

OBEY THE WAYS OF THE DIVE BAR

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Dive bars run on rules.

Once upon a time, I went into a dive where you only ordered cocktails only during cocktail hour, you had to know what you wanted before you spoke to the bartender, you didn't come in large groups and you had to carry something close to exact change to pay. At least, you did if you wanted a drink. The man had rules, and you never disrespect a bartender's rules in a dive bar.

Dive bartenders were probably working there long before you discovered the joint and they'll be working there long after your screaming liver insists you occasionally stay home. They can kick you out, cut you off and cut you down to size.

They can, like Sarah of Dry Creek, insist that you bring your bottles back to the counter your own self. Heck, they can tell you the bar's closed — no matter if there are 15 other patrons and it's only 8 p.m. and the bartender's pouring someone's drink.

Really, I've seen it happen — and you must go. Quietly. Without argument. Lest you get banned.

Dive bars are people's homes. Regulars receive the news of the day at their dive. They know the owner's kids and grandkids and may even have purchased those kids and grandkids a beer at the dive, age permitting. (Truth be told, their patronage probably helped put those kids through college, too.)

It's the place regulars go and are known, from the top of their heads to the bottom of their beer mug. And most of them, at one point or another, have been lonesome, which is why they'll say hello to you, pass the time of day.

Dive bars are where you go when your heart's broken and where you go to get your heart broken. They're often open at 8 a.m. to greet the night shift coming off duty and sometimes the owners'll make eggs. You never drink alone at a dive bar — and that can mean whatever you want it to mean, and sometimes things you never imagined it would. Says my friend Eileen of a dive bar where she and Melissa occasionally go to have martinis with shots on the side, "A white-haired gent once removed his dentures to be better able to enunciate his offer of a drink. I accepted."

I canvassed my friends for stories, realizing just how many of them are divers. I racked my brain and realized how much of my life happens in dives: the break-ups, make-ups, hook-ups, dance-offs, fall downs, pick-ups, crack-ups and dominoes.

And then I, together with my friends, made a list of what makes dives dives. And what makes them great. My thanks to Whiskey Susan, Dan Zehr, Ryan Muldoon, Chris

Muldoon, Eileen Gordon, Melissa Steeves and Brian Cannon — I owe each of y'all a Lone Star and a ticket at Ginny's chicken (expletive deleted) bingo.

Most, if not all of the following are true of dive bars:

A dive will often display a photo collage of their regular patrons in impaired states.

In a dive, it is not unusual for a patron to pay for his beer in change.

Dives often advertise set-ups (mixers to which you may add your favorite alcoholic beverage).

Acknowledgement by the bartender/wait staff beyond the drink order is earned.

Brown wood paneling is a major architectural element of the dive bar.

Dirt is structural.

Dives have a brand of beer regularly available for \$1.50 or less. You'd rather wait till you get home to use the bathroom, but the beer is so cheap.

In a dive bar, at any given time, the ages of oldest and youngest patrons are separated by at least 35 years.

There's often a colorful figure associated with a dive bar (Stella at the Carousel).

There's often a colorful activity associated with a dive bar, like letting a chicken loose on a special bingo board and betting on which square it will choose for doing its business (Ginny's).

Dives have only recently and begrudgingly started accepting Visa and MasterCard. If you are in a true dive, your bartender will only accept cash. If you are a true dive patron, you will pay only in cash.

And if you're a regular — as in, have your own insulated wrap/mug — then you can have a tab.

All windows in a dive are blacked out or permanently shaded. The most hard-core of dives have no windows at all.

As a rule, the jukebox has hardly any music from the past five years, to make sure that any songs that are added have real lasting value.

Patsy Cline is always on the jukebox.

Dancing can only occur if one or two people OK it by not paying attention to the dancing. And if they aren't there, no dancing.

Real dive bars are aged. Like pickled eggs.

There's always a woman who'll do you wrong. And one that's done been wronged, too.

Dives can only exist in their current location. They cannot be transplanted and survive.

There are never bouncers. Just regulars.

When you walk in, you know that you'll enjoy conversing with other patrons. Or that conversations will end in fisticuffs. Or both.

You only order shots of whiskey, bourbon or tequila in dives. If Clint Eastwood wouldn't drink it in a movie, you don't shoot it in a dive.

You never insult Elvis at a dive bar.

(BOX)

MOIRA'S FAVORITES

POODLE DOG LOUNGE

6507 Burnet Road, 465-9468

The Poodle Dog is my favorite dive. Not just because it's the perfect place to play pool on a Tuesday afternoon or because staff and patrons say hello. But because the Poodle Dog is essentially smoke-voiced and blue collar. It's AC/DC's 'Back in Black' and George Jones' heartbroke wailing, depending on who's at the jukebox. When the George Jones folks get going, they sometimes two-step through the pool tables. Beer comes in cans or bottles, but mostly cans. You can bring hard liquor and buy set-ups, but mostly you drink beer. And play shuffleboard.

CASINO EL CAMINO

517 E. Sixth St., 469-9330

I recently found out my boyfriend, who's lived in Austin for several years, had never had a burger at Casino El Camino. I considered breaking up with him. But it's probably easier just to take him to the punk rock dive, with a serious jukebox, pool tables upstairs, a patio behind the stairs and tattoos everywhere you look. If one of the key elements to a good dive is that it has a person or a thing it's known for, then Casino is a great dive because the burgers are to die for.

DONN'S DEPOT

1600 W. Fifth St., 478-3142

The dive made my list for two reasons: 1) There's shag carpeting in the women's bathroom, and the bathroom is made out of an old train caboos; and 2) dancers young and old congregate and wiggle to the beat. Yes, there's a slow cooker and popcorn, and actually a pretty full bar, but the reason I love the joint is because every time I go, I see older people, younger people and people in between - often dancing to the live music with each other. And because, once, a waitress promised to bring me drinks in the bathroom if I just wanted to hang out in there.

SAM'S TOWN POINT

2115 Allred Drive, 282-0083

This is a fabulous dive for the following reasons: because it's just outside the Austin city limits, you can smoke there. Natural Light, in cans, costs \$1.50, and beer comes with an insulated wrap, which you return with your empties. And well, I love the place because the first time I went, I had to jump a curb from an Ace hardware store to get to a little road to wind around to find the bar. (I later discovered that there's an actual turn you can make from Slaughter Lane onto Riddle Road and then to Allred Drive.)

DEEP EDDY CABARET

2315 Lake Austin Blvd., 472-0961

I didn't recognize Deep Eddy Cabaret the first time I went in after the smoking ban took effect. I could see all four walls. At once. But it makes the list because of a thousand kinds of stuff and photos and signs tacked up to the wall behind the bar. Because it has a history: It was a grocery store and bait shack before it was a bar. Because the jukebox has Frank Sinatra and Elvis (Costello and Presley) and most every kind of music you can think of. Because on Saturday afternoon, when a regular walks in, the bartender gets a big glass from the fridge and pours beer into it before he says hello. Deep Eddy feels like its own world.

THE DART BOWL

5700 Grover Ave., 452-2518

Think of it as artistic license when I call the Dart Bowl a dive bar. It's a bowling alley, of course, and really the little café/bar is mostly restaurant, but glory glory hallelujah, it's

one fine dive. One of the few dives to survive a move, the Dart Bowl took a whole wall of graffiti from its original location and put it up in the new café - and so its soul stayed intact. My hungover friends swear by the enchiladas. I find it's one of the few places I can have a bourbon no matter what time of day and not have to mutter 'It's five o'clock somewhere' guiltily to myself.

DRY CREEK CAFE AND BOAT DOCK

4812 Mount Bonnell Road, 453-9244

Apparently, Sarah yells a lot. She doesn't talk to reporters, not even bar reporters, but legend has it that if you don't bring back your empties, she'll yell at you. Sarah, who's 93 according to the Dry Creek Café and Boat Dock MySpace page (yes, Dry Creek has a MySpace page), is well-liked by many and feared by plenty. But she's the reason that this dilapidated dive with a water view in the middle of a monied Mount Bonnell neighborhood is on my list. You have to respect a woman with rules who's run a joint like that for 50 years.

THE CLOAK ROOM

1300 Colorado St., 472-9808

The Cloak Room is below ground and above reproach. The place rocks. I met one of my favorite friends there; I've broken my bank account there; I've drunk with classical musicians and roller derby fans there. Anything is possible at this dive alongside the Capitol, including entertaining conversations with lawyers. The bar is full, the jukebox is fuller and the yarn-spinning can be the fullest of all. Plus so little natural light leaks in.

HORSESHOE LOUNGE

2034 S. Lamar Blvd., 442-9111

I don't get over to this South Austin dive much, but I love it because one of the first times I stopped by, there was a box of kittens in the bar that someone was trying to find homes for. I'm not much of a cat person, but those kittens were pretty cute. And a dive ain't a dive unless it's possible that wildlife will be sighted - or looking for a home. The cheap beer, the friendly people and the NASCAR decorations were pretty classic, too.

GINNY'S LITTLE LONGHORN

5434 Burnet Road, 458-1813

I just got treated to a prix fixe chicken dinner and a bottle of viognier, courtesy of Ginny's Little Longhorn: My guy won the Sunday afternoon bingo and took me to supper with the prize money. Honey-tonker Dale Watson came up with the chicken (expletive deleted) bingo idea, and this tiny dive's definitely a honky-tonk. Folks always make room up front for the couples who want to two-step. Show up in the morning, and an actual train engineer might offer to buy you an 8 a.m. beer.

CAROUSEL LOUNGE

1110 E. 52nd St., 452-6790

How many bars do you know of that have circus themes? I know of just one: the Carousel. It's not the set-ups or the cans of beer or the bands or the pinball and Ms. Pac-Man or even the broken '50s-era private jukeboxes that decorate the wall behind each booth. Shoot, it's not even the pink elephant. This bar makes my list because it's where I met Stella Boes, Austin's most fabulous waitress. A senior citizen, a tireless dancer, a wearer of patriotic sparkles and red lipstick, the warm and friendly Stella is the kind of woman who makes dives vibrate with life.

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