Noise level: Medium. Recommended dishes: John's BLT, mac & cheese, THE salad, seafood specials, risotto, Nemesis chocolate cake.



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best tasted with very plain crackers, I found the Empire's accompanying fig bread a pleasing complement to the varieties on our plate. The mix was diverse, too -- the selections that day included a Pecorino Toscano, a slightly bitter sheep's cheese; a cheddar from Herkimer, N.Y., made from cow's milk; and a Humboldt Fog goat's cheese that had a layer of edible ash in the center.

If you're in the mood for greens, try THE salad (\$12). The delicious miso dressing distinguishes this salad from others and nicely balances the flavors of the avocados, grape tomatoes and chicken.

The restaurant also excels at gourmet cuisine. Seafood fans should check out two dishes in particular: the ruby trout with blood-orange sauce (\$15) and the lime-marinated yellowfin tuna with an avocado, charred tomato and cilantro salsa (\$26). The secret to Cohen's success with seafood is two-fold. First, he buys top-grade fish. Second, he makes regular use of the restaurant's charcoal grill. Often he will sear fish on the grill first, then move it aside for slower cooking.

Vegetarians will like the restaurant's risotto option. When I visited, the risotto was a savory pumpkin and mushroom variety (\$13), but the Empire has plans to introduce a spring onion and snap pea risotto with its forthcoming spring menu.

As for dessert, the Nemesis (\$7), a flourless chocolate cake with a ganache-like consistency, offers a decadent treat. The rustic apple tart (\$7) is another winner. You may want to ask for a side of whipped cream or extra ice cream with this one, to balance out the dense pastry.

One word of caution: Don't be deceived by the affordable small-plate prices or the availability of casual fare into thinking you'll only spend \$15 for dinner. The restaurant uses gourmet ingredients, which cost a lot. So modestly priced dishes like the risotto won't fill you up by themselves.

As for atmosphere, the Empire lives up to the "Lounge" part of its name. The décor is dark but inviting. At the back of the restaurant, big leather armchairs and sofas provide a cozy place to sip cocktails.

While both the servers I had at the restaurant were competent professionals, I did experience one glitch in service. On one evening, a holiday, I called ahead to ensure the Empire was still open. I was told it was. But when I arrived less than an hour later, the restaurant had closed early due to lack of business.

Still, the chances of such an oversight happening to you are minuscule. And the chances of getting an excellent meal are, well, excellent. Moreover, the atmosphere really is neighborly rather than hoity-toity. No one is going to ask you about truffle-infusion upgrades or about what kind of gourmet water you'd prefer. This is a down-to-earth place. It's the type of place that a team with Cohen and McManus's decades of experience would create -- one that combines a genius for cooking with the knowledge that good food doesn't have to come with an attitude.

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