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Walnut Speakeasy embraces past - but doesn't skip on modern amenities

By [Samantha Nelson](#) | Daily Herald Correspondent Contact writer



Server Katie Forkell shares a laugh with customers as she delivers their food at The Walnut Speakeasy in Elgin.

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Alcohol may be perfectly legal, but that doesn't stop The Walnut Speakeasy from embracing the Prohibition Era mystique. While in most ways it's a totally modern sports bar, the new spot occupying The Checkered Flag's old space strives for a more intimate and old-timey feel than its louder cohorts.

Motif: You won't find any neon beer signs or big sports team logos here. Instead the interior features high wooden rafters and stone brick walls lit by iron-framed yellow lamps hanging from the ceiling. The space offers large rounded booths and dark wood tables, though the focal point is a long horseshoe-shaped wooden bar lined with tall chairs. Of course Walnut Speakeasy is a sports bar, and the walls are also covered with 18 TVs showing everything from football to poker and big UFC matches. Along with great views, sports fans are often rewarded with a free game day halftime buffet featuring pizza and wings, plus weekend beer specials.

The Walnut Speakeasy
214 Walnut Ave., Elgin, (847) 695-2420,
thewalnutspeakeasy.com

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 11 p.m. Sunday

Crowd: The vibe is decidedly casual, with costumers sporting baseball caps, T-shirts and jeans. The crowd runs the gamut from families and younger couples coming for dinner to local workers stopping in for a brew at the bar.

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Liquid consumption: Beer is the drink of choice, with 14 brews on tap including Guinness, 312 and Leinenkugel Seasonal. There is also a selection of craft brews such as New Holland Dragons Milk and Three Floyds Dreadnaught. If you're not a fan of hops, the bartenders can mix you up a margarita or martini and a cocktail list is in the works, with drinks bearing old-fashioned names like Baby Face and Bees Knees.

Food: The menu offers far more than typical sports fan fuel. Dinner entrees include grilled skirt steak and seared walnut-crusted halibut. Diners pack in for the Friday night fish fry, though you can satisfy your craving any day of the week with a filet of fish sandwich, served hot with fresh cut fries. The baby back ribs can seem a little light on the meat, but what is there is tender and covered with sweet and tangy sauce. Chicken nachos are a favorite starter, though if you have a group to please you can try the sampler platter, which features chicken tenders, potato skins and spicy buffalo wings.

Service: Servers are friendly, attentive and quick to please, making jokes and chatting with customers at the tables and bars. When we asked for lemon to go with a glass of 312, our server asked if that was how it was normally served and seemed genuinely happy to learn a new bartending tip.

Sounds: Tunes are mostly provided by a jukebox or oldies radio, though the bar periodically brings in lounge acts and DJs on the weekends. The owner is also looking for regular acoustic performers.

Parking: There's a small free lot, so parking can get tight when the place is busy.

Bathrooms: You don't have to watch your liquid intake if you're afraid to miss a play. The bathrooms have their own TVs along with funky beaten metal-rimmed mirrors. The doors also embrace the old time speakeasy theme, showing a dapper dude in a top hat and a dame holding a long cigarette.

Overall: Part of a growing trend of more subdued sports bars, Walnut Speakeasy seems to still be working on how it will define itself as a dining and drinking destination.

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