

FUEL

BEST OF
2012

THE 52 BEST THINGS WE ATE

We compiled 52 of your picks (plus a few of our own) — enough to try something new each week.

OUR 21 FAVORITE BEERS

Food critic and beer columnist Evan S. Benn picks 21 of the most memorable beers from 2012. stltoday.com



The El Borracho burger at Circle 7 Ranch in Ballwin

The right direction

Circle 7 Ranch in Ballwin takes sports-bar fare to the next level. ★★

BY EVAN S. BENN / FOOD CRITIC / EBENN@POST-DISPATCH.COM

The new Circle 7 Ranch in Ballwin is a next-level neighborhood sports bar where you can pour your own beer and eat recognizable food with a homespun flair.

Brisket nachos (\$11) are a good example of Circle 7's habit of giving ordinary roadhouse fare a push in the right direction.

A mountain of the same tricolor chips you've seen a hundred times (ordinary) is given a smoky, sweet bite by pieces of chopped brisket and spoonfuls of black-bean-corn salsa (right direction).

Burgers (\$9) come from a house blend of various cuts of Angus beef and are

served two smashed patties to an order, with a dozen topping configurations.

Chef BJ Baker brings the south-of-the-border flavors of his former workplace to the El Borracho burger: queso blanco, candied jalapeños — and bacon. The peppers and mild cheese manage to make their presence known without taking over the beefy, well-seasoned flavors of the burger.

Next time, I'll try a Razorback burger, which features pulled pork that was the high point of Circle 7's BBQ pork-brisket-chicken platter (\$14).

A minor annoyance: Our server gladly took our requests for medium-rare burgers without letting us know they were thin patties and all

cooked to well-done.

While Circle 7's burgers are a step in the right direction, its food-service fries are rather ordinary, reminiscent of Burger King's old spuds. Sweet potato fries are a better choice.

So are fried pickles.

Circle 7's pickle coins (\$7.49) are thick — about a half-inch — panko-coated and served superhot, with a cooling side of ranch. In the hierarchy of recently reviewed fried pickles, I'd say these belong above Five Star's but below the Shack's.

In several instances, Circle 7 either doesn't try to get creative, or it swings and whiffs.

A Kitchen Sink salad (\$11) brings the same cold iceberg, watery diced tomatoes and no-flavor shredded cheddar that's

served at every Applebee's and Texas Roadhouse from U.S. 101 to Interstate 95.

(It's also pretty much the same thing as Circle 7's house salad, which is free with entrees or \$5 on its own.)

I really wanted to like my "jacked" mac 'n' cheese with Buffalo chicken (\$9.50), and our server, bless her, warned me that it had "a whole lot of stuff on it."

Still, I was not prepared for the pool of various shades of orange that "jacked" entailed. A bowl of soupy mac and cheese studded with Buffalo-sauced pulled chicken is topped with diced celery, blue cheese, sour cream, more Buffalo sauce and — the *pièce de résistance* — Cheetos.

Too many vices, too many competing flavors, too much. I'd rather have the kids-menu version, which comes topped only with crushed Cheetos.

The right direction prevails again in Circle 7's desserts, which aren't numerous or complex but are homemade and comforting.

A mixed sampler (\$8) gives

enough bites of warm brownie, sweet berry cobbler and chocolate-chip cookie crumbles — all under scoops of vanilla ice cream — for four to share or two to pig out.

Circle 7 is the first restaurant concept outside St. Louis city from Pete Ferretti and Buddy Coy, whose Lounge Concepts group includes clubs Mandarin and Pepper Lounge and events space Lumen; its El Borracho restaurant closed in 2011.

The pair have made Circle 7 into a striking space, located between a CVS and Mia Sorella restaurant in the new Ballwin Grove plaza.

Abundant reclaimed wood, flatscreen TVs, a granite bar and iron-branded hamburger buns all give Circle 7 a modern-rustic feel that's masculine but not macho.

Ferretti was present on both of my visits (and he spotted me each time). He's a proud host, quick to tell the story of how he and Coy lobbied the state legislature for the OK to bring Table Taps to Missouri.

Circle 7's nine beer-equipped tables are a cool novelty, and they look great, each with three taps of cold, draft-fresh beer that lets you pour as little or as much as you like (within reason).

Our party wound up at a table with draft Bud Light, Shock Top and Stella Artois, which may not have been my top three choices, but they were served with proper glassware, and, heck, it was fun. (The bar also has plenty of craft beers and about a dozen wines by the glass.)

Circle 7's food and drinks may not be destination-caliber, but I imagine this neighborhood sport bar's better-than-sports-bar food and its energetic atmosphere will keep it packed with happy crowds for a long time to come.

WHERE Circle 7 Ranch, 14412 Clayton Road, Ballwin • **MORE INFO** 636-220-9707; circle7ranch.com • **MENU** Burgers, wraps, salads, sandwiches, desserts and a kids menu • **HOURS** Lunch and dinner Saturday-Sunday, dinner (from 3 p.m.) Monday-Friday.