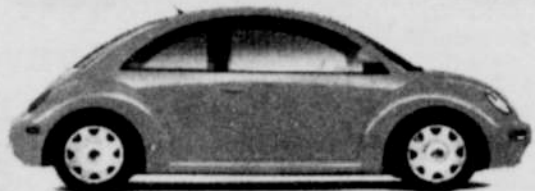


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CULTURE

Crushing a modern blend

Gay-owned wine bar expands and evolves

BY AARON SCOTT

The go-go boy wears a penciled-in mustache, a white shirt and black pants buttoned well above waist level. Tonight he's a salsa dancer. And his soul lives in his hips, where it bounces back and forth, drawing with it the eyes of half the men in the bar. He doesn't accept tips like in those downtown bars. No, like the bar he dances in, he is the perfect blend of class and camp.

The go-go platform stands unassumingly to one side of the center room of Crush's new three-room complex. The two new rooms' overarching simplicity accentuates each flourish of character: the question mark sweep of the lounge's bar, the found-art installations, the beautiful sculptures that are each room's lighting fixture. The design has all the freshness of modernity with none of its cold-hearted pretension.

And then there is the bathroom—a co-ed sink room with iridescent blue tiles and three fully enclosed, single-occupancy toilet rooms off it, like *Ally McBeal* meets summer camp cabin.

As DJ Sean Conlon says, "It's translucently funky."

Woody Clarke and Mitch Calhoun, partners of eight years, opened Crush in 2001 to create an alternative to the gay bars of downtown.

Calhoun designed and constructed themselves. The first, the new Crush Lounge, is the same size as the original space and houses the main bar, a gracious sweeping curve of concrete that shares the warm, Crush-trademark orange room with sofas, tables and hanging curtains.

The middle room, the last to fill with people on any given night, is a shape-shifter. On most nights it houses dining tables and one large corner sofa that seat small and large parties alike for drinks and food. But under the transformational power of the proper DJ, the tables can be moved aside to convert the room into a dance floor, complete with said go-go dancers.

Crush's original space has been seduced into the Vice Room: a sultry, dark-red smoking room where the bartender has free reign over the



Each of the three rooms at Crush has its own personality and crowd.



Woody Clarke (left) and Mitch Calhoun wanted to create an alternative to the downtown scene.

"Mitch and I were desperate to have a place to hang out that wasn't dirty and that didn't play porn," Clarke explains. "There was no alternative for gays with good cocktails and good food. It was slum it or nothing."

Crush didn't so much open with the pop of a champagne bottle, but more the savoring languor it takes for a nice red to breathe. It garnered a deliciously mixed crowd of dedicated regulars but didn't exactly create an eastside gay mecca. Perhaps size does matter; it simply wasn't big enough.

So when their landlord offered the space next door that previously housed the Morrison Street Tavern (a watering hole for the drunk-at-8 crowd—a.m., that is), Calhoun and Clarke could not resist.

"It was a daunting amount of work," Clarke explains. "But it would be ridiculous to spend 3 1/2 years on Crush and not expand."

Seven months later, Crush added two non-smoking rooms that Clarke and particularly

stereo, resulting in the dirtier punk, rock and electro that younger Portland queers hold so dear.

The three rooms, each with its own personality and crowd, actively compensate for Crush's eastside isolation. The constant flow of curious folk driven from one room to the next prevents each space from growing stale and simultaneously provides the opportunity for change and novelty that is important to any night on the town.

Like the venue, the Crush crowd is refreshingly unique for Portland. Men and women, straight and gay, not united by a single defining factor except, perhaps, an urbane palate. They include neighborhood folk, families for dinner, lesbian parties of 12 and solo gay men on the prowl. (Clarke claims interested parties have "no problem getting laid," although one of his bartenders qualifies that: "While it's easy to meet people, it's not a pickup joint.")

But just because Crush is all gussied-up and big-city doesn't mean it has forgotten the sense of camp and fun that fueled its initial flair. Expect events like June 26's Splash'n Show, a wet wear fashion show that includes local and parody designers; a dog show in August; the return of Calhoun and Clarke's breast cancer fund-raising party in September; and weekly T-Dances with \$1 beers and \$2 cocktails.

For a city whose gay bar scene seems barely to have progressed past the 1980s, Crush's clean beauty, joyful spunk and blend of old, new, known and novel offers a delicious sip from modernity's cosmopolitan. **JB**

CRUSH is located at 1400 S.E. Morrison St. For more information visit www.crushbar.com.

AARON SCOTT doesn't believe in mixing. He prefers it straight up.