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# GO NORTH

Denver's RiNo Arts District offers bites and booze for any budget



By **Eric Elkins**

It wasn't so long ago that the area now called River North (RiNo for short) was mostly just referred to as "north Denver." The vibrant neighborhoods were a mix of single homes and startups, small art galleries, beloved diners, and smoky bars where up-and-coming bands would get their first shot at building a fan base. But as Denver has grown and changed, so has its surrounding communities. And though RiNo has experienced its own growing pains along the way, you can still find a taste of old Denver intermixed with newer award-winning restaurants and high-end drinking establishments.

The best way to eat and drink your way through the arts district is on foot and with an open mind.

## The Daytime Wander

Whether it's a warm autumn Saturday or a blustery Tuesday, filling an afternoon in RiNo is just a matter of preferences. Do you want to drink through the day with local beers and distilled spirits? Or maybe snack and sip and check out an art gallery or two? The district offers up all manner of possibilities.

Either way, you'll want to get your start at **Denver Central Market**, a food hall where you can gird up at meat maven Justin Brunson's **Cured** or slurp up poke and ceviche at **Tammen's Fish Market**. You'll find plenty of other food options as well, plus **Etai's** bakery and even ice cream at **High Point Creamery**. If you want to start the tour with a healthy buzz, be sure to settle in for a cocktail with my friends at **Curio**.

If you're a beer taster, RiNo has more than a dozen breweries in the neighborhood. From OG stalwarts like **Rackhouse**, **Great Divide**, and heavy metal **Blackshirt Brewing** to local faves like **Our Mutual Friend (OMF)** and **10 Barrell**, or the pioneer of sour beers **Crooked Stave**, you'll find whatever style of brew hits your craving for the day. And with big brands **Odell** and **Blue Moon** serving up their beers as well, you're likely to find an old favorite.

But don't forget to branch out from beer and try something different! The cideries in the neighborhood have very different approaches, from dry and wine-like to fizzy sweetness. You could also taste local sake variations at **Colorado Sake Company**. And two wineries are bottling up goodness you won't find anywhere else. The tasting room at **Infinite Monkey Theorem** is an awesome place to try their many products while enjoying food truck fare, and **Biggsby's Folly** is a craft winery that serves food paired with its house-made vino.

For a vast wine list with an attitude, stop in at **Noble Riot** wine bar, which features the most hilarious menu in the neighborhood.

Spirits are your friend in RiNo as well, with **The Block Distilling Company's** intimate tasting room (their gins are a ton of fun), and **Ironton Distillery and Crafterhouse** which also sports an art gallery.

Feeling snacky after all those libations? In addition to Tammen's, local chef rockstar Jeff Osaka has two restaurants in RiNo that would be perfect for an afternoon bite. If you're looking to warm your body (and your soul), settle in for some heat at **Osaka Ramen**, and be sure to try the okonomiyaki fries. Or you could go a little more whimsical and take your pick of the small plates of goodness making their way along the conveyor belt at **Sushi-Rama**.

For another food hall with lots of options, step over the bridge to **Zeppelin Station**, where you can dig into a range of affordable tastiness, including **Norm's Deli** (with killer pastrami), Vinh Xuong's **banh mi**, and The **Budlong's** Nashville hot chicken. If it's getting into evening, head upstairs to **Big Trouble**, a sexy bar that serves up a Suntory highball that'll make your day.

Other delicious daytime options include Chef Troy Guard's **Los Chingones** for street tacos, **Port Side** for coffee and yummy breakfast sandwiches, or the wonderful **Comal Food Heritage Incubator** for Mexican, Syrian, and Ethiopian delights, cooked by women from underserved communities who are not only sharing traditional flavors but learning restaurant management. The food is always stellar.

If it's late in the day, don't miss **Finn's Manor**, with its magical indoor/outdoor island vibe, kick-ass bartenders making rum (and gin and bourbon) cocktails you won't find anywhere else, and a strong set of food trucks.

Denver Central Market



Sushi-Rama



Comal Food Heritage Incubator



Jimena Peck Photography



Il Posto



Bar Helix

### The Highbrow

With such a range of restaurant options in RiNo, you could spend a little or you could spend a lot on your evening experience. Whether you're looking for an impressive date night, or just a vacation splurge, RiNo's high-end spots hold up against anything you'll find on either coast.

If you're already staying in **The Ramble Hotel**, then starting out at **Death & Co** or the exclusive **Suite 6A** (with only 21 seats) is a no-brainer (see page 24 for more).

Just across the street is the stellar **Il Posto**, where chef/owner Andrea Frizzi pairs Italian dishes and wines with an upscale yet approachable ambiance. If you don't order the beef tallow candle to get started, you're doing it wrong.

For dinner and a show, **Nocturne Jazz Club** is a can't-miss. Between the killer music, inventive menu, and cool cats vibe of the place, you'll feel like you stepped back in time. Elevate your experience even more with their Renditions Tasting Menu – meticulously developed to match the themes and aesthetic of famous jazz albums.

On the other side of the bridge in **The Source Hotel**, get your belly ready for serious Israeli magnificence at James Beard Award-winning Chef Alon Shaya's **Safta**. The smell of fresh, hot pita will draw you in, but then you'll want to eat everything on the menu, especially the toasty shakshuka and duck matzo ball soup. If you're lucky enough to be there for brunch, be sure to try every bit of pastry chef Liliana Myers' delectable delights.

**Beckon** is a full-on dining experience with only 18 seats, two seatings per evening, and a curated tasting menu. Each month, the culinary team devises a seasonal set of dishes and beverage pairings to go with them. Over the course of two hours, you'll taste, sip, and savor an unforgettable multi-course meal at their horseshoe-shaped chef's counter. Reservations are pre-paid and go quickly, so you'll want to plan your visit in advance.

Chef Tommy Lee's **Hop Alley** is upscale, modern Chinese that also happens to be approachable, fun, and ridiculously delicious. You'll want to try every dish on the menu, including local favorites Sichuan eggplant and Beijing duck rolls, so bring a crew with you.

While you're over there, don't miss **Bar Helix**, where local wonder Kendra Anderson has established the sexiest bar in Denver, complete with negroni flights, caviar bumps, and all the bubbly you care to drink.

**Acorn**, with its small plates of concentrated loveliness, has anchored the RiNo Art District since it opened in The Source Marketplace. And another high-end spot with bite-sized gems of beauty is **Uchi**, where Chef Lucas Chandler is looking forward to dazzling diners with Kohada and Sawara this fall. You'll want to let the chef and his team choose your journey, so be sure to go with the omakase.

### The Modest Meander

You'll find it pretty easy to eat well and enjoy RiNo, even if you're sticking to a tighter budget. Between the neighborhood bars and approachable restaurants, affordable options are numerous.

Start your night at **American Bonded**, where even the high-end cocktails won't set you back more than 10 bucks or so. You can grab snacks at **True West Kitchen's** counter (the nachos are a meal unto themselves) at the back of the bar, or wander down the street to **Cart + Driver** for wood-fired pizza and oysters (Here's the secret: Get there after 10 p.m. for one of the best happy hours in the city. Don't miss the sardines and \$10 Manhattans).

Next door, you'll find the meaty and delicious **Work and Class**, where you order your proteins by weight. The goat is extra-special, but I never skip the perfectly-cooked lamb and tender beef short rib.

For more meat, wander up the street to **Owl-bear Barbecue**, which has quite possibly the best brisket in the city – slow roasted to perfection. And if you're pasta enthused, the counter-service Italian restaurant **Dio Mio** offers up crazy-good fresh pasta and small plates.

Just on the outskirts of RiNo is **Liberati**, the only place you'll find unique and delicious oenobeers (which are brewed with wine grapes) and Italian nachos (fried pasta piled high with olives, pepperoncini, fresh tomatoes, feta, and molten taleggio cheese sauce). The Italo-dip is a cross between a classic Italian beef sandwich and a French dip. Order it with sautéed mushrooms.

**Meadowlark Kitchen** serves late into the night (or early the next morning), so it's your best bet if you need to manage your sloshiness before heading bedward. Right next door is **Larimer Lounge**, where quite a few bands generated a following before going big nationwide.

Whichever your preferred path, RiNo has it. From the fancy to the unfussy, the pricey to the prosaic; for an epic night of fun or just a nightcap and a nosh, you'll find it there. **CT**

Liberati



Safta

# Take the Plunge

Colorado digs dives

The cheap booze.  
The sticky floors.  
The odd smells.  
The grizzled bartender.

By **Eric Elkins**

Everybody has a story about that sloshy night in a shifty bar, where you started out afraid for your life and ended up making friends with the drunken regulars who'd worn the shape of their butts into their bar stools. In Colorado, dives are the places where the locals unwind over shots of Fernet Branca and cold beers, bitching about work and life, but never about the bar they're sitting in. As much as we love our high-end cocktail culture, with all the meticulous muddling and locally sourced spirits, sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your poison.

So it's with some trepidation that I share this rundown of Colorado's fave dives, curated and cultivated via recommendations from buddies, bartenders, and boozehounds.

## Mountain Marvels

Amongst the high-end hotels and award-winning dining establishments of Rocky Mountain resort towns, a short wander can bring you into the realm of what you might call “local color.”

At the **Gold Pan Saloon** in Breckenridge, the Jamo shots flow freely. Not strictly a dive anymore, with Carboy Winery making its home in the bar and tap vino at the ready, the Gold Pan claims the oldest continuous liquor license west of the Mississippi with its start back in 1879.

Just down the highway in Frisco is one of my childhood faves, the **Moosejaw**, which was once a rough and rowdy biker bar and is still known for its massive Mother Lode burger and cheap beer. It’s pretty much the closest thing you’ll find to an old west saloon in Summit County.

And in Vail, the ski resort employees congregate down in the family basement that is **The George**, which means you can buy a brew for your favorite lift operator or ski patrol savior. It’s a cozy place, with low ceilings and puffy furniture and surprisingly good food.

I don’t know if **Coyote Café** in Beaver Creek truly counts as a dive, considering you can bomb down the mountain, down a shot of tequila at the ‘Yote and be back on the lift before the snow melts off your goggles, but it falls in the sticky, not-fancy, no-fuss dive bar category for sure.

Just west of Aspen, **Woody Creek Tavern** — all kitschy décor, walls plastered with photos, and log cabin charm — rests comfortably amidst its hoity surroundings. Stop in on a regular night, and you’re likely to find celebrities, locals, and lookers-on drinking cheap beer and enjoying the meaty menu.

If you’re on a fall foliage road trip along Highway 285 and pass through Salida, you won’t want to miss **Victoria Tavern**. Pretty much the cheapest liquor you’ll find at 7,000 feet above sea level, with a constantly shifting assortment of beers on tap. If you’re lucky, some kick-ass band will be turning up the heat on the tiny stage.

Closer to Denver on that same leaf-peeping tour is the town of Pine, where you’ll find the legendary **Bucksnot Saloon**. With a massive array of marked-up dollar bills hanging from the ceiling, a photogenic outdoor space, and a back porch perched among the trees, it’s probably the most beautiful dive bar in the country.

Winter Park aficionados know that **Crooked Creek Saloon** in Fraser is an essential stop once they’ve successfully negotiated the drive over Berthoud Pass. This super-casual restaurant and bar is low-key approachable, hosting live local music. Be sure to order a tasty tower of onion rings.

And even the dogs love **The Lariat** in Grand Lake, with its late-night pub fare and frosty beverages.



Sarah Wreck



Sarah Wreck

Crooked Creek Saloon



The Lariat



Embassy Tavern



The Occidental



Retro Room

## Denver's Dives

I'm going to let you in on a secret. And I'm counting on you not to get me in trouble when I share this. If you only go to one dive bar in Denver, go to **Star Bar**.

From the haphazard décor to the low ceilings and uneven floors, the loud music to the no-frills back patio, it's everything a dive should be. But it's also so much more. You can carry in food from any of the nearby restaurants, choose from an unparalleled craft beer selection, or drink distilled spirits that go from the cheapest rotgut vodka to the toppest shelf whiskey. And if you're lucky, some beloved local booze slinger will be belting out 4 Non Blondes on karaoke as you walk in. It's sticky, unruly, and authentic. It's a magical place, so don't ruin it.

Just about a dozen blocks north of Star Bar is another old-school dive that has quietly held its own amidst the onslaught of RiNo's farm-to-glass cocktail bars and award-winning restaurants (see page 18 for more about RiNo food and drinks). **Embassy Tavern** (formerly the much-loved Phil's Place) is a nondescript brick building on the north side of the neighborhood. But go inside, and... well... it's just a dive: wood-paneled walls with TVs above the playing card-patterned bar, the cheapest of cheap drinks, mismatched plush furniture, and a truly relaxed vibe. What you'll also find is some of the friendliest service in the neighborhood.

Sister spots like **Horseshoe Lounge** in Uptown, **The Owl Saloon** on Colfax, and longtime fave **Crow Bar** (say hi to Agata for me) offer up that same low-key charm and affordable drinks.

The strangest dive bar in Denver is all old school. You'll feel like you stepped into your grandmother's living room (or your parents' basement) when you walk into **PS Lounge** on Colfax. Not only does every woman receive a flower and a sickly sweet signature shot upon arrival, but this cash-only stop is primarily run by female bartenders who show their love for the regular customers with good-natured insults.

Committed to the cause? Do a full-on dive bar crawl on South Broadway, starting with a corn dog and PBR at **Sputnik** before moseying to **Three Kings Tavern** for live punk rock and pinball. Catch a hockey game and a schnitzel at **Sobo 151**, the Czech bar down the street, or play arcade games at **Players Pub**. The best live music can often be found at the **Skylark Lounge**, and the diviest dive on the block (by far) is **Brown Barrel Tavern**, with a barely noticeable doorway that opens into a long, narrow bar where locals quietly drink neat whiskey and cold, cheap beers.

I don't know if it's fair to classify **The Occidental** in LoHi as a dive bar — with the same owners as the nationally recognized speakeasy Williams & Graham -- it's way too clean, the bartenders are way too talented, and the cocktails are way too delicious to really qualify. But the Ox does have a divey, neighborhood feel to it, with '80s punk décor, dudes playing Big Buck Hunter against one wall, graffiti in the restrooms, and cheap beers in the cooler.

Downtown, don't wear expensive shoes into **Herb's Hideout** (they'll stick to the floor), but do settle in for killer jazz. And of course the legendary **El Chapultepec** has been hosting jazz legends for decades. **The Ginn Mill**, **Giggling Grizzly**, **Retro Room** (scorpion shot, anyone?), and **Zanzibar** all skew young, but the drinks are ridiculously cheap and they're all within the same block.

If you're catching a show at The Fillmore, you might get dragged into **Sancho's Broken Arrow**, a Grateful Dead bar that smells of feet and patchouli (and is much-loved for that reason). And of course **The OneUp Colfax** is right there for all of your vintage arcade game needs. If you're looking for a cocktail after a night of music at Cervantes, the **715 Club** is the place to go — it's dive-ish with local brews and all the cocktails, and the best part is easy access to big slabs of Famous J's pizza.



Star Bar

## The Outskirts

Just on the fringes of Denver, a healthy number of dive bars serve locals and hikers alike. Golden hosts notable faves like **Rock Rest Lounge** (try the bison burger) and **Ace Hi Tavern**, which has a happy hour from 7 to 11. In the morning.

Everybody raves about the melty cheeseburgers at **Bud's Café & Bar** down in Sedalia. Those and booze are all they serve. No fries. No sides. No salads. The tiny spot seems to have always been there, a true cowboy bar strewn with memorabilia and western art. It's a treasure.

**Cactus Jack's Saloon** up in Evergreen is all about the live music, as is their neighbor, **The Little Bear Saloon**. Spend a long evening soaking up whiskey, tunes, and good times.

Finally, this wouldn't be a proper rundown of Colorado dives without mentioning the fabled **Don's Club Tavern** just south of downtown Denver, which has been on the same block since 1947. This treasured gem was remodeled a few years ago, but it still manages to be the first bar any local will mention if you ask about dives in Denver. If you're in the neighborhood, it's worth stopping in for a whiskey.

Ready to dive in? Remember to drink lots of water and don't forget to eat something!

### Don't Ruin It.

Just a few tips to help keep your local dive bar friendly.

*Drink like the locals.*

Your fancy cocktail order may not be your best bet.

*Be kind.*

You're a guest, so be gracious, be patient, and say please.

*Read the room.*

Loud or quiet, mixing in with the mood will serve you well.

*Bring cash.*

Many dive bars don't take plastic.

*Tip well.*

Always.