

The avocado tartine at The Gibson is topped with cumin, arugula, and pepitas.



PHOTO: JAI WILLIAMS

Buzzing into 2019

WASHINGTONIANS SIP COCKTAILS WITH BENEFITS AND TOAST TEN YEARS AT A TOP SPEAKEASY

You know that Old Country stereotype about babushka-covered grandmothers thrusting plates at you and prodding you to “eat, eat”? It’s come to life in the best way at Arlington craft-cocktail bar BABA—fittingly, that’s Serbian for “grandmother”—a floor below Balkan sister restaurant Ambar. A few options on its new menu are referred to as “cocktails with benefits,” as they include a mini-dish on the side.

Sink into one of BABA’s floral armchairs and you’ll feel as though you’ve stepped into a granny’s parlor where vintage glassware fills antique hutches, gold-framed paintings line the walls, and crystal chandeliers light up the space. A perfect starter from mixologist Marko Strugar is the Balkan Caviar Martini with Destilerija Hubert 1924 Apple Brandy, one of many commercial and housemade *rakias* (Balkan brandies) on the menu. Stirred with Tanqueray Gin and dry vermouth, the drink is served with a spoonful of caviar. If you need to feed your sweet tooth, instead order the Gypsy Wedding; made with Hubert 1924 Pear Brandy, Del Maguey Vida



PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER MILINAUSKAS

Entering Arlington’s BABA is like stepping into a granny’s parlor.

Mezcal, lime juice, cinnamon syrup, and pear puree, it’s accompanied by a pineapple dessert.

Just days after hosting the only American pop-up of World’s Best Bar titleholder Dandelyan in November, The Gibson focused on celebrating ten years as one of D.C.’s top speakeasies. The bar has gotten a little more laid-back over the years, and the space, which includes three upstairs “apartments” for private parties, is as inviting as ever.

The drinks are equally elevated, a fact confirmed when my friend, a curious cocktail novice, joined me one recent evening to try selections from the anniversary menu. He started with the shock of blue that is the Nordic Spa Treatment; topped with sweet sparkling wine, it features Old Tom Gin, grapefruit juice, Becherovka, and Combier Bleu. I went rogue for the first round—requesting something “herbal

and citrusy with gin”—before switching things up on round two with the Smoke Strike. Dry, savory, and smoky, it blends mezcal with Manzanilla Sherry, bitters, and walnut and ginger liqueurs.

Also notable: The Gibson now serves a selection of bar bites with suggested pairings. The avocado tartine garnished with cumin, arugula, pepitas, and pumpkin-seed oil lends itself to “something tart and refreshing,” while a boatful of fries topped with togarashi and a wasabi emulsion works alongside any beverage. After all, as the menu points out, *everything* tastes great with fries. ■■

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PHOTO COURTESY OF BABA

Made with pear *rakia* (Balkan brandy), the Gypsy Wedding at BABA is served with a pineapple dessert.