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The Houston Brothers' Break Room 86 Sets the Wayback Machine to Excellent

Color us impressed: Flashback-themed cocktails are paired with vintage decor, karaoke, and lots of surprises in Koreatown's Line Hotel

By CAROLINE ON CRACK

Seems the Houston Brothers are incapable of slacking as they continue to raise the bar with their new projects. Good Times at Davey Wayne's shows that they can even turn your dad's shagrug-irific man cave into one of the coolest spots in town, and Butchers & Barbers proves that, yes, they can do a restaurant amazingly, too. And just when you're waiting for these guys to relax and maybe come up with only an OK spot for once, they build Break Room 86 in what is becoming the hippest hotel in L.A., The Line in Koreatown.

Break Room 86, which will open Tuesday, has all the best elements of a Houston Hospitality project: the "secret" entrance (this one is through a loading dock and behind a wall of...mumble-mumble), a stage for live performances (break dancers will make appearances), vintage details galore (check out the wall of cassette tapes and even a replica of the phone-booth time machine



from Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure), and a flashback-themed cocktail program by beverage director Joseph Swifka.

Although the bar is in Koreatown, where brothers Mark and Jonnie Houston grew up, that's not what defines it. "They like to downplay the whole K-town thing," Swifka explains. "It's part of their upbringing, but it's not the focus here. This isn't an homage to Koreatown by any means." Instead, this is a karaoke bar with a

1980s New York underground punk/rock 'n' roll vibe. Old rock-concert posters paper the walls, a wall of flickering tube televisions plays scenes from '80s videos and cartoons, and arched tiled ceilings are reminiscent of a NYC subway tunnel.

And it's the most entertaining Houston Brothers bar yet, offering tons to do with its four karaoke rooms, a mini arcade of classic '80s video games like Pac-Man, and even a smoking patio out back with talk of a mini boozy ice cream cart.

There are lots of details still getting ironed out, like whether that wall of old-school lockers will be used as liquor lockers for ballers to store their bottles of booze or how they'll serve large-format cocktails since, as Swifka notes, "punch bowls are kind of boring these days."

The cocktail program itself is good to go, though, with a short list of seven specialty cocktails (\$14 each). You won't find bad '80s cocktails gone craft as seems to be the trend nowadays, however. "I was considering that," says Swifka, "but Matt [Biancaniello] did a lot of those '80s variations downstairs [at Pot Bar], so I wanted to sidestep that. He had a White Russian and a Long Island Iced Tea."

Instead, the cocktails are inspired by Swifka's childhood and feature those artificial fruit flavors one loved as a kid in the '80s. "It's basically broken down into colors of the rainbow, and basic fruit flavors are standard flavors that you'd see at the 7-Eleven slushie machine or candy aisle," he says. "Like the grape drink, the cherry drink, the lime drink."

The Purple Rain cocktail, named after Prince's '80s movie and best-selling album, uses a Concord grape juice reduction and "should taste like a really delicious grape soda for grownups." The Dr. J is an ode to both the popular Orange Julius orange and vanilla fruit beverage and famous basketball player Julius "Dr. J" Erving. Those who used to chase after the ice cream truck will rec-

ognize the Rock-It Pop cocktail, which resembles that patriotic popsicle but is made with raspberry black tea syrup and blue curacao.

There are also boozy push-up pops and house-made wine coolers, the bar's version of bottled cocktails where they flavor wine-based drinks with syrups and juices then carbonate and bottle them. Naturally, the three on offer are inspired by classic wine-cooler flavors. There's sesame strawberry daiquiri, chili and green apple, and peach and honey Fuzzy Navel. Swifka says they're still trying to figure out whether to offer these as six-packs for the karaoke rooms.

Break Room 86 opens Tuesday and its tentative hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

