

D.C.'S PHARMACY BAR DISPENSES DRINKS & DREAMS

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It's amazing how much is really possible. I could, for example, move to Paris or Slovenia or Dublin. I could just do it. Sell my car, put my stuff in storage and go. I could. I can. I forget that sometimes. But I was reminded a few weeks ago, over beers in Washington, D.C. My cousin Brian (American) and his wife, Oonagh (Irish); my cousin Michael (American) and his wife, Clara (Spanish); and friends Sarah (Irish) and Wim (Belgian) were all in town from their various glamorous European capital lives. And, listening to them and their various accents, as well as my Belgian friend Julie, with whom I was staying, I remembered that if I really wanted to, I could pick up and move, too. I was thinking about all this in the apothecary sheen of the Pharmacy Bar, by the way. The Pharmacy Bar is my favorite gin joint in our nation's capital. Though one of my cousins called it a "New York" kind of bar -- perhaps because it's small, dark and hip -- it seems to me simply an urban kind of bar. Less because of the theme -- the 14 tables are decorated with 10,000 outdated, over-the-counter pills set in glass -- than because of the things around it.

You climb stoop steps to get in. It's in a tall, narrow building. The front window looks out on the street and stools provide a fabulous view of humanity wandering by. We walked there from my cousin's apartment, though we could have taken the Metro. It's a neighborhood kind of bar and the neighborhood has a name (Adams Morgan) instead of a set of cross streets to identify it. And cabs cruise by regularly. Urban.

The bar itself is a goodly place. Sixty people would fill it up, though some of them would have to stand, given that the tables are spaced with elbows and knees and breathing room in mind. (And, rumor has it, if it gets too full, the bouncers ask people to come back later. That's cool. And there are bars all up and down the street, so no one will be too discommoded.) Pavement and Leonard Cohen are now gone from the jukebox (it changes every two months). But we can sub Yo La Tengo and Neil Young.

Some customers have tattoos, some Brit pop haircuts, some just look like ordinary folks. It's that kind of place. As a matter of fact, an apparently famous indie band sat next to us one night, though no one could remember the name.

A table top Galaga/Ms. Pac-man beckons from just inside the door, and beverages call from the bar at the back. Beer ranges from Sierra to Guinness. Sandwiches range from veggie portobello with brie to a giant club.

The Pharmacy Bar seemed to me like the quintessential hip urban bar -- genuinely, not affectedly, cool, completely integrated into its funky neighborhood. Perhaps it was New York-like. Or San Francisco-like. Or Dublin-like. Or like any city where people can live whole lives within a 10-block radius.

In a poem called "Going There," Jack Gilbert writes of an emotional disaster -- adultery

maybe. Or perhaps only the terrible end to a relationship: "Going over and over afterward/what we should have done/instead of what we did."

But it's the closing lines that are most moving: "Still, for that/little while, we visited/our possible life." Our possible life. In the Pharmacy Bar, with my cousins and friends, I imagined, I visited a possible life. And then I came home.

The Pharmacy Bar. 2337 18th St. NW, Washington, D.C., (202) 483-1200.