

HOT SPOT

BY JEN ROSE SMITH

PHOTOS COURTESY OF
SHELburnE TAP HOUSE



Shelburne Tap House

Warm company and cold chardonnay on Shelburne Road

As an early winter afternoon turned to night, cars crawled northbound along Shelburne Road, their headlights dulled by a dusting of fresh snow. Set just back from the traffic, Shelburne Tap House is shoulder-to-shoulder with a lineup of storefronts that comprise one of Vermont's most eclectic strip malls. "You can get your hair done, you can mail off packages, and get a beer," says Shelburne Tap House owner Barbara Cote, who bought the bar in 2017. "It's the perfect location."



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Why stop there? Bar patrons looking for last-minute holiday gifts might duck across the street to Sweet G’s Smoke Shop, with an inventory that includes rolling paper-themed frisbees, vape pen batteries, and vintage clothing. Just next door, tattoo artist Michael Helz—a.k.a. Helz Kitchen Tattoo—etches more permanent designs in detailed swirls of black and gray.

Continue south, and the storefronts give way to ranks of shiny Volvos and Minis parked in sprawling lots. “Lots of people come by when they’re car shopping,” says Barbara. That’s when a writer, considering the power of lowered inhibitions, wonders aloud whether the Shelburne Tap House should demand a cut of future vehicle and tattoo sales. Barbara laughs: “I agree!”

FRIENDS GATHER HERE

Once inside the cozy tap house, whose walls are painted in warm saffron, the miscella-



neous scene and evening traffic recede. A wooden bar runs the length of the room, scuffed and scarred in the way that invites sidelong barstool conversations between strangers. “We have a slogan, ‘Friends Gather

Here,’” says Barbara. “It’s kind of that whole *Cheers* thing.”

FACES BOTH FAMILIAR AND FRESH

Barbara, who has worked in hospitality for 16



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years, says the crowd at the bar changes with the day. “There are some days I don’t recognize anybody,” she says. “That’s a great thing because there are people still finding us.” On other nights, familiar faces from South Burlington and Shelburne settle in at the barstools. “Our staff does a really great job taking care of the regulars,” Barbara says. “The minute they sit down, their cocktail or beverage of choice is sitting in front of them.”

Behind the bar, 12 draft lines feature a rotation of local draft beers, ciders, and spiked seltzer. High on a shelf, a pair of tomato-red trophies memorialize the Shelburne Tap House’s triumphs at the Champlain Valley Best Bloody Mary competition, complete with plastic garnishes of celery and olives.

Barbara says that “Taco Tuesday” is a popular time to gather at the bar, with \$5 tacos, margaritas, and a regular crowd. (Her impromptu batch of meatloaf tacos earned rave reviews on one recent Tuesday, but chicken, beef, and fish are the kitchen’s standbys.) “Thirsty Thursday” is another favorite, drawing hungry commuters for \$3 Pabst beers and piles of chicken wings sauced with one of the Tap House’s seven house-made flavors..

WHY LIMIT HAPPY?

On that particular wintry night, though, it was “Wine Down Wednesday.” Outside, snow began to pile in front of the hair salon, dry cleaners, and Shelburne Tap House. Inside, a new arrival shook white flakes from his scarf and hat. He ordered the house chardonnay—a screaming deal at \$5—and the bartender glugged a lavish pour into a round-bellied glass. On the opposite wall, booths began to fill with small groups, cheeks ruddy with the sudden heat of the room. Perched on a shelf behind the bar sat a slender, black sign lettered in gold: “Why limit happy to an hour?” ♡

Shelburne Tap House

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