

I'm holding a deep-fried calf testicle and am trying to convince myself to eat it. Even though it's peanut-sized, thickly battered and the waitress insists it "tastes like chicken," I can't get the vision of a wriggling calf kicking its legs while its manhood gets taken away out of my head. In Alberta, bull's balls or "prairie oysters" as they're known, are considered a bit of a delicacy—one that I've managed to avoid since moving here five years ago. But tonight there's no turning back.

I'm on what you might call a "grown-ups" pub-crawl. It's Saturday night and, for me and my companions, our goal is to hit as many nightspots as possible along (or very near) Stephen Avenue. We're scoping

the area for places that the weary business traveller can unwind in. Calgary's downtown is peppered with nightspots once you know where to look. With 17 places to stay in the downtown, its core—Stephen Avenue (8 Ave SW)—is a good place to start.

In 2007, over 624,000 business travellers came to Calgary and 73 per cent of them stayed overnight, making them a driving source of business in the downtown. Cindy Stewart, Chef Concierge at the Westin, and member of Les Clefs d'Or (a prestigious international organization of hotel concierges) sees an average of 1,200 business travellers come through her hotel a week. Often, Stewart says, when they're done for the day they're looking for two things: where to get



Evening Escapes

Discover places along Stephen Avenue to unwind at after a long day

BY LAURA PELLERINE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BLAIR HILL



(Both Pages)
At Divino,
You get the
full bistro
experience:
fine food,
cheese
and wine.



a bite to eat, and where they can relax. “I’ve noticed that the business traveller is changing, they’re becoming more sophisticated,” she says. “Before they wanted to go out with their clients in the evening over martinis, but now a lot meet their clients over lunch, and at night, they want a quiet dinner.”

She is quick to point out however, that that doesn’t mean they want to sit alone in a corner. “They’re certainly interested in going somewhere for a drink, and to be places where other people are going to be—like a lounge with a lively atmosphere—but unless they’re younger, they’re not as interested in going to a nightclub.”

Dr. Brian R. Sinclair, professor of Architecture and Environmental Design at the University of Calgary, and President of the design and research firm, Sinclairstudio Inc., is a business travelling fiend, often away at least once or twice a month. He echoes this sentiment, “Dinner is important—it is a time to unwind and contemplate. I move at a hectic pace in the work realm so putting emphasis on downtime is vital.”

In the recently Academy Award-nominated movie *Up in the Air*, George Clooney’s character loved being constantly flown across

the country for business—so much so, that when the prospect of web-conferencing was on the verge of keeping him grounded, he had a difficult time coping. Mind you, Clooney’s character was happily single with an aversion to making commitments, for Sinclair, travelling around the world for business is a mixture of exploration and, at times, challenges. Take the time he almost missed his daughter’s birthday due to an airline strike when he was travelling in Germany. Fortunately he got creative and re-arranged his route to go from Frankfurt to Hong Kong, from there to Vancouver, then on to Calgary. He arrived mid-afternoon on his daughter’s birthday. “It was quite an amazing feat,” he says.

Fortunately, Sinclair’s wife is also well-travelled and is sympathetic. Stewart says that approximately 70 per cent of the clients she deals with have families, and that this also contributes to the decreased interest in the party scene.

Some of Stewart’s favourite places to send clients include Murrieta’s, The Belvedere, the James Joyce and Escoba along Stephen Avenue. I, along with two co-workers and my husband (the designated driver) decided to

FANCY FOOD

Along with unique and stylish atmospheres, find creative items like breaded frog’s legs with lemon and garlic, seafood fondue, Magret duck breast, artisan cheeses and seared mahi mahi served with miso broth at:
Blink (Page 46)
Farm (Page 46)
Jaroblue (Page 55)
Laurier Lounge (Page 46)
The Living Room (Page 48)
Olives (Page 53)
Sky 360 (Page 48)

HOTEL LOUNGES

These tasteful lounges are oases of calm, and a good option for anyone who wants refuge from loud music, jostling crowds and amorous advances.

Chef’s Table (Page 51)
Oak Room (Page 55)
Sandstone Lounge (Page 55)

WILD NIGHTS

If you’re looking for a raucous good time, expect DJ music and high energy dancing at:

The Roadhouse (Page 29)
Vinyl (213 - 10 Ave SW)
Tantra (355 - 10 Ave SW)
BLVD (Page 55)
The Mercury (550 - 17 Ave SW)
The Whiskey (341 - 10 Ave SW)
Metropolitan Grill (317 - 8 Ave SW)



BEST SPOTS FOR WATCHING THE GAME

Melrose Café & Bar (Page 43)
 Flames Central (Page 32)
 Bob the Fish (501 - 17 Ave SW)
 Barley Mill (Page 56)

HIP HANGOUTS

Places to go if you want a laid-back night on the town without dancing, sports or deafening music.

Broken City Social Club (613 - 11 Ave SW)
 Meet (924 - 17 Ave SW)
 Ming (Page 55)

LIVE MUSIC

Every Friday and Saturday night, venues across the city present live music for any taste.

Blues: Mikey's Juke Joint & Eatery (1901 - 10 Ave SW)
Celtic: James Joyce (Page 52), Fionn MacCool's (Page 52)
Country: The Palomino (Page 44), Ironwood Stage & Grill (1429 - 9 Ave SE)
Duelling Pianos: Aussie Rules (Page 28)
Indie Rock: Republik (Page 28)
Jazz: Beat Niq Jazz & Social Club (Page 30)
Lounge Music: Vintage Chophouse (Page 58), Murrieta's (Page 43), Rush (Page 44)
Up-and-coming Bands: Marquee Room (Page 28)

WHERE TO WINE

There have been a slew of wine bars opening in Calgary over the last two years. Here are some of our favourite places that offer a relaxed atmosphere and plenty of wines by the glass:

AKA Wine Bar (Page 60)
 Vin Room (2310 - 4 St SW)
 Winebar Kensington (Page 60)
 Zia's Enoteca (425 - 11 Ave SE)



investigate some of these places to see what they have to offer the weary business traveller. Though we gave ourselves a week, the goal was to hit most of them up on their liveliest night: Saturday. Here are our thoughts:

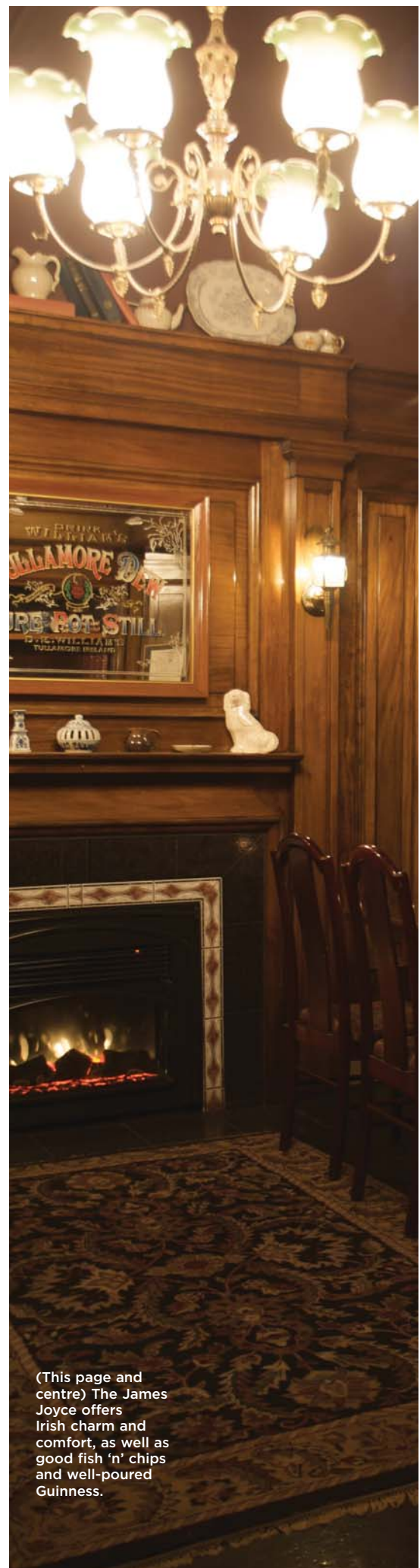
THE BELVEDERE: MASCULINE

The Friday night before, I stopped in to The Belvedere for some wine in their lounge and a long chat with owner, Clayton Morgan. This discreet spot has a very masculine energy with heavy drapes, velvety banquettes and maroon accents. It also has a stigma Morgan says they've been both blessed and cursed with: that it's a great restaurant to head to "when someone else is paying," (entrees can go as high as \$49).

This is the kind of restaurant that's popular with the business traveller, which Morgan says makes up 90 per cent of his clientele Monday through Thursday.

The lighting is low, Michael Bubl  croons softly in the background and the wine is delicious (they've been a *Wine Spectator's* Best of Award of Excellence winner since 2003). The food is as local as it can be, Morgan insists on serving Alberta (and not New Zealand) lamb.

Morgan remembers the days when tycoons from the States would come in and ask for Cuban cigars with a glass of Scotch. You're not



(This page and centre) The James Joyce offers Irish charm and comfort, as well as good fish 'n' chips and well-poured Guinness.



allowed to smoke in public places anymore in this city (unless you're in a hookah lounge or at certain golf clubs), and Morgan says a lot of his male clients have traded their Scotch for wine. But it is still a good place to head to for a quiet atmosphere and refined service, food, and drink.

THE PALOMINO: TRUE WEST

After leaving The Belvedere, The Palomino raucously called to me. There couldn't be a bigger contrast between the two venues: in every way The Belvedere is sophisticated, The Palomino is rustic. At The Palomino you seat yourself, your cutlery comes rolled up inside a paper napkin, and the house-made barbecue sauce comes in a squeezeable tube. Everything on the menu is Southern barbecue inspired so there are items like Kansas city pork ribs, "very, very slow smoked chicken," and bacon-wrapped corn-on-the-cob. On the walls hang western and sports relics, including a pair of cowboy boots dangling from the ceiling.

On weekend nights the restaurant doubles as a live music venue, and tonight the band is playing country—complete with a steel guitar and Johnny Cash classics. The crowd is everybit as casual as the atmosphere, with many adorned in faded jeans, sweatshirts and even the odd cowboy hat. On the tables, drink specials are listed as "Cheap Sh#t." The food here is good and well-priced; this is the place to go to if you're looking for an unapologetic glimpse into western hospitality.

MURRIETA'S: POSH

The next night—"the" Saturday night—our first stop is Murrieta's. We settle into the lounge and survey the décor: historic sandstone, black leather chairs, polished hardwood floors and a bar that is nearly as long as the room. Behind it, staff wearing crisp, white-collared shirts and ties, mix spiked iced teas, fruity cocktails and pour draft from 12 shiny beer taps. My husband is particularly in awe of the "impressive" beer selection. We ask the waitress if anyone has ever ordered the \$400 "Dom Bomb" cocktail (made with Dom Perignon Champagne, Hennessy cognac, Grand Marnier Centenaire and gold flakes) and she says she saw someone order it once and it was a big "to-do."

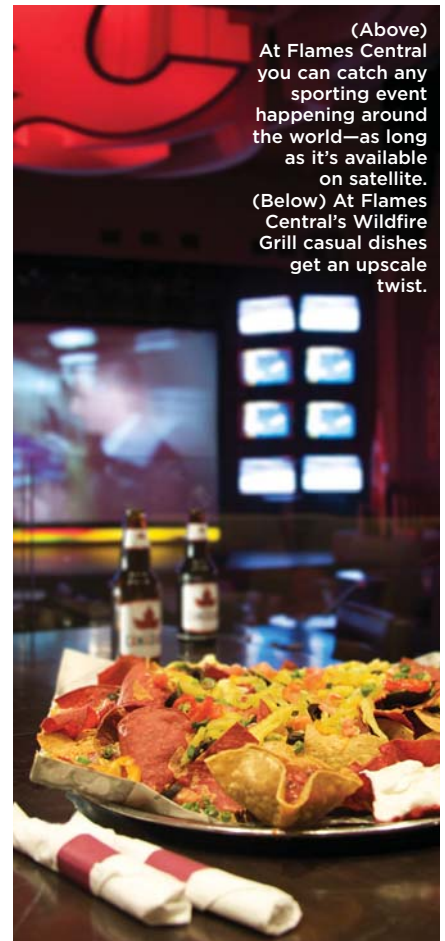
The otherside of the restaurant is a beautiful courtyard with a large skylight, tables blanketed in white, and an open-kitchen prep area. In the hallway are black and white photos of Stephen Avenue from the 1900s. It's elegant without being pretentious.

It's 5:30 pm, and the place is starting to fill up, a Beatles tribute band is playing tonight,

but once we finish off our tomato basil flatbread and trio of dips, it's time to head to our next destination.

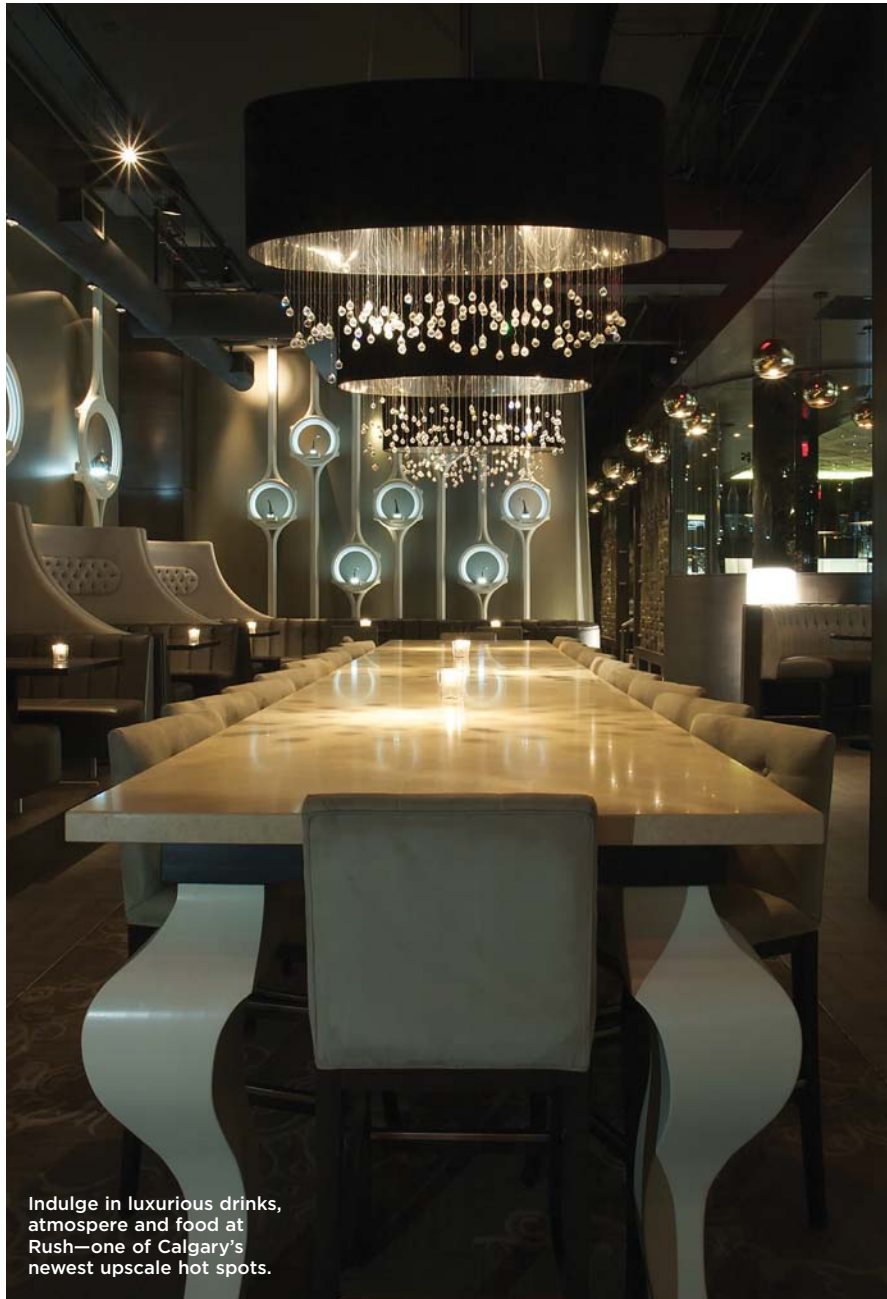
RUSH: LUXURY

Next up is Rush, one of Calgary's newest upscale dining establishments, and inside, the interior gushes eclectic luxury with a range of textures and patterns. In the dining room velvet spirals climb vine-like up pillars, pillows are placed in half-moon booths, and even the ceiling is decorated with quilted suede. The lounge is equally dazzling with a marble harvest table, chain-link pillars,



(Above) At Flames Central you can catch any sporting event happening around the world—as long as it's available on satellite.

(Below) At Flames Central's Wildfire Grill casual dishes get an upscale twist.



Indulge in luxurious drinks, atmosphere and food at Rush—one of Calgary's newest upscale hot spots.

DRINK SPECIALS

For those looking for a specific breed of liquor, check out the following establishments for connoisseurs. For wine, turn to our list of wine bars (Page 20).

Beer: Bottlescrew Bill's, where you can find close to 200 beers (Page 56).

Classic Martinis: Divino, the place for gin or vodka connoisseurs (Page 44)

Fruity Martinis: Vicious Circle, know for their roster of 141 martinis (Page 55)

Signature Cocktails: Raw Bar. We recommend The Derelict, made with Skyy vodka, lychee liqueur, pineapple juice and a homemade plum & clove jelly (Page 55).

Whiskey: Buchanan's. Their menu of single malt Scotches alone reaches 300 (Page 43).

glowing vases, and three chandeliers with show-stealing crystals.

As we slouch into over-sized chairs, everyone agrees that the interior is "cool." Over soft jazz music we deliberate over drinks like Chaitinis, French Manhattans and sparkling Proseccos. Around this time, a woman begins playing the baby grand piano, singing with a voice that reminds our table of Diana Krall and Norah Jones. Rush perfectly exemplifies Calgary's transition into urban sophistication. One of my companions proclaims that she's "already feeling it," so we decide to check out our next spot.

DIVINO: DIVINE BISTRO

When we get to Divino it is like a slice of Paris—there's a cheese display, baguettes in a basket and a large wine menu. Even the crowd here is stylish—think trendy eyeglasses, scarves, and at the table next to

us, one girl is even wearing a feather in her hair à la a 1920s flapper. We're seated next to a wall-length window looking directly onto the pedestrian traffic of Stephen Avenue, and as our eyes devour the cheese menu, our server brings us a dish of deep-fried green beans, which may sound odd, but taste delicious.

One of my co-workers orders a dirty martini. We're surprised when our server asks her for her preferred vodka (they have nine kinds), and are later impressed when the drink comes back perfect. "Most people don't know how to do dirty right," my co-worker says. "It's usually too much, or too little juice, but this is good." We finish up with some Quebec aged cheddar, an olive platter and house-cut frites with shavings of Parmeggiano Reggiano before heading across the street.

THE JAMES JOYCE: COMFORT

The James Joyce is the kind of place where you relax as soon as you walk onto their creaky wooden floors and smell their deep-fried comfort foods. Traditional Irish music plays jauntily in the background and we weave through a mix of men in suits and bomber jackets carrying on lively conversations. We find seats in one of their alcove rooms decorated with a mix of faded photographs, china antiques and window coverings splashed with the slogan "There's no time like Guinness time."

When our server appears with the menu we happily assess that it's impressive for a pub. The fish 'n' chips are great here, as are the potato nachos, but they also have healthier choices like spinach salad with fresh mangos, strawberries and almonds. After two orders of bread pudding, as well as a few drinks, we make ourselves carry on—the environment is so comfortable it's hard to leave.

FLAMES CENTRAL: SPORTS HAVEN

By the time we get here, it's last call so we don't get in, though we do notice a stretch SUV limo waiting outside. This seems to sum up Flames Central: a haven for business men to hang out, eat "upscale casual" food (like gourmet hamburgers and yam fries), be served by young blonde waitresses, and watch the game on their 30-ft. theatre-style HD projection screen. They regularly show any sporting event that's happening around the world if it's available on satellite. Although on big game nights it may be tough to get in, you could easily come here by yourself and not feel conspicuous or lonely.

BOTTLESCREW BILL'S: TESTOSTERONE

This pub shares their space with Buzzards, a western-themed restaurant serving “authentic cowboy cuisine” like prairie oysters and ale-braised bison ribs. Tonight, the crowd at Bottlescrew Bill’s appears to be groups of guys (with token girls) in baseball hats.

“Beer dudes,” one of my co-workers dryly observes. Not much wonder, they have close to 200 beers on the menu. As if to prove her point, one guy beside us excitedly points at his buddy exclaiming, “Best beer I’ve EVER had!” The waitress who approaches our table has an easy smile and when we place our order for prairie oysters she has an impressed gleam in her eye.

When they arrive, we aren’t given cutlery so we assume eating with our hands is okay. My husband unabashedly pops one in his mouth proclaiming it “not bad,” so I and a brave co-worker clink ours together with a “Cheers!” and throw them down.

They do not taste anything like chicken, instead they’re kind of sweet and mushy. Not sure if I’d eat them again, but there’s a sense of pride in downing them once. Our conclusion? This is a good place to head to for a beer later in the evening.

BEAT NIQ: SOUL

The Beat Niq is a jazz club nestled underneath Piq Niq Bistro. If Divino gives you a slice of Paris, at Beat Niq you get a taste of Chicago. Throughout the week (though mostly Thursdays to Saturdays) jazz and blues bands from around the world take the stage in this dim-lit room, crammed with small tables and people. Shows can sell out 45 minutes before starting at 9 pm.

The crowd here has a mature vibe, young and old jazz aficionados don fedoras, bowties, and tweed jackets. Some sway softly or nod their heads along to the smooth sounds of the band’s saxophone.

We all agree that it’s a unique showcase of urban culture for Calgary, and a spot you could easily slip into if you’re on your own.

THE UNICORN: GOOD TIMES

Next we stop into The Unicorn, a favourite haunt for locals and the downtown business crowd. Saturday nights attract live entertainment (with no cover), and tonight, the band is playing up-tempo rockabilly. There is a range of personality types and ages here, from young girls in flirty dresses, to a group of middle-aged empty nesters chatting at the table next to us.

The music is so loud we have to yell our drink orders to the waitress. The majority

OUTSIDE THE CORE

If you’re staying in a hotel outside of the downtown core, check out these pubs, clubs and lounges:

Near the Airport: Toad ‘n Turtle (Page 57), Flat Iron (2493 - 27 Ave NE)

16 Ave NW: Big T’s (2138 Crowchild Tr NW), Redwater Rustic Grille (Page 47)

Macleod Tr S: Radiopark (8989 Macleod Tr S), Ranchman’s (Page 31),

Limerick’s (7304 Macleod Tr S), The Atlantic Trap & Gill (3828 Macleod Tr S)

Kensington: The Kensington Pub (Page 56), Molly Malone’s (1153 Kensington Cres NW), Vero Bistro Moderne (Page 46)

of the people are smiling despite the warm mugginess. If you’re looking for a no-frills, crowd pleaser with a decent beer selection (18 on tap) this is the pub for you.

METROPOLITAN GRILL: DANCE FEVER


From outside, the bass-pumping music and colourful lights of “The Met” are hard to ignore. When we walk in the energy is high and light-hearted. By day this venue acts as a trendy eatery serving up dishes like lobster mac ‘n’ cheese, but by night it comes alive as a dance club.

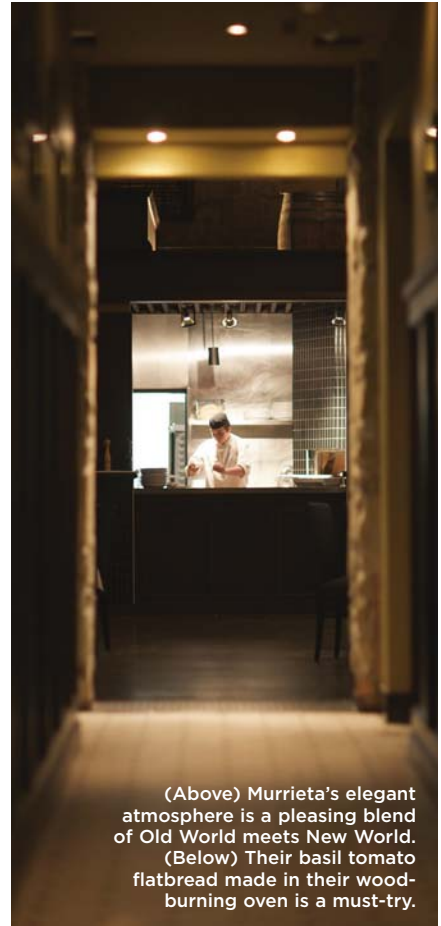
The place is packed with girls in tight dresses dancing to club mixes of pop music and flashing colourful spotlights. A good spot for a twenty-something business protegee looking to have a good time.

ESCOBA: EASY LOUNGING

Our last stop is Escoba, a wine bistro at the end of the avenue. Unfortunately we find out they close around 10 pm, but we head back a few days later. Owner Darren Hammelin explains that his laid-back wine refuge is a place where people tend to start their night.

Hammelin tells us he is very hands-on, and is always on site to chat with his patrons. Often, he says, it helps to provide the lone business traveller with some company. I recommend trying their “famous” baked spring rolls with feta and spinach, as well as their wine flights—they come in groups of three with notes on the flavours. The mood is Californian vineyard—quiet, but cultured.

Though we tried, we were unable to hit all of Stephen Avenue’s hot spots—it’s just not possible in one evening. Stewart says she has seen the city come a long way in the last two decades. “People are excited now about going out and trying places in Calgary,” she says. “When I first moved here 17 years ago, there were only a few places to go and they seemed a little sketchy. It’s nice to see how Stephen Avenue’s changed.” And that’s the good news—whether you’re looking for a pub, lounge or club, Calgary’s downtown is brimming with options. 



(Above) Murrieta’s elegant atmosphere is a pleasing blend of Old World meets New World. (Below) Their basil tomato flatbread made in their wood-burning oven is a must-try.

