

BEYOND CRAFT KANSAS CITY'S THE MONARCH

AS IT'S BEEN NOTED here in the past, man (nor woman, for that matter) does not live by wine alone. So it was with great anticipation that, on a recent

visit to Kansas City, I ventured into a highly touted cocktail bar called The Monarch.

Over the past decade or so, the classic cocktail movement has dramatically altered the way we drink in America. In my

travels to cities like Minneapolis and Pittsburgh, I have found a plethora of new and innovative distilleries, cocktail bars and speakeasies that combine big-city sophistication with local character. It's a heady time to be an American drinker.

But Kansas City? Other than the Italian wine list at Lidia Bastianich's eponymous Union Station farmhouse restaurant (which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this month) or a Boulevard brew with fall-off-the-bone BBQ at Q39, both of which are worth a trip, I had limited expectations for finding a revelatory sipping experience.

The Monarch, however, proved the ignorance of my preconceptions. In the cocktail world, to use a cliché, not only is everything up to date in Kansas City, it is light years ahead. Beyond just spirits in a glass, this stunningly creative establishment offers an immersive European/American cocktail experience that is as much about the sum of its parts as it is about having a drink.

Named for the elusive monarch butterfly (and not the old Kansas City Monarchs baseball club, as I had surmised), the stylish cocktail bar and lounge is a collaborative effort conceived and crafted on the mutual passions of owner David Manica and barkeep/cocktail maven Brock Schulte.

Housed on the ground floor of a nondescript high-rise near the famed Country Club Plaza, The Monarch features a see-and-be-seen outdoor terrace

for warm KC evenings, a bright, contemporary Main Bar and a leathery club room for those who prefer to sip and mingle in darkened luxury with VIPs and the invited. Open just over a year, The Monarch has become a go-to for the city's young professionals, as well as visiting celebs and sports stars.

Manica, a Kansas City native who travels the globe building stadiums for sports teams, wanted to bring elegance, design sensibility and sophistication to his hometown. Schulte, a longtime fixture on the KC cocktail circuit, wanted to find a place where he could curate his obsession with all things cocktails, including, but not limited to, the classics and using the freshest of ingredients and purist of ice.

The Main Bar is noteworthy for both its simplicity and its art. Below an acrylic "Monarch Chandelier" featuring over 1,000 replications of floating butterflies, a 24-seat, U-shaped bar is topped with sleek white marble. The design is motivated by the notion of having clear "sightlines," as one might have in a stadium, to view the action. A couple of sofa-centered seating areas are accented by a bold 30-foot-long triptych oil painting which, of course, also features an abstraction of butterflies. All of the art is produced by local artists.

Manica Architecture has satellite offices in London and Milan, and the vibe for this room is very European. The back room, or The Parlour, is more discrete, as though one were visiting a British sitting room.

Schulte has put together an insanely intricate cocktail program that relies on an incredibly efficient under-counter back bar. Though the cocktail list is 38 pages long (cocktail themes are "inspired by the various flight paths of the Monarchs"), the program is meticulously organized to ensure that even the most complicated of concoctions can be made in minutes.

Shiny metal-capped, color-



The gin-based King Palm cocktail at The Monarch.

coordinated squeeze bottles pre-filled with blended ingredients sit in a row below the bar. Even with a crowd, the bartenders can swiftly access just the right elements as they fulfill each order seamlessly. Schulte explained that there are members of the team working literally round-the-clock to prepare all the necessary ingredients.

From the "Monarch Negroni" (which is "homogenized in limousine oak") to the "Silver Dollar and Half Light Skies" (a whiskey, black tea and bitters creation with a barrel-aged cream soda reduction and a smoky finish), each drink is built on a base of creativity. These are items to sit and contemplate as you sip, and the barkeeps are more than willing to help you do just that.

The unification of art and design focused on the ethereal butterflies, and the intense

IF YOU GO...

THE MONARCH COCKTAIL BAR & LOUNGE
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attention to using the world's finest ingredients for the cocktails, make The Monarch a completely unique destination. It's worth a flight.

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