



Snapper in the City

By Michael Nagrant

WHILE I ABHOR COSMOPOLITANS, the one thing I do love about those ladies from “Sex and the City” is their camaraderie. I suspect their daily meetings, however, are nothing but TV mythology. There’s no way anyone with a real job and life has time to meet with their friends so often. Still, their gatherings duly represent my aspirations of whiling away endless afternoons over drinks, food and banter to celebrate life. And so I do. Since I moved to Chicago, my best friend Aamir and I have made it a pretty regular habit to decompress at various downtown establishments after work.

Almost seven years ago, I started working with Aamir at an industrial-supply company in the Western suburbs. For about six months I never said a word to him. He was a big silent dude with a fierce long goatee made not so much of hair but sharp porcupine-like quills (I’ve seen his stray beard hairs stick in his finger like a fishhook) that would make most Hell’s Angels jealous. Frankly, I was scared of him. Then one day, he noticed I had an Ella Fitzgerald CD, and asked to borrow it, thus launching a beautiful friendship. Ironically, he being a lover of jam bands and no female singer post-Vaughan/Fitzgerald/Holiday, and I, an unapologetic indie and pop aficionado, we’ve never agreed on music since.

One thing we do agree on is that we’re passionate students and lovers of Chicago history. As such our post-work Alcoholics Anonymous meetings often take place in ornate old-school Chicago hotel bars. We figure it’s always good to have something beautiful to look at and a story to be told. And, at least for me, the strange energy of happy-go-lucky tourists and hunkered-down regulars is an inspiring mix.

Our favorite spot used to be the lobby bar in the Hotel Intercontinental on Michigan Avenue. The Intercon inhabits the old Medinah Athletic Club and holds the legendary fourteenth-floor swimming pool where Olympian Johnny Weismuller, aka Tarzan, used to train, under a still extant terra-cotta fountain of Neptune. More importantly the bar used to make a killer double Bombay dry martini served on ice in a crystal decanter for \$10. That was until some bean-counter figured out the hotel bar didn’t have to be a loss leader and revoked the crystal decanters and encouraged parsimonious pours.

And so we moved on. There’s been the peanut-shell-sullied floor at Monk’s Pub, the wainscoted womb of the Berghoff and the magnificent carved relief-encrusted ceiling of Potter Palmer’s Hilton. Then about a month ago, we decided to hit the red-leather-banquette-lined confines of the Coq D’ Or at The Drake Hotel. Though we expected to drink, I’d been ashamed that as a chronicler of this city’s eats, I’d never had the famous Bookbinder soup, and so that was our real mission. I was a bit skeptical that it would be any good, as I’ve been disappointed by most of the classic restaurants, finding the pasta at Italian Village or the German plates at the old Berghoff to be relatively mediocre nostalgic tourist fare.

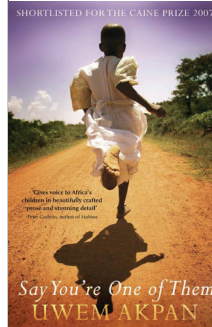
Reinforcing my fears was the fact that even though the Coq first allegedly served drinks to guests before the 8:30pm call announcing the repeal of Prohibition on December 6, 1933, outside of the martini, our bartender didn’t know how to make a classic cocktail (*nyet* on an Old Fashioned, a Moscow Mule and even a more modern Dark and Stormy). On the other hand the Coq’s spicy nut mix was incredibly addictive.

And the soup...well, it’s named after the restaurant of its provenance, Bookbinders, which opened in 1865 at 125 Walnut Street in Philadelphia. There are two stories how the recipe came to The Drake, both based on the idea that both Bookbinders and The Drake catered to entertainers, royalty and political dignitaries, and having the dish was a matter of cachet (President Taft allegedly hired a chef specifically to make the soup while he was in the White House). Either Edwin Brashears Sr., the second owner of the hotel (after the Drake brothers), got the recipe directly from the owner of Bookbinders in the 1930s or The Drake’s original architect Benjamin Marshall, finding the Bookbinders owner uncooperative, took their chef out for a few drinks and wrangled it from him.

Somewhere along the way the tomato-and-roux-based soup infused with sherry evolved from using “snapper turtle” meat (as it’s still served at Bookbinders) to “red snapper” fish. I haven’t been able to find exactly when the change was made, though the recipe definitely called for fish at The Drake as early as 1952.

As for the actual taste: my first bowl was distinctive and revelatory. The Drake version is served with a crystal decanter of sherry, which you pour into the broth as you slurp. The nuttiness of the sherry roils up in your nostrils along with the vegetal perfume of tomato and celery, both which also mingle on the palate. It’s definitely not only for tourists. Rather, it’s the perfect bowl of tradition suitable to meet old friends over.

The Drake Hotel, 140 East Walton Place, (312)787-2200. If you can’t make it to The Drake or want to try to make it at home, you can find a recipe at Newcity.com.



Horror Stories

A READER WHO SKIRTS AROUND THE INTERNATIONAL PAGE OF NEWS SECTIONS

may recall the grim events around which Uwem Akpan’s debut story collection revolves. In 1994, with the encouragement of their government, the Hutu majority of Rwanda systematically murdered nearly one million Tutsi people. In 2002, the BBC reported that aid workers in Western Africa were exploiting sex from child refugees. Two years ago, violence between Muslims and Christians ratcheted up in Ethiopia. Today, girls as young as eleven are being recruited into the sex trade from shantytowns outside Nairobi, Kenya.

In “Say You’re One of Them,” Akpan teleports readers out of their chairs and into the lives of children trying to survive these dire circumstances. The book is less a story collection than a powerful, frankly activist work of fiction that often succeeds in spite of its best intentions. Akpan, who is a Jesuit priest from Nigeria, exhaustively catalogs the meager circumstances of his cast. In “An Ex-Mas Feast,” an entire family clusters around one glue bottle, with which they get high and stave off hunger. They spend the story eagerly anticipating the nightly haul of their 12-year-old daughter, who has become a streetwalker.

Akpan often narrates in the first person, a storytelling strategy which allows him to contrast how much his young narrators understand about their situations, and how little the chances are they can escape them. In “Fattening for Gabon,” a young boy and girl are sold into semi-slavery when their parents are diagnosed with AIDS. Their uncle ferries the kids to the border, where they are fed stories of happy lives and platters of Western food and sea breezes. Only as they get closer to departing, their uncle’s actions in the bedroom reveal they may be on their way to a living hell.

Akpan is such a clever, instinctual writer, that even when his characters are providing testimony, it can feel like art. Each narrator in this book has a different style of speaking—often a mixture of a colonial language and its more complicated African brethren—and a slightly different nature. But they have a universal method of dealing with the worst disasters: they run. When a young girl’s neighbor forbids her to play with their children, the girl’s family packs up and leaves. When a one-handed Muslim notices that events are out of control, he disguises himself and boards a bus south. These stories are dispatches from a journey, Akpan makes clear, which has only begun. It is to their credit that, grim as they are, you cannot but hope they have a sequel. (*John Freeman*)

“Say You’re One of Them”

By Uwem Akpan

Little, Brown, 384 pages, \$23.99

READINGS

Women and Children First Bookstore, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7pm. Free.

THU/19

WED/25

→Karen Abbott

The author discusses “Sin in the Second City.”
The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

→Grandmaster Flash

The musician and now author discusses his memoir, “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash: My Life, My Beats.”
International House, 1414 E. 59th, (773)753-2270. 6pm. Free.

SAT/21

Sappho’s Salon: A Provocative Night of Lesbian Diversions

Featuring Jolie du Pre, Kathie Bergquist and more.

→Jessica Abel, Matt Madden

The authors discuss “Drawing Words & Writing Pictures.”
Quimby’s, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 7pm. Free.