

# The Neighborhood Tavern: Community Tradition at the Harmony

When I was a child, a perfect meal was a greasy hamburger topped with a slice of raw onion, accompanied by krinkle-cut french fries slathered with Heinz ketchup and served in a wax-paper-lined plastic basket, and washed down with an ice-cold, syrupy Coke. My brothers and I also enjoyed other gastronomic delicacies such as beer nuts, sour cream and onion potato chips, maraschino cherries, Slim Jims, Blind Robins, and Weasel Peters. Food this wonderful was only served in a neighborhood tavern: a dark, heavenly place that smelled like fried food and cigarette smoke.

Gina Grumke

Taverns contained fantastic, mysterious things that flickered, beeped, and squawked. We pestered our parents endlessly for quarters to fill pinball machines, juke boxes, and pool tables. The adults who frequented these places, including our parents, were more tolerant there of kids' behavior and exuberance. They themselves talked and laughed more than they did at home.

Taverns or bars (these words seem to be used interchangeably) in Wisconsin are a ubiquitous feature of the landscape in both rural and urban areas. Local taverns have been community gathering places in Wisconsin since European settlement. Although the social fabric of Wisconsin has undergone tremendous changes since the days of "a bar on every corner" — in particular, as affects taverns, there are more health-conscious consumers, stiffer drunk driving laws, and an increasingly mobile population which no longer has to live within walking distance of entertainment — taverns continue to exist and even thrive in various incarnations in all regions of Wisconsin, and they provide a cornerstone of social life.

When I left Wisconsin in my twenties, I was surprised to realize that most of the country did not share this idea of the tavern as a comfortable gathering place for all family members. Instead, taverns were viewed as places to imbibe liquor, consort with unsavory characters, and generally get yourself in trouble. I was puzzled by what I encountered — bars closed on Sundays, the creation of private "clubs" to circumvent restrictive liquor laws, the concept of a "dry" anything — and I found state-run liquor



*Patrons at the Harmony Bar play sheephead, a German card game popular throughout Wisconsin.*

Photo © Bob Rashid





*A softball team sponsored by the Harmony enjoys beer and food at tournament time. Photo by Gina Grumke*

stores with lab-coat-attired sales staff absurdly funny. In the 1980s I spent a summer working in Germany and discovered the neighborhood *Stuben*. They had soup and sandwiches, beer on tap, a juke box, some electronic games, and a crowd that could walk there. The Wisconsin taverns that I grew up around were close cousins of these neighborhood *Stuben*.

Wisconsin taverns are generally housed in long, narrow buildings and are furnished with a counter, bar stools, a few tables, and maybe a pool table and some pinball machines. Most bars have at least a small grill and fryer, and some have full-size kitchens in back. Many bars have an attached "dining room," which is used for eating, as a performance space for bands, and for parties and other special celebrations. Tavern owners more often than not work several shifts

behind the bar themselves, serving drinks, making burgers, and generally keeping order.

Sitting in Madison on the corner of a busy cross-town artery and a residential street in a couple of connected two-story storefronts is the Harmony Bar. Housing a bar since at least the 1930s, the building has tiny signs out front proclaiming "Bar" and "Grill" and neon beer signs in the small windows. Regular customers enter the bar by the side door, from the side street. (Only new customers use the "front" door.) Bartenders and customers greet each other by name and inquire about each other's lives. "Did you catch the softball game last night? Did you see Dave slide into third base?" "Where is your wife working now?" During the day people come and go, drinking coffee, reading the paper, watching the news or sports on the televisions, and chatting with the bartenders, many of whom have worked there for years. There is a con-

stant stream of delivery people bringing beer, liquor, and food. Around 11:30 the lunch rush starts — workers from the neighborhood, government office staff who obviously have driven there from the State Capitol building, and folks from the neighborhood. After lunch people start drifting in for a beer or two, maybe a bowl of soup, a plate of stuffed jalapeño peppers ("poppers"), or a basket of homemade chips and dip. There are decks of cards and cribbage boards behind the bar for the asking. The telephone rings frequently; many calls are for customers whom the bartenders know by name.

The adjoining dining room, with its black-and-white checked tile floor and beautiful tin ceiling, is full of chairs and tables that are easily and frequently rearranged by customers to accommodate their needs and activities, including eating, drinking, playing cards, holding infant carriers, displaying birthday cakes, and stacking presents. Customers are welcome to bring in their own decorations for parties, ranging from embarrassing photo montages of the birthday person to signs of farewell, good luck, and congratulations and balloons and crêpe paper. Also in the dining room are electronic dart machines, framed posters, announcements of past concerts and dances at the bar, and an elaborate menu board. When there is no band playing, the stage is used as more dining space.

Keith Daniels and his wife, Jo Raggolino, opened the bar in 1990. Keith was born and raised in Burlington, outside of Milwaukee, and spent his youth helping out in the family bar, which was also called the Harmony Bar. He left Wisconsin for a while but returned, with Jo and a strong sense of what kind of bar he wanted to open. When he and Jo, along with a partner, bought the bar, it



was, in their words, “a dump.” The only positive angle was that there was no clientele to offend or change. Designing the Harmony to be a place where he would enjoy hanging out with his friends, he packed the juke box with his favorite blues, rock, and some jazz (B.B. King, the Rolling Stones, Stevie Ray Vaughan), stocked local and regional beer, and slowly started building a menu of tasty bar food. He purposefully built a base of customers who were at least in their thirties, relaxed, and would return frequently to a place they liked — in particular, women can come to the Harmony and not be hassled. Although the clientele is primarily from the neighborhood, people drive there from all over the city. The owners have installed bike racks for those who prefer to cycle in. In a '90s update, although cigarette smoking is allowed in the bar, there is no cigarette machine. A small number of brands are sold from behind the bar at very high prices, reflecting the management's ambivalence towards smoking.

Jo's area of expertise at the Harmony is the food. The Harmony offers wonderful examples of traditional Wisconsin “bar food” — hamburgers, cheeseburgers, french fries, deep-fried onion rings, and even deep-fat-fried mushrooms and cheese curds. Jo has added a chalkboard menu of weekly and daily specials such as quesadillas, vegetarian sandwiches, pasta salads, and stir-fries. She recently installed a pizza oven and now serves an old-fashioned, thin-crust pizza, complete with gobs of cheese and toppings. Using her extensive skills and vision and fresh vegetables from her father-in-law's garden, Jo is redefining what bar food is (at least at the Harmony). Although her hus-

band Keith will never allow brats, burgers, and cheese curds to be removed from the Harmony's repertoire, she is continually changing and tinkering with the menu, with mouth-watering results. Jo was raised on the East Coast and was not familiar with the Wisconsin neighborhood tavern, but she has embraced the concept wholeheartedly.

Throughout the year customers from the neighborhood gather at the Harmony for a variety of food and entertainment. There is a daily sheephead table in the front of the bar, instigated by Keith, an avid player. Keith's enthusiasm for many professional sports, including basketball, is reflected in the Boston Celtics posters throughout the bar. Several large televisions are mounted high on walls — often as not tuned to different sporting events, with the volume turned down except, of course, during big events such as playoffs and anything involving the Packers. On the weekends there is live music in the dining room. Keith only books genres of music he likes.

Throughout the year the bar sponsors darts, basketball, pool, volleyball, and softball teams. The undisputed favorite is softball. The Harmony Bar sponsors the most softball teams in the city of Madison. In fact, the Harmony fields so many that Keith is able to put on a day-long tournament at the end of the season with only Harmony teams. Teams are expected but not required to come to the bar, relax, and, they hope, celebrate after the game. The bartenders keep track of each team's orders on a big chart behind the bar, and at the end of the season the team that has spent the most gets a free pizza and beer party. The Harmony is developing such a reputation for softball and postgame celebrations that some regular customers stay away on summer

evenings because the atmosphere is so frenetic.

The Harmony has close connections with the Atwood community center, a volunteer community service agency a block away. The busiest night of the year at the bar is a tropical theme party which benefits the center. The Harmony sponsors a music stage at the Atwood neighborhood summer festival, and inside the bar a bulletin board displays announcements for upcoming community events.

Taverns like the Harmony Bar are significant social and cultural institutions in Wisconsin. At once rooted in past traditions and dynamic, they provide a space where people of all ages can come together and enjoy food and drinks, music, sports, games, entertainment, and each other. Wisconsinites appreciate the idiosyncratic, community-based character of taverns, which stand in sharp contrast to the homogeneity of larger American fast-food culture. They are proud that taverns, emblematic of social identity in Wisconsin, are places in which they can assert and maintain their own distinctive cultural traditions.

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*Gina Grumke, a Wisconsin native, has done fieldwork relating to Wisconsin taverns and is now completing her dissertation at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She is currently employed by the Dublin Group, a Chicago-based innovation planning firm.*