



FUSE IGNITES

Nashville Nightlife

By Fred Minnick

Fuse, a nightclub in the **Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center**, is not your typical Nashville honky-tonk.

Designed by acclaimed hospitality architect Jeffrey Beers, Fuse burns, with its posh decor reminiscent of a **flashy Las Vegas lounge**. But looks alone don't cause Fuse to sizzle. Original and interactive top-quality cocktails, scintillating finger food, and a **dance-crazy music vibe** draw droves of merrymakers to this dazzling space.

Haute Hip-Hop

Clearly Fuse's Vegas-like ambience is irresistible to the nighthawks of Nashville. Tiger-striped throwback pillows adorn long, brown-cushioned benches in sections separated by shimmering gold curtains. Red and yellow rays of light bathe the modern red leather sofas and simple black barstools between the dance floor and the enormous horseshoe-shaped, black-granite bar. The 14,000-square-foot, \$10 million nightclub features go-go dancers, restrooms with see-through one-way privacy panels, VIP covers with concierge service, and a misting vodka locker filled with more than 60 brands.

The club's July 2008 opening featured Kid Rock spinning records in the DJ booth, as well as



Operating Manager Dreke Holton (left) and General Manager Nando Rodriguez enjoy a quiet moment before the Nashville nighthawks swoop into Fuse.

celebrities Kim Kardashian, Ty Herndon, and Nick Carter. And the Bravo TV network held a casting call at Fuse for its show *Make Me a Supermodel*.

On any given night, waitresses in red dresses and black or white high boots serve a diverse multitude of guests from 75-year-old grandmas to professional athletes to country music singing sensations. “Fuse brings Nashville something that was missing,” claims Operating Manager Dreke Holton. “There are clubs downtown, and they do a nice job. But there’s nothing that can compete with the glamour in Fuse.”

Nashville’s other nightclubs and bars attract tourists, make decent cocktails, and sling beer, but as Nando Rodriguez, general manager of Fuse and The Old Hickory Steakhouse, sees it, “Fuse actually gives people the excuse to say, ‘Hey, let’s get dressed up and go out and have a really good time.’ At the same time . . . you have the opportunity to utilize everything else on the Gaylord property, like shopping and entertainment. . . . Opryland is essentially like a giant playground.”

Interactive Drinks

When guests swirl a lollipop in their Forbidden Apple-Tini, pour a Bacardi Limón-based concoction to liquefy cotton candy, or stir their Trufflini with a chocolate stick, they are enjoying Fuse’s half-dozen interactive specialty cocktails, priced at \$12, that leave the final step of stirring or mixing to the customer. “Each drink is more than a drink. Each is an experience,” Holton insists.

Cocktails range in price from \$9 to \$12, and the per-person tab is about \$24. For these prices, Fuse delivers quality: freshly

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FUSE

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Nashville, Tennessee 37214
615-458-3873
FuseNashville.com

Owner Gaylord Hotels

General Manager Nando Rodriguez

Operating Manager Dreke Holton

Number of Employees 65

Bar Focus Premium cocktails with a Vegas flair

Average Drink Price \$10.50

Signature Drink and Price Cotton Candy, \$12;
Potion #9, \$12

Pouring Costs Standard cocktails, 11–12%;
specialty, 18%

Per Capita Bar Bill \$24

In the Well Premium spirits only

made sours and premium spirits. The well is filled with only high-end products such as Grey Goose, Tanqueray, Jack Daniel’s, and Johnnie Walker. With many celebrities walking through, bartenders are always ready to pour a high-end drink, and guests with deep pockets like the high-end choices for mainstay cocktails—for example, ordering a Jewel of Russia martini for \$30 instead of a Belvedere martini for \$13.

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Cotton Candy

1¼ oz Bacardi Limón Rum
1½ oz fresh sour mix
½ oz cranberry juice
Cotton candy garnish

Combine rum, fresh sour, and cranberry juice in ice-filled bar glass. Stir, strain, and pour over ice-filled highball glass topped with cotton candy garnish.

Skilled Bar Staff

There may not be a celebrity mixologist behind the bar, but Fuse is staffed with experienced, well-trained, hardworking bartenders. They know how much to pour, what garnishes to use, and how to style every single drink on the menu as well as a long roster of popular and classic cocktails.

Holton runs regularly scheduled training sessions, working on knowledge, skills, and drink consistency and administering frequent tests with his bar staff blindfolded. “We have them pour into their tins or pour into the testing boxes that we have to see where they’re at and where they need to be,” he explains, adding, “They pour left-handed and right-handed.”

About 800 people applied for Fuse positions when it first opened in July of 2008. The nightclub hired 65, and 60 of those original hires still work there. Rodriguez credits this low attrition rate to the camaraderie and training, and to treating the workers well. “We refer to our employees as stars,” he remarks. “We believe in taking care of our employees, and they’ll turn around and take care of the guests. And that will end up taking care of the bottom line.”

Nightlife Fare

Fuse may exceed most Las Vegas nightclubs when it comes to food. Executive Chef Brian Owenby, who composes the menus for Fuse and other spots in Opryland, has raised after-hours finger foods to a new level, selling items such as a chicken flatbread pizza made with sauteed onions, peppers, mustard barbecue sauce, barbecued chicken, and shredded cheese. But some of the chef’s offerings are not always as well received as the aforementioned best seller. “A lot of nights we won’t have a lot of food eaters,” admits Owenby. “Anything too far out there . . . won’t be successful, like . . . octopus.”

For the most part, Owenby’s food and labor costs are low compared to those of similar operations because he shares his staff and ingredients with other restaurants in the Opryland. “You can always utilize the things everywhere in Opryland,” he notes. “Whenever we do have really huge parties, there’s plenty of staff out in the hotel we can pull from.”

Great Music and Flow

Even without its spectacular decor, tasty drinks, and food, Fuse would draw thousands each night on the strength of its DJ, Tyrus Briggs—Nashville’s best. He blends old-school R&B with country, and party classics with electro, creating a sound that keeps crowds on the dance floor and at the bar ordering drinks. Briggs boasts that he can read a crowd and “create the sexy mixes that get the pulses going.” Despite the dance atmosphere, Fuse is a good place even for those who don’t dance. “You can move from the lounge out to the dance floor, back out to the lounge, and behind one of the bars,” Rodriguez muses. “Fuse has great flow to it.”

Fred Minnick (FredWrite.com) is a journalist and photographer who writes about the hospitality industry and other subjects.