

Arts and carafes

Painting the town

March 18, 2014 | Tod Caviness, THE WINGMAN

I am only midway through my second beer at Bar Louie on Orlando's Restaurant Row, and already things are looking blurry. The grass is a little too green, punctuated with mysterious bits of white that only vaguely resemble flowers. When I examine the sky, it melts into a riot of purple and blue blotches. Clearly, this is going to be a messy night.



The Wingman unveils his masterpiece, and keeps his day job. (Tod Caviness)

Luckily, I'm wearing an apron.

My wife and I are having a date at Paint Nite, which is exactly what it sounds like. Participants are supplied with paint brushes, a blank 16"x20" canvas, a palette of paint and that all-important apron. By the end of the night, everyone leaves with a personally-created, original work of art – or a sloppy approximation of a landscape, if you're anything like me.

The point, of course, is to leave your inner critic at home. "Fine art" takes a back seat to relaxation at these events, which are held chiefly at bars or restaurants across the country. Orlando's first Paint Nite debuted in late 2013, and they already have a strong following. The one we attended had a packed house of 50 painters, and similar nights are frequently sold out weeks in advance at venues such as Schumann's Jager Haus and Avenue Gastrobar.

At each Paint Nite, the painters have a common goal to guide them. A sample piece of art is held up as the "model" for the evening (a vibrant mountain landscape, in our case), and participants do their best to replicate it with the guidance of the artist host.

Again, art education is secondary. Host Sarai Del Moral walked us through the painting process in (ahem) broad strokes, referring to our three brush sizes as the "papi brush, mami brush, and baby brush." To make a sunset, blend the colors. To make some grass, a series of short upstrokes.

Her most crucial bit of advice: "The more you drink, the better it looks." Bar Louie's bartenders were more than happy to help out with that one.

A similar philosophy is at play at Painting With a Twist, a brick-and-mortar version of Paint Nite's nomadic art events. Their Orlando location opened in 2011, and they have expanded last weekend with a location in Altamonte Springs.

"The object is to have fun and socialize," says Tasia Apostolou, the Altamonte Springs owner and manager.

To that end, they keep the format simple. Like Paint Nite, the "model" canvas at Painting With a Twist is made by artists at one of the franchise's locations. (There are over 100 nationally). Participants are supplied with all the painting tools, and get to keep their paintings. Because of zoning, alcohol is strictly BYOB at the Altamonte location, but the Orlando studio has an in-house wine and beer bar.

Apostolou says that her place will also host special charity nights. Partial proceeds for the next event on April 30 will benefit children with life-threatening illnesses through New Hope For Kids – check the website for details.

I'm no Picasso, but I can recommend a painting event for either couples or "girls night out." The largely female crowd at Bar Louie fit into one of those two categories, and all of them seemed to enjoy the process more than the results, laughing at mistakes and breakthroughs alike.

I must admit there is something meditative about painting, especially with a drink in hand. After my messy masterpiece was done, I was even confident enough to add a final nerdy touch: A burning Eye of Sauron a la "Lord of the Rings," looming in the distance above my gloomy, messy mountains.

I don't think Bob Ross would have approved, but the host thought it was funny.

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Paint Nite

Cost: \$45 (includes paint, supplies and canvas to take home)

Online: paintnite.com

Painting With a Twist

Where: 6700 Conroy Windermere Road, Orlando, and 851 W. State Road 436, Altamonte Springs

Cost: \$35-\$45 for 2-3 hour session, \$25 for 90-minute children's session

Online: paintingwithatwist.com