

Small Joints— Cool Bars Just ‘Round the Corner



In 1981, producers Les Charles, Glenn Charles and Jim Burrows were looking for a neighborhood bar in Boston to model for a proposed television series. Dozens of bars, lounges and pubs were considered and rejected. The stream of places referred to them by friends and associates was quickly exhausted. Some establishments were engaging, others raucous, but none had that certain “it.”

Their fortune changed when out of frustration they resorted to leafing through the Boston phone book. Near the top of a page was a small ad for the *Bull & Finch*. What they found when they went there was an English-style pub located under a small neighborhood restaurant. While long in the tooth, the pub had a warm, inviting feel, the kind of place where it’s easy to spend time, relax and share a pint with friends. The trio had found their bar.

The Bull & Finch soon became America’s favorite bar, the place “where everybody knows your name and you’re always glad you came.” While a dash of luck and good timing helped, the success of the bar was the product of a precise and orderly mind.

“When I started in this business, my partner and I toured Europe studying pubs and bars,” says Bull & Finch owner Tom Kershaw. “We looked at scores of places. Over there, pubs have real staying power and don’t fall out of style or fashion. They have significance as meeting places and are central to people’s social lives. We incorporated what we learned into the Bull & Finch. Apparently those efforts paid off.”

And according to Kershaw, of course size matters. It’s hard to create a place to which people feel connected with an arena-sized venue. While much is said and written and celebrated about large-format bars, restaurants and clubs, many of the most well-run and longstanding establishments occupy considerably less space, but own a large portion of our souls. No, in this case, small is beautiful and the shared characteristic of our most cherished watering holes.

Case in point is *Marcus’ Martini Heaven* in Seattle. The subterranean haunt is located under Pioneer Square in what was the lobby of a 19th century hotel at the city’s original street level. The bar has the timeworn look of a speakeasy

Send us your comments at amo@barmedia.com

with exposed brick and stone walls, wood beam ceilings, demur lighting and the occasional waft of dank stagnant air. While some may perceive the place as sketchy, the steady stream of people pouring through Heaven's door come for the ambience and its impressive roster of cocktails.

What's one man's dive is another's home away from home. Give Americans a night off and we're just as likely to traipse to the place down the block as we are to stay on the couch.

"My favorite bar to while away a night is *Tony's* in the warehouse district downtown in Los Angeles," says Aidan Demarest, director of spirits and beverages at glamorous The Edison. "Although it was recently renovated, Tony's hasn't lost the hole-in-the-wall feel. In fact, it has the requisite 5 dive bar components—booze, beer, juke box, pool table and killer bartenders."

Even after a facelift Tony's still looks every bit of its 60-years. The dark wood interior, antique bar and low lighting create a post-war atmosphere. Although low-key and unpretentious, don't expect watered-down drinks served in dirty chipped glasses. General manager Skyler Reeves—who left a cushy gig in West Hollywood to manage Tony's—has stocked the backbar with a serious complement of whiskeys and devised a menu full of all-star cocktails aimed at attracting urban explorer-types.

Demarest admits the place may strike some as unsavory. "I left work one night, hopped in a cab and headed for Tony's. When I got there, the cabbie looked at me dressed in a suit and refused to drop me off. He said he wouldn't be responsible and that there had to be somewhere safer for me to have a 'good time.' So he turned around and drove me back. Ironically, the next cabbie knew Tony's and raved about it the entire 20-minute ride."

Small Landmarks

At 460 square feet, *The Matchbox* is undoubtedly Chicago's most intimate bar. The 75-year-old institution is indeed tiny—three-foot wide at one point—and every night it's a full house. "The place should be called 'the bar

where you can't fall over,' the room is so narrow," observes trader writer and beverage expert Jack Robertiello. "But they've been expertly preparing cocktails for years, using fresh ingredients and high quality products. Great people, great scene, great drinks."

Located on the corner of Ogden and Milwaukee, the Matchbox draws an eclectic crowd, all of whom apparently appreciate well-made drinks, the large assortment of brews and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow revelers. It's an offbeat, yet thoroughly engaging experience.

The same can be said for hoisting a few at the *Cherry Tavern* in New York's East Village. It's a relaxed neighborhood joint with dated furniture, subdued lighting, loud rock and tons of atmosphere. "I love hanging out here with friends and drinking some good beer," confides Jonathan Pogash, director of cocktail development for New York's Hospitality Holdings, which operates The Campbell Apartment and The World Bar, among other venues in Manhattan. "Inexpensive and unassuming, it's a great place to escape to. Everybody should have somewhere like this to escape to once in a while."

Inexpensive and unassuming speaks volumes about the draw of small neighborhood bars. Most of those interviewed for this piece expressed a visceral connection with their favorite haunts, yet couldn't quite put their finger on exactly why.

And then there's Tito Beveridge of Tito's Handmade Vodka fame, who knows exactly what he most appreciates about Austin's *Ranch 616*. "The place is an authentic South Texas Ice House with cool artwork of 1920s cowgirls, a great waitstaff and food to die for. But what makes it unique and why I keep going back are the owners—Kevin, Antonio and Matt. They give the place character and make every guest feel like they're family coming back home."

The reputation of many a small landmark has been forged by its owner's personality, likely none more than that of the *Billy Goat Tavern* in Chicago. Located under Michigan Avenue near the offices of the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun Times, Billy "Goat" Sianis opened the famed sports bar in 1937.

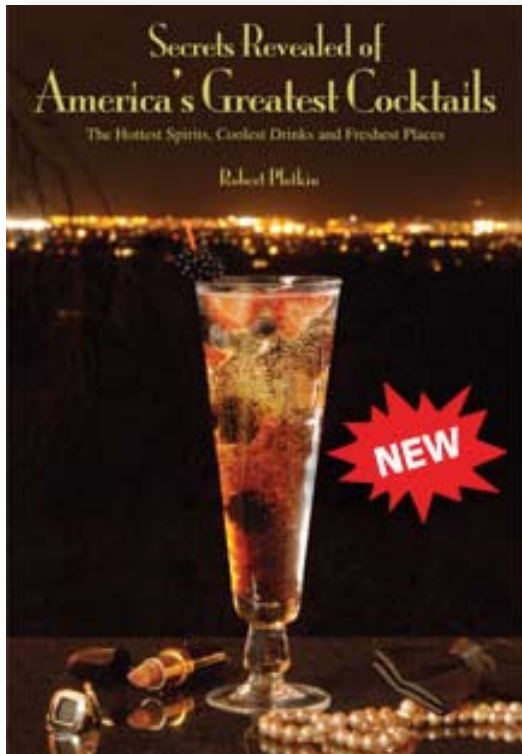
Send us your comments at amo@barmedia.com

He garnered national attention several times. First in 1945 when his goat and he were kicked out of Wrigley Field during game 4 of World Series and then again as the inspiration for SNL's Olympia Cafe sketch ("Cheezborger, Cheezborger, Cheezborger. No Coke. Pepsi."). It's said Sianis' personality filled every square inch of the place, so much so that journalist Mike

Royko declared Sianis the "Greatest Innkeeper in Chicago."

Observes Jack Robertiello, "You won't hear as many customers ordering Cheezborger and coke to get the crowd to yell 'No Coke, Pepsi,' but you're guaranteed great time knocking back a few brewskis and rubbing shoulders with all sorts of Windy Citizens."

Robert Plotkin is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books. You can reach him at BarMedia— robert@barmedia.com.



Only For Our Subscribers!

The Best in Fresh Mixology!

Visit BarMedia.com to get this invaluable Hardcover cocktail guide now at a very special price for our subscribers only!

Was: ~~\$19.95~~, Now: **\$9.95** + S & H
Enter code **SCRT032610** at checkout

Valid until 03/26/10