

## in praise of dive bars

**g**oing to dive bars is like sex—you never forget the first time and oh, how you long for more. I lost my dive bar virginity to a place in New Orleans called Aggie & Johnny's. A naive 20-year-old, I had experienced only the requisite college hangouts until some fraternity pals suggested we end our evening of reveling with a visit to the seediest joint on St. Charles Avenue. When we walked in, I couldn't believe my eyes. The remains of a ceiling fan gamely tried dissipating thick clouds of cigarette smoke. Tiles tumbled off the walls the instant you leaned against them. Knowing that they had the run of the place, roaches didn't skitter by—they sauntered past with an air of *noblesse oblige*. A barstool collapsed under one of my drunken friends as soon as he sat on it, like in a Three Stooges sketch. The bar was populated by a gamey group of old men who probably hadn't left their seats since Huey Long ran for governor. I was in heaven.

Dive bars—also affectionately known as Old Man's Bars—are relics of a time when every American neighborhood had its comfortably dingy local hangout. Like the *Cheers* bar, they're often a place where everybody knows your name. Even better, they're often a place where you can do whatever you want in total anonymity. I've had some makeout sessions in the booths of dive bars that would have gotten me booted out of so-called better establishments.

After I graduated and moved back to New York, my fascination with dive bars waned for a few years. Then one day, an actress asked me to leave a copy of a script for her at a place called Rudy's Bar & Grill. A warped Patsy Cline tune warbled on the jukebox. The floor was even covered with sawdust, a rare dive bar perk. Who says you can't go home again?

Once I found Rudy's, there was no stopping my quest to ferret out New York's finest dives, oxymoronic as that may be. Each hangout had to satisfy a demanding checklist before earning an honored place on my roster. A true Old Man's Bar should be pitch dark, even at seven in the morning; it should have a pockmarked dart board that you have to duck under as you wend your way to the decrepit bathrooms, which feature a host of profane, misspelled graffiti; dusty Christmas decorations hang year-round; the jukebox's tunes must range from Queensryche to Frank Sinatra, with at least one sappy rendition of an Irish classic like "Danny Boy" thrown in for good measure; the beer should be cheap, on tap and American; and above all, there should never, NEVER be more than a handful of adventurous yuppies scoping out the premises.

After much exhaustive and often bleary-eyed research, I finally chose a bar called The Jaunting Car as my regular port of call. My friends and I were quickly on a first-name basis with John the bartender, who had the bemused, laconic personality that seems part of the job description for all dive bartenders. We celebrated my thirtieth birthday at The J.C., and as a scratched rendition of Bing Crosby's "Happy Birthday," played on the jukebox, I sighed with contentment and wondered if life could get any better.

Alas, little did I know that The Jaunting Car's days were numbered. One bleak evening, John announced that The J.C. was closing and he was moving on. Gentrification had claimed another victim. There was only one thing for me to do: move.

Since sleek and sumptuous LaLaLand seemed the least like-

ly place to find a good dive bar, I sadly put that part of my life behind me. Then a wonderful thing happened. A gentlemen friend of mine who knew of my passion for low-rent hangouts gave me the second-best birthday present in the world (the first, as we'd all agree, being a randy weekend in bed).

After dining at a typically trendy L.A. restaurant, David took me to a Venice hole in the wall called Big John's. As soon as we walked in, I wanted to cry with happiness. The place was as dark as Hades. A faded tinsel Christmas garland hung above the bar. Although there were only four patrons in the place, a cloud of cigarette smoke as thick as volcanic discharge filled the entire room. A pool table and pinball machine made up for the lack of a dartboard.

Not long ago, David and I rendezvoused with some friends at a dive-bar-turned-trendy restaurant in Santa Monica. Wedged between gaggles of yuppies, we waited a tortuously uncomfortable half-hour for a table that never materialized. Finally, we steered our friends out of this living hell and over to Big John's, where we ordered in pizza and played round-robin pool. Where else but in America today can you find this kind of atmosphere—and beer for a buck and a quarter? ♥

