

FEELING REALLY TEXAN? HEAD FOR POODIE'S
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SPICEWOOD -- I heard about catching a coyote (KY-yote) and Hill Country attractions such as the caves at Krause Springs, where you can dive to 130 feet. I heard that the bartender was a former military guy who took no guff, and I saw tattoos faded blue with age and smoke.

Most people come to Poodie's for the music. Sure, there's burgers and beer and set-ups if you want to walk next door and buy yourself some hard liquor. Pool tables about shuffleboard, and the big TV may display the wide green expanse of a golf tournament. Patrons chat and holler to each other across the bar; camaraderie is palpable.

But people come for Willie. For open mike Wednesdays. For Billy Joe Shaver and the Troubadillos. For Guy Clark. For songs about girls and bikes and broken hearts. We came for beer. We came because it was Friday and hot, because we'd been teaching all morning, and because we wanted a beer. My friend had wanted to go for months: Her husband is a musician, younger than Willie and older than Guy Clark, and so she knew about Poodie's, the way most local musicians of a certain age or style know about it, since it's owned by Willie's road manager, Randall "Poodie" Locke. And it was she who recognized Billy Joe Shaver when he stopped by the bar for a quick chat. (My arm may still be bruised.)

Not 10 minutes after we'd sat ourselves down, we'd already met a couple folks. By the time we left, I'm pretty sure one or the other of us had chatted with every one of the 10 or so people there. That's how I heard about the coyote and cave, how other folks learned my friend was from New England and loving living in Texas.

Poodie's is big, open and set inside a building so unremarkable that we passed it the first time and nearly passed it the second. We should have looked for the cars: Eleven miles past RM 620 on Texas 71, a handful of pickups and a Harley nestled together up on our right. Inside, Poodie's has the usual bar stuff: signs and photos, room for a couple hundred folks, some picnic tables outside and a jukebox full of heartbroke tunes, even some songs by the bartender, Jimmy Lee Jones.

It took me years to acknowledge that I'm a Texan. Much of my family's from San Francisco, and though I grew up in Dallas, I used to claim SF as home. It wasn't till I got to college and learned that my roommates had no idea what the "Cotton-eyed Joe" was, much less how to dance it, that I had any notion that Texas was different. And good. Great, even.

That may be why I like places like Poodie's. Not just the beer and music and the "there aren't strangers here" style of conversation. But because it feels so Texan. Like something you can't get other places. Like something you choose.

One of the guys we'd been talking to left just after we did. He rode a motorcycle with the high handlebars, and his gray ponytail was banded tightly every three or four or inches. I watched him -- just for a second -- in my rearview mirror as he turned right and headed deeper into the Hill Country. We turned left and made it back to Austin in time for our dinner plans.

(box)

Poodie's Hilltop Bar & Grill. 22308 Texas 71 W., Spicewood, 264-0318.