

BEER, HISTORY AND OOMPAH MUSIC MAKE SCHOLZ AN AUSTIN CLASSIC MOIRA MULDOON

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Change is in the air. Friends are breaking out of long-term relationships. Other friends are getting back together. The fabulous Susan is moving to Illinois for a fabulous post-doc and will no longer be around for girls nights and after-hours merriment. My housemate (and friend) of three years is moving in with her boyfriend, and I'm about to start the grown-up stage of living alone. I heard Mercury was in retrograde; maybe that explains it (or so I'm told by people who know about such things). In any case, with so much change swirling about, it was good to have a beer this week in a place that's been around almost as long as Austin itself: official historic landmark Scholz Garten.

Scholz's is an old-fashioned beer garden. Opened at the end of the Civil War in 1866 by August Scholz, it's an enormous place, able to cater to parties of as many as 700 people (500 outside, 200 inside). Outside, more than 25 picnic tables seat guests -- some of whom share tables when the place is crowded, just like in a German beer garden. Inside are three separate dining/drinking areas -- the wood-heavy main room with the bar, the larger north dining room, and a third room downstairs between the beer garden and front. Neon beer signs from Schlitz to Budweiser, old newspaper clippings and posters decorate the walls. Food ranges from roasted chicken (an occasional special) to jagerschnitzel. Scholz's was leased about eight years ago to Green Mesquite BBQ, though it's owned by the Saengerrunde folks, and Green Mesquite brought in barbecue.

And of course there's beer. German brews from Lowenbrau to Spaten are on draft, along with various and sundry others from Fat Tire to Live Oak and Guinness. Those looking for a Bud or Miller or Red Stripe can find those and others in bottles. All can be drunk in any of the rooms, but are most especially enjoyed outdoors, where patrons can sit and stare at the stage with its backdrop depicting an Alpine scene. On Thursdays in spring and for a short while in the fall, a German oompah band plays. A polka band was recently added to Monday nights -- and on a Monday, if you're lucky, you might even see a couple dancing with vigorous hops and twirls.

Scholz's, being so close to the University of Texas, is particularly popular (like body-to-body popular) before Longhorn football games -- or any UT sporting event. Or so I've heard: Despite my two-year stint at the flagship institution, I never went to any sporting event, and so missed the pregame madness. But those without tickets can watch games -- Scholz's has more than a dozen televisions tuned to various sporting events -- and sometimes CNN. As it's also so near the various government buildings and the Capitol, Scholz's hosts legions of politicians. LBJ drank there, most Texas governors have eaten there, the state constitution was rewritten there and it's a safe bet that during lunch or just after work, you'll find suits hanging out and wrangling and hammering out details. The bar has a long history of hosting liberals -- most recently the Deaniacs gathered during Howard Dean's ill-fated campaign -- though it's been known to allow in Republicans, too (in 2002 the Travis County Republican Party launched the campaign season at Scholz's). The bar also was a character in a book: "The Gay Place," former LBJ staffer Billy Lee

Brammer's fictionalization of Texas politics, politics that sometimes took over the garden.

Change, they say, is a good thing. Or at least a necessary thing. Or, at the very least, something you can ponder at Scholz's, where the Austinites hanging out there may have changed over time, the menu and the folks in charge may have changed too, but the bar itself, in its various permutations, has existed for more than 100 years.

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