



Business partners, from left, Dave Brooks, John Schnibben and Richard Bucher, and chef Tyler Sloop

Strong Alibi

(ALIBIS EATERY & SPIRITS)

First Place, Best New Restaurant

It's 11 o'clock on a Tuesday morning, and Dave Brooks proudly walks around his empty bar/restaurant, Alibis, in downtown Carlisle. It's strange to be in an empty bar, hours before it opens — the neon beer signs dark, the jukebox quiet, bar stools lined up neatly like toy soldiers.

As he walks, Brooks explains the extensive renovations that were done to the building. In the 1930s it was a diner, then it became a restaurant, then a bar. Its last incarnation before Brooks and his three partners bought the place was as the Blessed Oliver Plunket (the Plunket, for short) — a seedy, dimly lit joint that came by its reputation for being “rough” honestly.

Brooks talks about how he punched through the building's second roof to expose long-forgotten skylights. How when he asked his workmen to rub the brand-new, freshly laid hardwood floors with linseed oil to make them darker and then batter them with chains and hammers to make them look old, they thought he was nuts. How he and his partners chose a clean red, soft yellow and black color scheme and hung up framed Prohibition-era posters to give the interior

a “speakeasy” feel. How the name “Alibis” refers, simply, without further explanation, to “misspent youth.”

With his goatee and his hair pulled back into a short ponytail, loose-fitting jeans and gray sweater, Brooks looks every inch a tavern owner. What is surprising is that Brooks is a former colonel in the United States Army. Like many Army officers, Brooks found a second home in Cumberland County after a stint at the U.S. Army War College, located in Carlisle. The Kentucky native retired as a colonel and just a few months later found himself the proud owner, with three friends, of Carlisle's newest watering hole. “It was a second-career thing,” Brooks says. “It's something I've always wanted to do.”

Besides Alibis' clean, welcoming interior, the biggest draw of the place, not surprisingly, is the drinks. Brooks and his partners focused a lot of their attention on building an extensive offering of microbrews and specialty martinis. Patrons can sign up for the Pennsylvania Brew Tour, a way to sample 38 beers made by Keystone State breweries, including Tröegs, Appalachian Brewing Co., Victory, Stoudt's, Sly Fox and

One of the most popular dishes is the “Build Your Own Alibi” burger.

Yards. Non-beer drinkers can participate in the Martini Challenge, which Brooks describes as “like an 18-hole golf course, but with martinis.” Alibis also happens to be downtown Carlisle's only totally nonsmoking bar.

Brooks is the first to admit that the main emphasis at Alibis is on the drinks. “We're a bar first, and a restaurant second,” he says.

But that's not to say that you won't get good food here. The menu may be small, but the elevated pub grub is tasty. “We think we have the best burgers in town,” Brooks says.

Indeed, one of the most popular dishes on the menu is the “Build Your Own Alibi” burger. Diners choose a burger, flat-iron steak or grilled sandwich, then add toppings, which range from applewood-smoked bacon and “dragon's breath” cheese to grilled Italian vegetables and chipotle chili.

In addition to burgers, patrons can feast on chef Tyler Sloop's BLTs, pulled-pork sandwiches, grilled salmon salad, pork “ribbies” and potato-cheddar cod.

“We may not have an extensive menu, but what you get is very good,” Brooks says. “Good service, good drinks, good food and a good time.”

The mantra seems to be working — for people of all ages. Brooks recalls a night, shortly after Alibis' opening in November 2006, when the entire bar — many of them Dickinson College and Dickinson School of Law students — staged a rousing, raucous impromptu sing-along when the DJ played Bon Jovi's “Livin' on a Prayer.” Days later, the same thing happened at a special holiday luncheon with a group of senior citizens — except they sang to a Perry Como Christmas song.

Brooks recalls the two moments with a laugh, and says, “Yeah, after that, I thought, ‘Hey, maybe we're onto something here.’”

—STEPHANIE ANDERSON WITMER