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Table Talk

story by Amelia Levin, photographs courtesy of Angela Carpenter Creative

Rolling up to the Lincoln Park condo, I ring the buzzer labeled “Birch Road Cellar” and wait for entry. It feels like one of those scenes from a movie when someone knocks on the nondescript door to a hidden bar or club and the gatekeeper slides open a narrow window asking for the secret password. Very speakeasy.

The buzzer goes off and the door unlocks because they knew I was coming. Past the short hallway I notice the fingerprint access pad for extra security. Co-owner Kim Bosse opens the door and walks me through the foyer, which looks like a beautiful home or perhaps the scene of a small-venue wedding where you might pick up your table assignment. There’s a round table in the center with a floral arrangement and an abstract metal art fixture climbing up the wall toward the high ceiling.

Stepping into the main “bar” area, it instantly feels like I’ve walked into a friend’s kitchen. There are a few high-top tables with members seated all around enjoying the wine, beer, scotch and other bottles they’ve brought. At the long, custom-made bar across the way other members have gathered round and sit at counter seats, listening to Chef Gregory Laketek—the brilliant salumi maker and owner of West Loop Salumi—talk about charcuterie as he slices up some samples of his Old World culatello, barolo and bresaola. I join the group.

There are exclamations of joy after we all take a bite. We’re feeling very lucky indeed to be a part of this group.

Birch Road Cellar & Social Club, a members-only club and gathering space, hosts special events like these about once a month. Bosse says it’s a great way for members to connect with old friends, make new ones and to learn a thing or two; past events have showcased a cheesemaker, a mixologist and an oyster guru.

“Our events are 30 people, maximum,” says Bosse, who co-owns Birch Road with childhood friend Sharon Provins. “We like to keep them small so everyone can have that personal experience with the guest chef or presenter.” A far cry from the swarming outdoor food festivals where you might sneak a bite of food and at most get in a quick “Hi, Chef.”

Bosse credits the connections she made during her former job as the marketing and operations director for Three Headed Productions, a Chicago-based restaurant and nightlife group responsible for the late craft cocktail pioneer Drawing Room, among other places.

“That’s the nice thing about being in the industry for 10 years,” she says. “I can call on old friends who can offer something a lot more experiential and educational in a super casual, slow-paced setting.”

But there’s more to Birch Road than just the fun events. From about 10am to 1am, members have full access to their own space with glassware and barware, running water, refrigeration, mixers, free coffee and snacks. Bosse hesitates to call it a bar, since the space is strictly BYOB, but members can “be their own mixologists” if they so choose.

Membership also entitles individuals and couples to their own lockers in the temperature-controlled cellar, where they can store their own wine, beer, scotch or even soda if they prefer. The cellar, which was part of the inspiration for Birch Road Cellar’s name, remains locked at all times and is accessible by members only with fingerprint access on the door’s control pad.

“Some people get the wrong idea about us, that we’re a members-only wine club,” says



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BIRCH ROAD
CELLAR & SOCIAL CLUB





Bosse. Instead, they are more diverse and less stuffy. “We’re so attitude-free around here—it’s not about bringing the most expensive bottle of anything; it’s about bringing what you like, whether that’s a bottle of scotch or Two-Buck Chuck or a six-pack of Miller Lite.”

Down a step from the central “bar”—or “tasting room,” as Bosse puts it—is an open, loft-like room with a concrete floor and industrial accents, softened by cozy lounge furniture where groups play board games and listen to music. Other seating accommodates those working on their laptops (free wi-fi), conducting business meetings or hosting gatherings (the space can be reserved for larger private events). The loft was once home to a photography studio, and the owners have done their part to pay homage to that, decorating the walls with a rotating lineup of local artists’ work.

“We wanted the design to make the space feel like home, but not like home,” says Bosse. “People want to be comfortable but they still want to get out of the house.”

Off to one corner, a small dining room offers a 14-seat table for intimate gatherings surrounded by an expansive hutch to hold catered platters and a buffet-like setup. When cordoned off using the bamboo-like room divider, it feels like you’re in the dining room of a real estate-lucky friend or family member.

There is no kitchen, but plenty of people have had food delivered or they have brought their own platters—often from Pastoral—to share. Last year on New Year’s Eve, a couple from the suburbs rented a bus and brought their friends to the space to celebrate in a more quiet, private setting with a chef-caterer and their own favorite wine. Beats fighting for bar service and a cab ride home.

And that’s just it. Birch Road caters specifically to those looking for a place where they can hear each other speak and not feel cramped in a crowded room. And, where they can drink what they want to drink “without the crazy markups,” as Bosse puts it.

This is what she and Provins have always wanted, and especially after marrying and settling down with kids. And after seeing the success of similar-type places in New York, Los Angeles and Europe, they knew they were onto something. So they left their hectic jobs (Provins worked at Samsung) and took a leap toward their dream. After writing a business plan, securing some investors and finding the right space, Birch Road Cellar officially opened in May 2014.

“We grew up together on Birch Road in Northbrook and have been best friends since the fourth grade,” Bosse says, explaining the origin of the name. “What we’re trying to do with the concept is to help friends like us make time to connect and talk over a great bottle





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of wine or whatever they want to drink without loud music or blaring TVs. We all tend to get caught up in our adult lives and can go months without talking to the people who are important to us so we wanted to help people get rid of excuses to get together.”

And the same goes for Bosse and Provins, who now live in separate cities. Birch Road serves as a place where they can come together and connect.

Since opening, the space has seen married couples on a date night, small groups of friends with smallish apartments looking to host their own dinner parties, and busy moms looking for a quiet moment away from the kids. Others make Birch Road a quick stop pre- or post-dinner in lieu of the busy bar scene.

“It’s like a friend gave you the keys to their awesome loft and you can stock it with whatever you want,” says Bosse.

Unlike other private social clubs across the city, Birch Road remains open to all types of members with no restrictions in terms of what industry in which you work. And you don’t need to submit a picture with your application.

“The idea of a private club might seem stuffy or exclusive,” says Bosse. “But I think one of the beautiful things about Birch Road is how diverse the membership is compared to some other clubs that are more homogenous. Here, you never know who you’re going to talk to that night—we have artists, advanced sommeliers, nonprofit directors, stay-at-home moms, CEOs, chefs and others in our group.”

That night I was instantly welcomed, chatting it up with a firefighter and his physical therapist wife, a doctor, a dentist and a funny, joke-sliding young man who likes to dine at different restaurants and make vodka out of his bathtub. It’s an eclectic group but we enjoyed each other’s company, and could actually hear each other. And I got to talk to Laketek first-hand about his amazing salumi.

At \$89 a month for individuals and \$119 for couples, Birch Road skews slightly less costly than other social clubs in the city. Individual memberships allow you to bring two guests, while couple memberships allow four. Since there is no on-site staff, the owners only ask that you put away your dirty glasses in the dish room at the end of the night. That makes it just like home—except it’s not.

If I were deciding the secret code for entry to this speakeasy-like space, one word comes to mind: cool.

News alert: There are still spaces open for membership. Visit BirchRoadCellar.com, enter your information and someone will reach out. When they do, you’ll be happy they did. **ec**