

## Downtown's Rocket Bar: We Have Liftoff

By Fritz Hahn  
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Developers are on a mission to turn the Seventh Street NW corridor into our own mini-Times Square, complete with the accompanying audiovisual overload: the giant Jumbotron screen that's constantly showing sports highlights at top volume outside Verizon Center. Mall rock blasting through the speakers at Urban Outfitters. Enormous signs outside chain restaurants, such as the golden fish beckoning customers into Legal Sea Foods.

Amid the hubbub, it's easy to walk right past Rocket Bar, whose presence is, at the moment, limited to a small sign over a single glass door next to Ruby Tuesday and a folding chalkboard advertising drink specials and the presence of pool tables and other diversions. To miss it would be a grave mistake.

The newcomer, which opened its doors last month, is hidden below ground level, under Ruby Tuesday and the soon-to-open Comfort One shoes, right across from Verizon Center. Customers descend the lime-green staircase to enter, passing sci-fi murals and rockets before finding themselves in a cozy basement clubhouse stocked with pool and shuffleboard tables, couches and seven large flat-screen TVs for watching sports.

Rocket Bar is the newest concept from the Bedrock Management group, a local company that specializes in creating comfortable, quirky neighborhood pool halls and taverns, including the similarly subterranean Atomic Billiards, Bedrock Billiards and Buffalo Billiards. (Other bars in the portfolio include Aroma, Carpool and Mackey's Public House.) The name comes from the coolest part of the decor: eight whimsical 1950s-style rocket sculptures by Jimmy Descant, a New Orleans-based artist who uses old thermoses, vacuum cleaners and other cylindrical scrap metal to make mad-scientist-worthy spaceships that I wish were in a gallery instead of mounted behind the bar. I want to look more closely at the silver model with TV rabbit ears standing in for sleek, swept-back wings, or the blue chassis sporting curved bicycle handlebars and glowing orange electric candles in lieu of afterburners.

In case you needed the theme drummed into your head, one wall features a stylish mural of an astronaut that looks like it was copied from a pulpy mid-20th-century comic book.

Globe-shaped spaghetti lights hang like planets over the glitter-topped bar, and it's clear that the owners have been borrowing liberally from their other properties. Similar lights and a sparkling bar are key elements at Rosslyn's Continental; the space-age theme has Atomic Billiards written all over it; shuffleboard tables have long been a hit at Buffalo Billiards.

Owners say this single room is about 1 1/2 times bigger than Atomic, and the posted capacity is 250, but

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nooks and platforms make it feel even more spacious. Part of the reason is the layout, which has pool tables grouped in the middle, two bars hugging the earth-toned walls and plenty of seating throughout.

Drink shelves and bar stools surround the structural support columns, while high tables and chairs have a section to themselves near the video games. Couches and banquettes are tucked into corners, while one perch, raised a few steps above bar level, features vintage '70s-style furniture. Plenty of stools line the long, curving bar, and, aware that there would be a crush on game days, designers added a small satellite bar on the other side of the room, though it's often unmanned during the week.

Rocket Bar has become my favorite place in the neighborhood for a pre- or postgame drink, but it has plenty to offer on days when the Wizards and Capitals are idle. Four pool tables should be a draw, since this is one of the few places in the vicinity offering billiards. One person on a Wednesday evening pays \$6 per hour while a couple pays \$12. Thursday through Saturday, those prices jump to \$10 and \$14, respectively, up to \$20 an hour for four or more people. Compare that to Lucky Strike across the street, which charges a flat rate of \$14 an hour after 5 p.m. daily, no matter the number of players.

There's often a wait for the two tabletop shuffleboard games, each about 12 feet long, so you'll want to arrive early to get one. Three dart lanes are available, though you should note that there's a \$1 dart "rental fee" per session. The expected Golden Tee machine is tucked into a corner, though I was happier to find an old-fashioned sit-down Ms. Pac-Man console.

Like its sister pool halls, Rocket Bar offers a growing selection of board games, because Connect Four and Battleship are perfect for whiling away the time after happy hour. You'll have to pay a \$1 rental fee, though, which with luck means that they'll be able to buy new ones when all the letters go missing from Scrabble.

I'm a fan of "traditional" jukeboxes, rather than the overstuffed Internet versions, and the vintage model is a thing to be treasured. The 90 CDs within were selected by Rocket Bar's staff, and they cover all the right bases. You can pick Donny Hathaway, the Jackson 5, Parliament, Joe Jackson, Elvis Costello, the Clash, the Shins, Pixies, Blackalicious, A Tribe Called Quest, Bruce Springsteen, Beck, or even Journey for those times when you feel the need for a tipsy 1 a.m. singalong of "Don't Stop Believin' " with your best girlfriends.

Also, this is one of the most generous jukeboxes in town: A dollar gets you four songs, two bucks are good for nine and a fiver is worth a whopping 25. (Just don't hog the thing all night, okay? Some of us can take only so much Pearl Jam, unlike the visiting president of the Eddie Vedder fan club I encountered on a recent visit.)

Back to the bar. Rocket has cheap drink options if you're saving your money for overpriced suds inside Verizon Center, including \$3 cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon and \$4 Miller Lite pints, but most of the 14 drafts are about \$5. Skip Yuengling for sublimely hopped Flying Dog Pale Ale or, in time for warm weather, the spicy tang of the Brewery Ommegang's Belgian-style Witte wheat beer. The wine list doesn't contain any notable by-the-glass selections, but it's not too expensive, either.

There's no kitchen -- the owners decided they'd rather use the space for seating and beer storage than food prep -- so you're allowed to bring your own carryout from any of the neighborhood restaurants. A collection of takeout menus is growing behind the counter, so it's okay to ask. (Popular culinary options include pizza from Matchbox around the corner on H Street or burritos to go from the nearby California Tortilla.)

Unpretentious Rocket Bar seems to have thought of everything, and other than the expected delays getting drinks after a hockey game, I've yet to have a major complaint about the place. Even the restrooms deserve praise: A friend of mine who regularly frequents Bedrock, Aroma and some other related bars was veritably gushing about the spacious women's room having multiple stalls instead of just one toilet.

Well, maybe I have one complaint: Between the buzz of conversation and laughter on weekends and the tunes blasting out of the jukebox, Rocket Bar can get pretty darn loud. But I suppose that's par for the neighborhood.

*Rocket Bar 714 Seventh St. NW 202-628-7665 Scene:* Pool, shuffleboard, a great jukebox and plenty of room to hang out make this subterranean bar a perfect pre- or post-Verizon Center destination.

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