

## Menu

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## *Nine bites to make your tongue, wallet and hours happy*

**By G.A. Benton**

Yo, cheapskate! Yeah, you. Pluck that freakin' greasy chicken wing out of your "Buffalo"-smeared maw and listen up. Given the pretty weather and ugly economy, I agree that bebopping out to gnaw on happy-hour apps for dinner can be a sound plan now and again. Certainly the half-off prices and raucous tavern ambiances often seem alluring.

But how to escape the tyranny of fried poultry parts, creamy-sauced tater chips and molten cheesed nachos (yes, they do get old)? Well, I recently discovered a beauteous bar-stool bargain I thought I must immediately share with you.

Weekdays from 3 to 6 and again from 9 to close, the Easton Brio has nine nifty nibbles it sells for a paltry \$3 — and there's not an underachieving slouch among them. I know this because I recently plowed through every single one (you see, as that annoying song goes, "I want it all!"). But I didn't just want food far above and beyond the usual bar snacks, I also wanted outdoor comfort, ADHD-satisfying scenery and NBA playoffs bouncing across flatscreens outside.



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OK, this is where I'm not going to bother trying to convince fanatical indie idealists to give even a locally grown chain restaurant in a yuppie mall a fair chance. Believe me, I feel that pain, too. But I also know a good — and cheap and delicious — thing when I eat it. And really, it's hard to beat what the Easton Brio is offering (ostensibly the Polaris branch also complies).

First of all, there's the handsome, roof-covered, open-year-round patio. It's equipped with seasonal overhead fans and underfoot heaters (when needed). Fashioned with retractable "walls" and enveloping umbrellas, it's also fitted with a granite-like permanent bar (thus the tavern deals) which overlooks a plaza.

Sure the obviously blueprinted plaza only mimics a real sense of civic park leisure, but it does it pretty well. Because there, partially hemmed in by benches, shrubs and trees, playful lights and synchronized fountains dance in matching start-and-stop rhythms that can best be described as soundlessly musical. This is a big attraction for kooky kiddies (and their tipsy elders) who love to flirt with getting squirted. It also makes for a Brio-bar-bound boredom-busting distraction.



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Likewise chasing away the workaday doldrums is that delectable, discounted yet high-end bar menu inevitably labeled Tuscan Tasters. Yeah, the name's silly (could someone please put the kibosh on calling anything even remotely Italian Tuscan?), but the munchies are not.

Taster portions are surprisingly generous and each plate is carefully assembled with quality ingredients. It's actually hard to believe so much flavor and texture can be had for the price of a

crappy fast-food sandwich. I recommend all nine, but can report that any two would be plenty for even semi-hearty eaters.

**Brio Burgers:** An all-too-uncommonly worthy ciabatta (grilled) "bun" holds a quartet of meaty, peppery, grilled to medium-rare, juicy burgers whose smokiness rhymes with their smoked mozzarella — served with rockin' house-made potato chips

**Calamari:** A plateful of exemplary tender, ungreasy squid rings and peppers coated in a light batter inflected with garlic and chili flakes are served with a pungent aioli and a zingy tomato sauce

**Beef Carpaccio:** Quite similar to this place's progenitor (Lindey's), and therefore excellent; another startling value

**Spicy Shrimp & Eggplant:** A highlight; four thick romano-crust eggplant fritters prop up grilled shrimp and are plopped down on a pool of an intense and irresistible dark peppery cream sauce

**Flatbreads:** One of the best pizza deals in town; four slices of spicy pepperoni and sausage with fresh mozzarella or a winning margherita arrive on a terrifically thin and crispy (crackly, not crackery) singed-at-the-edges crust

**Shrimptini:** Almost a dozen smallish yet clean-tasting shrimp rim a martini glass layered with a vibrantly crunchy salad, lemon, rich aioli and a homemade sweet-roasted tomato "cocktail" sauce

**Bruschetta:** Made right, on good, grilled bread topped with rare beef with gorgonzola dolce, wilted arugula and a sweet tomato chutney or big roasted red peppers, snipped fresh basil and fresh mozzarella.



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