

SHINER BOCK FINALLY REACHES CHICAGO



A Taste of Texas

AFTER SEVEN YEARS IN CHICAGO, I HAVE STOPPED CARING WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK. I pump 7-Eleven chili directly into my open bag of Fritos. I sing along with Willie, Lyle and Zona—loudly—and often refer to others as “all y’all,” which is the plural of “y’all.”

I wasn’t born in Texas, but as the saying goes, I got there as soon as I could and swore I’d never leave. That is, until I married a boy who got a job in Chicago. So began my life as a Texpat. Getting used to the weather was the biggest challenge (although buying a real winter coat did help), but I also found it annoy-

ing that my favorite beer, Shiner Bock, was only available as far north as St. Louis.

For nearly a hundred years, Shiner’s been crafted by the family-owned Spoetzl Brewery in the little Hill Country town of Shiner (population 2070). The easy-drinking, amber-tinted Bock tastes like lazy weekends, local bars and porch swings, and it’s got a slight sweetness that can stand up to even the most piquant jalapeno popper.

My Yankee friends may not understand my love of the Lone Star state, but soon they’ll be able to fall in love with my favorite beer. That’s because, starting this week, Shiner is officially available in Chicago.

It’s the end result of about ten-years-worth of requests from Chicago consumers, distributors and retailers, says Shiner marketing guy Charlie Paulette. “We weren’t trying to avoid Chicago, we just wanted to wait until the time was right,” he says. “We’re a little brewery, and we did the best we could.” And that’s plenty impressive: The fifty-employee brewery added a second shift to churn out the 4,000 cases needed to “seed” the city—the cases traveled last week to Chicago via three packed trailer trucks.

To create buzz for the big launch, the brewery has sponsored a series of teaser ads on buildings and in print. It’s also been hooking up local Texas alumni groups, big-time. “Donating beer is the best currency in terms of making people happy and spreading the word, and we’re relying on that word of mouth, especially from other Texans,” Paulette says. “Shiner grew out of the liberal, open-minded, laid-back crowd that exists in Texas—those are the people who made us popular, and hopefully we’ll connect with those same people in Chicago.” (*Jenny B. Davis*)

To find out where to enjoy Shiner Bock, visit www.shinerchicago.com



Hungering for More

By Michael Nagrant

THIS COLUMN MIGHT SUCK.

Sounds like a set-up? You bet. As a self-respecting writer, one should either skip writing such a column, or just write the column and let the reader decide whether it sucks or not. Similarly, any professional waiter shouldn’t start the night’s service with the following statement: “Hello, I just want to let you know we have twelve large parties tonight, and we’re going to be real busy. Your food order will probably take a long time. Just bear with us and everyone will have fun.”

I suppose if this were one of those restaurants where your gum-smacking high-school-aged waitress hopped up on a case of Red Bull sits next to you in the booth, strokes your arm and calls you honey before taking your order, that

might be OK.

But this happened Saturday night at Las Tablas (2965 North Lincoln), an independently owned Colombian-style steak house located in Lincoln Park. The waiter even flashed his best Alfred E. Neuman “What, me worry?” grin before walking away.

Why he pulled any punches when he should have added, “We may not even bring part of your order, and once we do, the corn muffin and fried yucca will taste like an Elmer’s School Glue cake. If you care to lodge a protest, feel free to do so as you pass by the wine-bottle-clutching throngs in the lobby while our front door hits you on the ass on your way out,” is beyond me.

Indeed, the waiter forgot a steak for one member of our party. Halfway through everyone else’s meal, when the meat finally arrived, the waiter set it down without apology, clapped his hands like a wayward Flamenco dancer and asked if everyone was having fun.

It doesn’t surprise me. Las Tablas is the poor man’s version of the all-you-can-eat churrascarias, where faux gauchos sporting MC Hammer pants and redneck handkerchiefs hawk over-salted meat impaled on glinting swords, and where you can’t possibly eat enough food to justify the high price tag. At Las Tablas, you can at least score a pretty tasty, well-seasoned steak as big as a Mayor Daley’s head for about \$18 and bring your own liquor to boot.

With masses lined up down the block all summer long there’s no incentive for Las Tablas to improve. I don’t blame the folks in line, as it’s just another sign that Chicagoans are still seeking tasty, value-driven food, where they don’t have to pay a Tony Rezko-campaign-contribution’s worth for a decent meal. Faced with paying \$34 for a twelve-ounce filet mignon at David Burke’s Primehouse (blue cheese crust will run you \$4 more), I’d run for the nearest South American steak house too.

Though for my money, I’d head to Tango Sur (3763 North Southport), where the garlicky chimichurri, the flaky zesty empanadas and sizzling parillada grills are superior to Las Tablas.

While looking at high-priced steaks, I noticed that Avenue M (695 North Milwaukee) is selling a bottle of Mumm’s Cordon Rouge, which retails for \$27.99 at Sam’s Wine and Spirits, for \$115 (a 410-percent mark-up). At that price, they should be serving the bubbles with a complimentary whole-roasted foie gras. Three-hundred-percent mark-ups are becoming the norm in the restaurant industry, making the few BYOB’s that operate, irrespective of food quality, that much more attractive.

Thankfully, across from Avenue M, you’ll find Juicy Wine Company (684 North Milwaukee), where bottles drunk at the bar are marked up only \$15 above “retail.” While the retail prices at Juicy are slightly higher than at Binny’s or Sam’s, they are eminently fairer compared to the egregious prices charged by many local sommeliers.

I was also disheartened by last week’s “An Insider’s Food Guide to Chicago” published in the Tribune’s Good Eating section. Purportedly, it was a guide for folks in town for the International Association of Culinary Professionals convention, as well as primer for regular readers who might “...stash this guide away somewhere or download it to their hard drive. We want them to come back to it again and again because it’s useful and fun and maybe, just maybe, there’s something good they don’t know about.”

Featuring spots like Superdogg, Billy Goat Tavern, Pizzeria Uno, Al’s #1 Beef and Hot Doug’s, the article might have been more appropriately titled, “A Food Guide to Spots Lauded Ad Nauseum by the National Press and Only Useful for Chicagoan’s Who’ve Returned from a Fifty-Year Coma.”

I suspect culinary professionals are more likely intrepid food folks looking for a bit of brains masala on Devon or some banana blossom salad at Spoon Thai rather than a well-known gut-bomb deep-dish pizza. This article is especially puzzling, when the Trib also ran an informative piece on how and where to eat an obscure regional dish like Nigerian fufu the same week. It will be interesting to see if the rise of Sam Zell (aka Ruport Murdoch 2, electric bugaloo) will do anything to unify the paper’s food-editorial vision.

De Lux

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