

MARK SHAFFER ponders the relationship between a man and his bar.



Woody: How's life treatin' you, Mr. Peterson?

Norm: Like it caught me in bed with its wife.

A little more than a year ago while scouting out Beaufort on a whim, I wandered off the beaten path and into a local bar, parked on a stool and ordered a beer. A month later my wife and I were brand new residents and considered “regulars” at this particular establishment. And while I frequent other bars (hey, it's my job) I always come back to The One. It's my Cheers, my comfort zone. I'm part of the family. This is where I catch up on news, check the pulse of local politics, meet friends and make new ones, debate, and network, relax, write and watch sports. It's my bar.

So I asked some friends knowledgeable in such things to ponder the sort of qualities one looks for when claiming a stool as a regular. My friend Warren recalls the halcyon days when “you could call a bar your own if you got phone calls there or if people sent your mail there. Those days are gone with cell phones and email. I used to claim The Lion's Head in Atlanta because the bartender, Otha, knew my name and could keep up with my ever-changing choice of beverage.”

My pal Richard writes “All bars are mine when I walk in the door. The rest depends on the bar. I can just as quickly walk out the door again.”

What should a regular expect? “My drink to be waiting when I sit down,” says Warren. “The bartender to greet and talk to me like a friend.” When I lived in Las Vegas my preferred mixologist, Jeff, always had a beverage on the bar by the time I took a seat, even if I hadn't made up my mind. He had the uncanny ability to read his regulars. Whether it was a beer or a bourbon, he always got it right.

Richard prescribes a simple formula. “Ask me what I want. I will tell you. Get it for me. I will pay and tip well. Do all that and I'll be back – a regular – even if it's Atlanta and I'm only there three times a year for Braves games...a good bartender will remember a loyal (if infrequent) customer, and (eventually) I'll be granted some honorary status ... out-of-town membership, if you will. Back home, the same theories apply – only more often.”

My buddy Warren affirms that it is indeed possible to be a regular at more than one bar, “but there's always a favorite place to close out the night.” But as Richard points out, “Unfortunately, the neighborhood bar – one you can walk home from – has become a thing of the past.” Strip-malls, urban sprawl and our addiction to the automobile have killed the concept for most of us. I find this a sad fact since the common ancestor of all bars is the Public House – or pub, as we've abbreviated it - a traditional gathering place for the community. This was a place where people met to share a pint or two and catch up on the news, debate politics and religion, insight

sedition, settle business, fall in love (forever or just for the night), research a novel, sing a song, write poetry, or simply find comfort in the crowd. There are pubs in the British Isles nearly 1000 years old. That's a millennium of regulars with an allegiance to a certain concept of neighborhood. Corporate logos spread across interstate exits, airports and shopping malls don't care about such things. It's not in their bottom line and their bottom line is based on the concept of "turnover," not family. That's what regulars – good regulars - are, family. And that is a privilege indeed.

Email feedback and ideas to backyardtourist@gmail.com