

Drinks: Milwaukee Untapped **FOOD & WINE**

With cracked vinyl, plastic flowers and the occasional polka band, Milwaukee's best bars are tiny strongholds of authenticity in a world full of imitation.

LOUISA KAMPS April 01, 2002

"Why, it's a world class of people!" says the tiny, bustling bartender at National Liquor Bar, spreading her arms wide to indicate her patrons. It's a snowy December night in Milwaukee. The neon sign outside--a giant brown bottle pouring out an eternally trickling stream of golden hooch--glows through the frosty front window. Everyone from "the homeless to top businessmen" frequents the place, she says, although at the moment only a few beefy guys dressed in Carhartt and Green Bay Packers jackets are huddled around the bar--decompressing, from the looks of it, after factory shifts.

A three-in-one establishment--with a long rectangular bar and a greasy-spoon diner plonked down in the middle of a vast, fluorescent-lit liquor store--National Liquor Bar is the paradigmatic watering hole for a city where there's never any shame in satisfying the urge for a brewski. The glory days of Milwaukee brewing may have ended with the departures of Schlitz in 1982 and Pabst in 1996, but Wisconsin is still one of the top beer-drinking states in the land. Shoppers picking up a bottle to take home say "What the hay?" and stop at the bar for a 90-cent Milwaukee's Best from the tap. Solitary old ladies drop in at midday for a glass of High Life. And when the Packers are playing, you might even spot a few suits hollering up at the TV.

Then there are patrons like me, urban preservationists who come here for a shot of Milwaukee, straight up, without the frippery and fakery of the new theme bars that threaten places like this. Ever since I was a kid and would meet my dad for lunch downtown in a dark tavern near his office, it's seemed to me there's magic in Milwaukee's best old bars. The German immigrants who began rolling out the barrels of beer here in the 1840s called it *gemütlichkeit*--meaning, essentially, coziness. Milwaukeeans, despite their reputation for "never saying nothing out," have a way of unwrapping all their protective layers--literally and figuratively--in

their city's most welcoming nightspots. Whenever I feel weary of New York City's endless succession of new see-and-be-seen boîtes, I go home to Milwaukee for a little gemütlichkeit. And I know that when I go out, if I choose my taverns carefully, I'll have plenty of company.

Opening the door of Art Altenburg's Concertina Bar for the first time in years, I am relieved to find the party still in full swing. Art's polka palace has been a haunt of mine since high school (sorry, Mom--and sorry, Art). On a tiny stage, elderly gentlemen squeeze out a happy double-time waltz on their concertina accordions. Silver-haired men in snappy flannel shirts and women in gold-trimmed sweatshirts swirl in tight, fast circles around the dance floor. Art, who must be in his eighties, is busy behind the bar mixing drinks. Art's idea of hype is souvenir T-shirts with a silk-screened concertina that has actual cloth handles. As Bernie Rafalski models it, her husband, Lenny, the drummer in Art's band, sneaks up behind her, reaches his arms around her shoulders and pumps his hands in and out--just to make sure everyone understands that the loops are there so you (or a friend) can play your bosom like a bellows. Bernie turns and swats him.

Next is Long Trail Tavern, a no-frills bar nearby. My friend Eva Robar-Orlich, once the fourth runner-up in the Wisconsin State Fair apple-dessert competition, piqued my interest with a story about the owners' souvenir liquor decanter collection. When they learned the decanters would be worth just as much empty, they drank them dry and then returned them to their Plexiglas display case. Eva's also told me the Trail is a notorious pick-up spot.

My own opportunity knocks the minute we walk in the door, as a guy dressed entirely in camouflage says, "Hi, my name's Jeff, and if you want to get hitched, I promise I'll never cheat on you and I'll raise our kids right." I'm so startled that I can think of only one possible complication: Do they make camo for babies? But I needn't have worried. Later, I hear Jeff make the same pitch--volubly and verbatim--across the bar to another woman, who keeps sucking her Merit without a flinch. Maybe she's been burned by the Trail before.

The next night, I stop by Bryant's, on a residential street on the south side. Because Bryant's specializes in ice cream drinks--it claims to have invented the Pink Squirrel: crème de noyaux and crème de cacao blended with vanilla ice cream--my friends and I are meeting here "for dessert." I'm the first to arrive, so I

pass the time asking a bleached-blond waitress named Shirley if things have changed in the 36 years she's worked here. "Well," she says, "we maintain a certain status quo. We don't tolerate foul language. The clientele stays about the same age, and we just get older." She chuckles. "But we play contemporary music, like Sinatra."

When my friends show up, we begin the lovely ritual that is ordering at Bryant's. Because the bar makes about 400 different drinks, you simply describe your hankerings to the waitress, who translates them into a cocktail. Unable to decide, my friend Tom Landre asks, "Do you have anything with skulls in the name? Do you have anything made with Limberger?" Shirley just gives him a Pink Squirrel. Later, slurping up his third--ice cream drinks go down as fast as malted milks-- Tom says, "I could drink three more, no problem."

We don't let Tom drive us to Bryant's rival cocktail lounge, At Random. The feel of the place is similar to Bryant's--vinyl, mirrors, plastic flowers in need of a good dusting--and the drinks here, like the fabulously sweet-sour Mexican Water Lily, also pack a rope-a-dope punch. When I ask the owner about the popularity of his frozen drinks, he launches into a scientific-sounding explanation. "Well, there's fat in there--a natural hormonal endorphin releaser," he begins, then cuts himself off as he seems to realize the ludicrousness of trying to pin down the appeal. "It's just Milwaukee, on a Saturday night!"

On my final night in town, I drive around with my old friend Paul Finger, reminiscing about the taverns we've loved and recently lost. Mine is Litke's Ol Place, where I've spent some of my happiest New Year's Eves snacking on the oddly delicious combination of sauerbraten and marshmallow salad. Paul's is Sczesny's Candid Tap, where the nicotine-stained walls and pressed-tin ceiling were the exact shade of yellow--a white-turned-ocher-over-time--that gives the best corner taps their hearth-like light. In a sappy infomercial voice, Paul imagines what Martha Stewart would call that color: "Distressed Life!"

Paul is troubled by the idea that someone might put his town's neighborly style of socializing in a can and sell it. "You've got people pillaging old places for their woodwork and molding, then sending everything to Chicago, so people there can build a fake Milwaukee bar," he says. "And then people in Milwaukee--thinking of something they saw in Minneapolis that's copying Chicago's fake Milwaukee bar--

build some new fake-old bar back in Milwaukee in the same space where the real thing used to be!" This is why a certain bar here serves apple margaritas with a wedge of Wisconsin Cheddar stuck on the rim. And it's why there are now two long strips of cavernous theme bars where the atmosphere--old brewery paraphernalia everywhere, music so loud the bass rattles your sternum--might be described as *gemütlichkeit* on steroids. So it gives me no small pleasure to report that just a stone's throw from one such strip, Tony's Tavern is fighting the good fight.

Hands down my favorite Milwaukee bar, Tony's is run by Tony Pogorelc and his wife, Ann, beneath the old rooming house Ann's parents bought in 1920. Tony, who's in his early seventies, sits behind the bar in a sweatshirt. The "Nut Hut," a glass box with heat lamps that warm mixed nuts, glows near one end of the bar, and Tony's real-record jukebox (do yourself a favor and hit number 141, Artie Shaw's "Star Dust") glows at the other. As Paul and I take swigs of the local Lakefront Brewery's smooth Cream City Pale Ale, Tony points out Ann's dad in a Prohibition-era photograph. "They put on suits and hats to go drink in somebody's basement," he says, wrinkling his nose.

As Paul and Tony catch up, I consider why this place is so great. Is it the solidity of the spotless mahogany bar, worn at the lip from so many bellies rubbing against it over the years? Is it the curious collection of alpine herbal liqueurs that never seem to get drunk? Of course. But then I realize that the real beauty of a place like this is simply its ease--the vibe that is the very definition of "come as you are." I ask Tony what his favorite kind of night at the bar is, and he answers with a shrug: "Every night is different. You just accept it as it is. There's no such thing as 'your night'--it's the people's night." And tonight, as always, I'm glad to be one of the people.

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