

SOOTHE YOURSELF UNDER STARS AT STEPHEN F.

Moira Muldoon

Publication Date: September 16, 2004 Page: 8 Section: XL Ent Edition: Final

The gods are punishing me.

Last week I was in Belgium; in the days leading up to my friend Julie's wedding there, I tasted all manner of Belgian beer: Maes, Stella, Trappist ales, wheaty beers and even the occasional Duvel (a beer so strong that the Belgians turned and commented as I walked through the cafe with it).

I drank champagne -- pacing carefully, as always -- through 12 hours of the black-tie wedding reception (it was still going on when I went to bed at 4:30 a.m., sober and bloody-footed from dancing). I ate lots of fries, the "national" food of Belgium, with mayonnaise, and stayed up half the night gossiping with old friends and new.

And now, I'm nasty green-nosed sick. (Clearly, I had way too much fun when I should have been in school.) As a result, the gods will have their vengeance.

But I refuse to be sick for long. I've traveled a good deal in the last two months and I have lots of people to catch up with; staying in bed is not an option. I will, however, only meet folks in soothing bars: the San Jose, for example, or the Stephen F. inside the InterContinental Stephen F. Austin hotel.

I wrote about the Stephen F. -- a place I would recommend to any newcomer -- in one of my very first columns nearly three years ago, commenting that it was less a bar for adventures than a place to go have a chat with friends. That's still true. The difference is that I'm less interested in adventures than in lovely chats these days, and so the Stephen F. has become, more so than any other bar in town, the place I visit most frequently. The reasons are the terrace and the service.

There are those among you who may frequent the Stephen F. for its "Ash Wednesday" cigar night, when the scent of tobacco lies as heavily across the bar as incense in the Vatican during Lent. (I generally like the smell of cigar smoke but Ash Wednesday is too much for me.) Or perhaps for its extensive tequila and vodka lists or mountains of martinis (I do love their version of the cosmopolitan).

Or perhaps for the fabulous service. I've almost never spoken to a bartender at the Stephen F. because the waitresses come so quickly to my table, usually armed with an assortment of nuts and pretzels; they check back in at regular and consistent intervals. Rarely have they not been ready to take my order when I've been ready to place it. I never sit inside; always on the terrace. The appeal is something akin to elegance. The interior of the bar itself is attractive, but in a leather-and-cigar-and-TV kind of way. Outside, there's a loveliness to sitting in one of the dozen or so wooden tables on the terrace, the lights of the Capitol illuminating a friend's face, the traffic and people moving through Congress Avenue a flight below. I often find myself undoing my budget by

ordering one of the \$9 drinks on the menu (a cosmo is such a drink) because Jack Daniels doesn't look as pretty in a martini glass. And I want something as civilized as my surroundings: a martini, a glass of champagne. The nights when a breeze is blowing, especially if the temperatures are dropping to the 60s and 70s, nothing feels as good as cold champagne and warm conversation, all enjoyed while watching the world wander by.

The Stephen F. has other attractions, of course: an expensive and expensive-tasting appetizer menu, single malts and wines, a bathroom with rich wood stall doors that go all the way down to the floor. These are good things, lovely things.

When I was in Belgium, sitting in a cafe in the late afternoon, watching the traffic go by in the square, lazily talking and being silent with new friends, I was utterly content. And this week, as I try to catch up with old friends, the terrace at the Stephen F. beckons. It's not the same as the Belgian cafes, not even remotely. But the delicate elegance of a glass of champagne and watching the world: That's something that appeals no matter where the bar is.

Stephen F.'s Bar & Terrace, 701 Congress Ave., 457-8800.