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Here, It's All About the Beer

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I remember sitting out on a deck listening to the Old 97's play at the Ginger Man. This, of course, was the Ginger Man in Dallas, and the Old 97's hadn't yet started drawing the kinds of crowds they do now. Rather, a bunch of people I'd known in high school (we were home from college) would hang out, half-listen to the band and catch up with each other. We'd drink Duvel, a Belgian beer my Belgian friend Julie introduced us to and which led to some of our more entertaining evenings, and sit on long benches in the sun, while strains of "The Other Shoe" floated in the background. ("One old brown shoe falls in slow motion. . ." Man, I still know all the words.) It was great.

The Old 97's tend to play capacity crowds at Emo's and Stubb's these days, and I finished college awhile ago. But I still like going to the Ginger Man -- the Austin one, these days -- to have a Duvel or a Celis or any one of the other zillion beers the bar offers. I sit indoors now -- the Texas sun has gotten scarier or I've gotten more aware of it -- and still catch up with folks, though fewer of them are friends from high school, and more are friends here in Austin (and some, God bless them, are both).

The Ginger Man started in Houston, opened a second location in Dallas in 1992 and then a third, in Austin, in 1994 -- though each is owned by local folks, rather than a corporation. (There's now a fourth in New York City as well.) The Austin Ginger Man is, like the others, a pub: dark wood snugs, darts, pool, beer garden, the aforementioned zillion beers from around the world. Actually, the Ginger Man is all about beer. There are about 100 on tap, more in bottles, from countries such as Germany, Australia, Belgium, the United States, Great Britain and Ireland. You can buy cigars at the Ginger Man, but not liquor and only a few wines. You must drink beer. Good beer, at that. I never see anyone with a bottle of Bud Light in hand. Perhaps because it's not offered.

Monday nights are logo night: If you buy the beer of the evening, you get to keep the logo glass. I've always liked drinking Duvel from a Duvel glass, Chimay from a Chimay glass -- at least, I've liked it ever since my friend Julie told me that in Belgium you'd never be served a beer without the appropriate glass. Something about that appealed to the budding beverage connoisseur in me. Of course, when I visited Julie in Belgium, I was very excited that I was knowledgeable enough to expect the appropriate glass. I was 19 then. Everything was exciting. Even Belgium. (Kidding, Julie. Really.)

The Ginger Man grub is good beer-drinking fare -- pizza and pretzels and the like -- and the bar itself, like its counterpart in Dallas, is conducive to lazy, rambling conversations on late afternoons or in early evenings. Especially in the summer; for nostalgic reasons, I like the Ginger Man better in the summer. Weekend nights, the Ginger Man is a sort of end-up place for me, though it's sometimes crowded, sometimes really crowded. But then, I rarely go there late night without a crowd myself.

Gender-wise, the bar tends to be more male than female, especially early evening-ish. As my friend Kurt said, the Ginger Man doesn't seem like a place most women would choose for a girls' night out, though it could well appeal to guys for boys' night. Regardless of gender, the crowd is usually a mix of ages, which I like -- you'll find folks in their 40s, 50s, 30s and 20s. And most of them won't look at you funny if you hum something about old brown shoes under your breath as you order a Duvel.

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