

## [DINING]

# Brick House's 'man cave' is a guilty pleasure

By **ROMMIE JOHNSON**  
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TAMPA » It's not difficult to imagine a team of marketing execs sitting around a conference table when the question came up, "Do we have to spell it out for them?" And, apparently, the answer was a re-sounding yes, so there it is, helpfully inscribed on the wall in massive gothic script: "Man Cave."

You know, just in case you couldn't figure it out when the attractive young woman in Daisy Dukes greeted you at the door with a smile. Or from the 30-plus flat-screen TV sets tuned exclusively to sporting events. Or from the group of men in the corner, all seated in plush leather recliners huddled around a 50-ounce beer bong.

After all, you're a guy, an easily amused simpleton, the sort of good-natured everyman who doesn't mind your meal coming with a heaping side of reductive stereotypes. Presumably, when you meet your low-brow pals for a few beers and some football, you won't have your wife or girlfriend around to explain everything to you.

Intentionally or not, that's the barely subliminal message you get at Brick House Tavern & Tap, recently opened on north Dale Mabry in the space formerly occupied by Johnny Carino's. It's less a restaurant than a branded concept churned out by a marketing machine, the kind of place where the menu is created by a focus group rather than a chef.

Fortunately for Ignite Restaurant Group (they also own Joe's Crab Shack in Clearwater), real men don't complain about sexism. We're either remarkably tolerant or every bit

## DINING REVIEW

### Brick House Tavern & Tap

**BOTTOM LINE:** American comfort food in an upscale sports-bar atmosphere.

**WHERE:** 1102 N. Dale Mabry Highway, Tampa

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to midnight Sunday

**CREDIT CARDS:** All major

**RESERVATIONS:** No

**CHILDREN'S MENU:** Can accommodate

**ALCOHOL:** Full bar and wine list

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes

**PRICE:** Entrees range from \$7.99 to \$19.99

**CALL:** (813) 350-9108

as dumb as they seem to think.

Because, however vehemently you resist being treated as a target demographic, it's tough *not* to have a good time at Brick House. It's casual and clean, fun and friendly, and the food is better than you'd expect.

The menu focuses mostly on stick-to-your-ribs comfort food: burgers, wings, ribs, steaks and chicken. On our visits, we found everything to be dependable and a cut above the usual pub grub — not to mention that it's probably worth a try no matter what sort of equipment you have between your legs.

At our server's recommendation, we started out with Zucchini Curls, which were hand cut, lightly battered and fried.



Staff photo by CLIFF McBRIDE

If you man up and swagger down to Brick House Tavern & Tap, you can chow down on hearty — though not heart-friendly — dishes such as Chicken & Waffles, center, Kobe beef burger, left, and tater tots.

The crispy, not-too-greasy batter offered a pleasantly contrasting texture to the zucchini, and its delicate flavor was nicely complemented by a mildly spicy Sriracha-ranch dipping sauce.

We also enjoyed the Smothered Bleu & White Chips, a mountain of homemade potato chips loaded with bleu cheese crumbles and white queso melt.

Wings are served three ways: traditional Buffalo-style, barbecue and garlic-Parmesan. The Buffalo sauce was tangy with a kick somewhere in the medium-to-hot range, while the garlic-Parm wings were an interesting alternative. Both were good, though not quite great.

Burgers are brick-shaped and come with one, two or three patties and a solid variety of toppings including a fried egg. Our single-patty cheeseburger was plenty big enough, juicy and perfectly cooked to order. A gourmet Kobe beef burger on a brioche bun ups the ante at \$14.

A solid list of sandwiches includes a Doubewide Sloppy Joe, a Philly Cheese Steak and a Big Boy Prime Rib with smoked provolone and peppercorn au jus. The delightfully messy Chicken-Parm Hero Melt was big and satisfying, with a tender breaded chicken breast, homemade marinara sauce and melted smoked provolone stuffed into a soft hoagie roll.

From the list of entrees, two dishes stood out. The Drunken Chops — a pair of whiskey-glazed, center-cut pork chops — were juicy and full of flavor, topped with fried onions and served with Texas toast. We also devoured the BBQ Baby Backs, a full rack of slightly smoky, slow-cooked pork ribs that were fall-off-the-bone tender.

Other main-course options include steaks, shrimp, chicken and mahi mahi — more than just the usual sports-bar fare.

Of course, you'll want to wash it all down with a cold beer, and Brick House has plenty to choose from. The list

of draft brews is mostly middling and far from comprehensive, but includes enough decent offerings (Magic Hat #9, Longhammer IPA, Abita Purple Haze, Shipyard Export Ale) alongside the usual suspects to keep all but the haughtiest beer snobs happy. They're all available by the pint ("Sissy"), 20 oz. ("Man-Size") or in a 50-ounce or 100-ounce self-serve beer bong. They also offer microkegs of Heineken, Warsteiner and Paulaner Hefeweizen.

Service, in our experience, was friendly, knowledgeable, efficient and — OK, we'll admit it — easy on the eyes.

So, yeah, maybe the concept is a tad insulting, but the reality? Not too shabby. Give us enough hearty chow and cold beer and apparently we're more than happy to swallow our pride along with it. If that makes us Neanderthals, well, then so be it.

*Tribune reviewers eat anonymously. Rommie Johnson can be reached at (813) 259-7426.*