

VILLAIN  
DRINK, DINE & MUSIC  
& SAINT

**I Want It Painted Black**

*Classic black defines Robert Wiedmaier's Villain & Saint*

Imagine an underground music den of the classic rock era, minus the beer-sticky floors and heavy haze of exotic smokes mingling in the air. Put up-and-coming musicians on the stage, just arms-length from the crowd, and have renowned chef-restaurateur **Robert Wiedmaier** in command of the casual gastro-pub menu. Now locate the whole scene on Wisconsin Avenue in the heart of Bethesda, Maryland. Call it “**Villain & Saint.**”

The name is a play on ‘Hell’s Angels,’ and motorcycles, as well as previous projects, are what connect Wiedmaier to Villain & Saint designer Scott Severson of Shelter Studios. The rock ‘n’ roll concept is dear to the hearts of Wiedmaier and his **RW Restaurant Group** partners Frank Shull, chef Brian McBride and Joe Lively, whose bond over music matches that of hospitality.

Severson sat down early on with Wiedmaier to hear his vision for a music venue that treats artists well, serves great food, and evokes a 1960s vibe. After that, says the designer, Wiedmaier let him loose to have fun with the design. The result is bold, easy-going, and fun, with a dramatic palette, large-scale murals and kooky details. “I tried to mix it up, and include some eclectic elements to make it feel true to the time. Design in the 60s embraced certain previous styles, so you’ll see layers and hints of Victorian and Art Nouveau in there to keep it real.”

A monumental blackboard in the tiled vestibule off Wisconsin Avenue notes the line-up of the week’s talent. Through the door, a diagonal script “Welcome” reminiscent of Carlos Santana’s 1973 album cover greets you in a BIG way, superimposed on a floor-to-ceiling still from a vintage B-movie – look closely for the motorcycles. Just beyond that, a playful installation of multicolored lava-lamps glows on the wall. “It’s all you can see if you come in at night, before your eyes adjust to the dark,” notes Severson. Behind you, set just inside the storefront vitrine, is the compact, elevated stage, with room in front for dancing, drinking, and air-guitar. A roller blind pulled down during performances proclaims “Live Music Tonight” to the sidewalk traffic. The stage act is transmitted to seven televisions inside, and two more out back on the patio; the sound is piped to three separate sound zones through discreet but powerful speakers. A dedicated app allows patrons – or would-be patrons – to check out the show on their phones.

Adjacent to the stage, a wall of distressed red brick is hung with a gallery tribute to the late-greats of rock ‘n’ roll: how many do you recognize in their sepia portraits, in Victorian costume and black oval frames?

Most walls within the deep narrow space are painted a matte black – just like Mick wanted. A raised platform to one side elevates tables for optimal stage viewing, and above the tables hang pendant lamps whose shades are re-purposed gramophone trumpets with a tortoise shell finish, sourced in England. The wall above the tables is covered in an undulating psychedelic pattern.

The black paint extends onto the ceiling, whose recessed center is lined with pressed copper tiles, giving the effect of a dark cavern with a glowing heart.

Opposite the table seating, the brushed nickel bar gleams beneath more gramophone-trumpet lamps, and industrial bar stools with wood swivel-seats add a layer of aged and honest grit. On the walls above the pair of high-tops at the far end of the bar hang a handful of guitars and electric ukuleles. A bronze sculpture salvaged from a church, depicting a winged hero-saint defeating a demon-villain, anchors this end of the interior. Antiqued mirrors behind the bar reflect Villain & Saint's impressive collection of bourbon and tequila, and whiskey and rye -- speaking of which, a nightly "last call" tradition beams a colorful lightshow throughout the cavernous space, accompanied by a sing-along to Don McLean's "American Pie," a Wiedmaier favorite.

The long black passageway leading to the rear patio is alive with psychedelic splendor. On one side, illuminated by black-lights, is a gallery of vintage 1960s handbills, advertising iconic acts and historic appearances: the Grateful Dead, Hendrix, Big Brother & the Holding Company; a who's who of classic rock at Fillmore West. A colorful Woodstock banner brings a flash of sunshine to the far corner. The opposite wall is completely covered by a large-scale mural, enlarged from a vintage postcard of a cascading woodland waterway. A stuffed carrion crow is mounted high up in the scene, "Just for fun," says Severson.

A sign at the end of the passage proclaiming "In Through the Out Door" directs you to the rear patio, a pergola-ed garden setting that seats 40 at tables and 12 at the bar. A gurgling waterfall anchors the space at the far end, and wisteria, a massive fig tree, and hanging planters surround you with natural elements. The nightly action on stage is delivered via two large televisions. A gate by the bar leads to one of Villain & Saint's most remarkable features, for downtown Bethesda: 49 parking spaces in the adjacent lot.

The basement Green Room is proof positive that Villain & Saint is a venue that honors its performers. A spacious lounge with dark walls, framed rock posters, and tie-dyed tapestries, its design is consistently cool, and thoughtful amenities including a dedicated server, dining area, cushy leather sofas, big television, big mirror, and refrigerator are here for rockers to enjoy before the show and between sets. Plenty of power sources let them plug in for warm-ups. A defunct beer fridge, too massive to be removed, is coated with flat black paint and serves as an autograph/message board between bands.

*Rock on!*

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