

AT RED'S, THEY LOOK OUT FOR YOU

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Lately, my brothers have been responsible for me talking to strangers.

While we were in the Bay Area last week, my brother Ryan gave me a "Cat in the Hat"-inspired red-and-green hat as a birthday present -- it has lots of faux white fur, with the words "Kiss Me" emblazoned on the front and a sprig of fake mistletoe dangling from a red velvet curlicue projectile thing. It was impossible to pack, so I wore it in the airport and on the way home. Lots of people talked to me. (Thanks, Ryan.) And a couple of nights ago, while wearing Ryan's old high school sweatshirt --from Cistercian, a Dallas institution run by Hungarian monks with graduating classes of 28 or so -- some guy at Central Market approached me and started chatting because he'd gone to Cistercian too. So I guess it should be no surprise that when I mentioned Red's Scoot Inn to my brother Chris, he turned out to know all about it and offered to introduce me around.

Sadly, Chris wasn't with me when I went in, but I understood why he liked the place -- he and his rugby buddies used to go there after practice (the field was down the street) and after a few weeks, they noticed that a cooler full of cold Schlitz was waiting for them -- on the field -- at the end of practice. The owner didn't come over and hang out or make a big deal out of it, but she made sure the guys had a cold one when they finished -- a thank-you for all the business the guys gave her.

Red's Scoot Inn is on Fourth Street, just east of the highway, where it's been since 1871, making it one of Austin's oldest bars. In its current incarnation, Red's is a Tejano dive (it's been a biker bar and a rock bar), with cheap beer (\$1.75 every night), lots of Tejano music on the jukebox (which seems to be set on "loud as you can make it") and endless rows of picnic tables with bad chairs. At the moment, it's covered in Christmas lights too. The crowd tends to be working class and over-50, and proprietor Vera Sandoval's mother, an 84-year-old woman named "Red," does the security, while Vera, her sister and her son Jay (the one who actually hauled the beer over to the rugby field) all work behind the bar. (Vera herself told me a funny story about the police coming to look for underage drinkers, being greeted by her mother, taking one look around the place and pretty much not coming back again.)

Physically, Red's is a pretty straightforward place -- one big room, a bar, a pool table, and an outdoor seating area that's not terrifically appealing right now, given that it's chilly. And the clientele seemed like stand-up people. While ordering a beer, I overheard a couple of guys on their way out offer another guy a lift since his ride hadn't shown up. They didn't appear to know each other, but one guy needed what the other two had, so they offered. Which is a decent thing to do -- as is leaving a cooler full of beer for a bunch of goofy, sweaty rugby boys. It's how people should behave -- and so often don't. I'm not sure when or if the Scoot Inn gets jammed -- I haven't gone on a weekend night, which is when the Sandovals say the house is packed -- but it's certainly low-key during the week. There were never more than a dozen people there and everyone talked to each

other or didn't, depending on what kind of vibe you were giving off. But the beer was cold and cheap, the service was swift, and I knew that if ever I needed a ride home, I could probably get one.

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Red's Scoot Inn. 1308 E. Fourth St., 320-0004, 3 p.m.-2 a.m. daily.