

Tavern Food

R E V I E W

Eating may not be the first, second, or even the third thing that comes to mind when thinking of taverns, but it is an activity that goes on alongside the barstools and Muchmusic screen.

We know all this at *Gazette Arts Magazine* because we've eaten at a tavern or two ourselves. The food's usually cheap, you can wash it down with an ever-more-expensive glass of draft, and it can be a perfect atmosphere for talking anything over. And since most other students know this as well, we're straying from greasy spoons for our second venture into the eats industry. This review is taverns and nothing else. What places we overlook, we'll catch up to later on. Again, enjoy!

Maxwell's Plum (Grafton & Sackville) is a real plum among taverns.

Don't be put off by the semi-slick exterior, nor the prime location — at the corner of Grafton and Sackville, we're talking Young Urban Professionals at Play territory. But inside, the ambience is cheerful and the fare is surprisingly cheap. Maxwell's strives for the cosy-English-pub look and succeeds without being cloying. There's no fake imported English kitsch on the walls. All the kitsch and memorabilia is Canadiana, thank you very much.

Draft is the standard \$1.10 a glass, and there is a staggering variety of imported brews available. It's like the "Atlantic News" store of taverns. Service is friendly and efficient. The most pleasant surprise is the menu — everything is under \$5. This includes real steak — 8 oz. of sirloin and 12 oz. of prime rib, both priced under \$4. Other items run the range from chicken in various forms, to seafood, some appetizers, and hefty salads with excellent homemade dressings.

A word of warning — the chicken wings are for lovers of spicy foods only. Don't believe the menu when it lists the sauces as Mild, Medium and Hot. It's actually closer to Hot, Hotter, and Will Singe Your Mother's Hair. It rates an impressive four and a half forks.

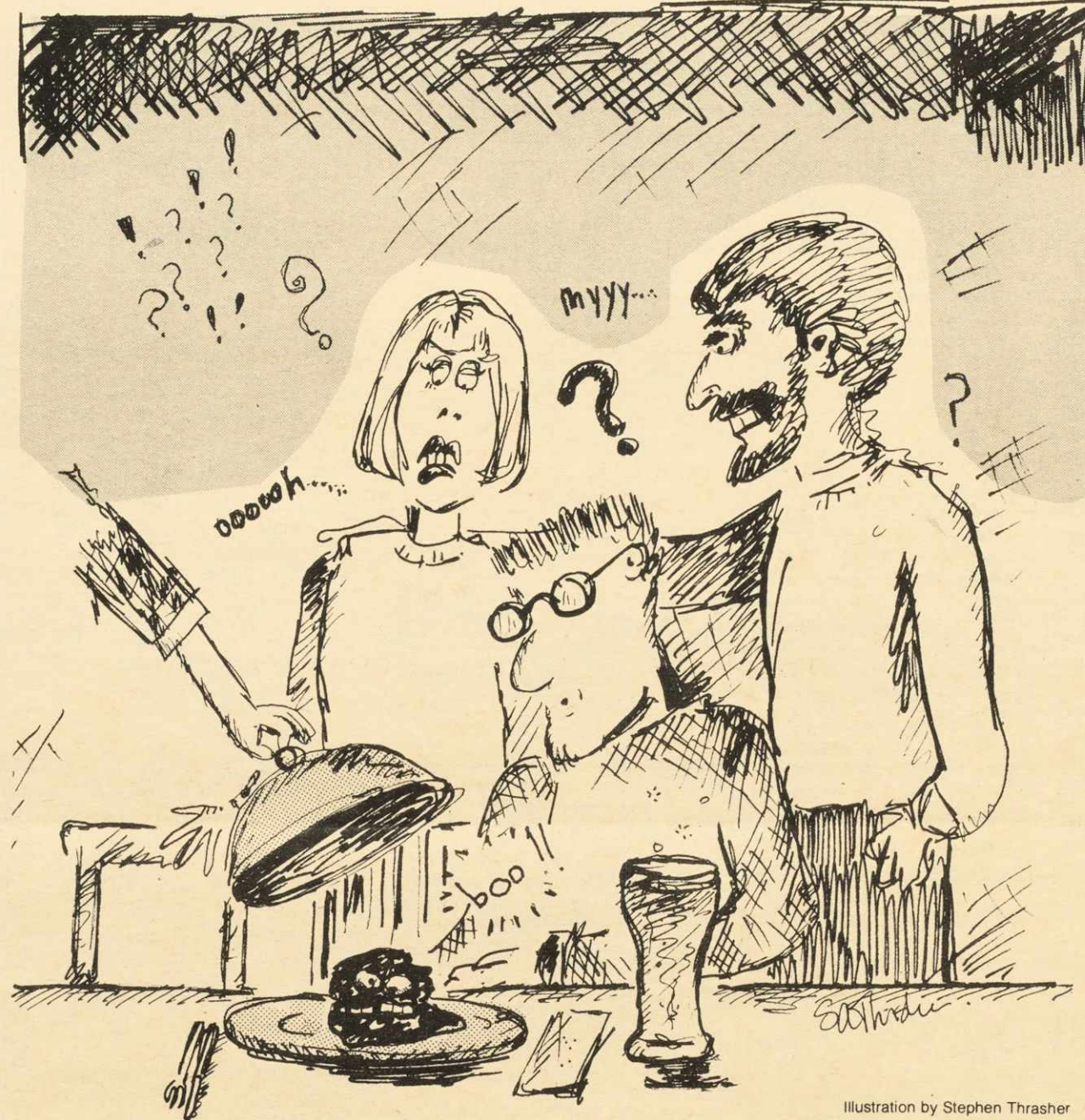


Illustration by Stephen Thrasher

The Lower Deck (at Historic Properties) offers the customer a natural attraction which other restaurant/taverns lack. If one can avoid the tourists the waterfront location is great. But even this wouldn't help a tavern very much if it had nothing to offer inside its doors.

Happily this is not the case. A warm atmosphere and genuinely friendly service greets the customers as they enter. The long tables are spread over two smallish rooms and a terrace.

The tasty fish and chicken-finger dishes are average size, with french fries below par. You could avoid these though by ordering one of the warm-up dishes such as the French-onion soup or the seafood chowder. They're big enough for a meal by themselves.

The kitchen closes at 7:30, when beer takes over as the main staple. The prices are comparable to other taverns with \$1.60 per 12-ounce draught, and around \$5.00 per main course. With an admittedly not every extensive menu, this is not the place for

burger fanatics. The Lower Deck caters more to the seafood lovers and tavern hunters of Halifax. It ranks three forks.

Lawrence of Oregon's (1726 Argyle) is spicy maybe, but definitely not pricy.

The beverage room, located at 1726 Argyle, offers an Italian menu with over 25 items, only one of which is priced beyond five bucks.

If you can manage to tolerate the unfinished plywood decor and sometimes out-to-lunch service, this could be a place for you.

The portions are bountiful; you certainly don't need to ask for more when you're through, even if you want to. You don't need to ask for ketchup or salt or pepper either; it is provided. And they handle spices, so vital to zesty Italian food, exquisitely. Besides, there's always more draught to set your mouth straight with.

The chicken parmesan, stuffed tomatoes, and pizza won our unreserved approval. The cannelloni and lasagna were received with mixed

blessings, but they were eaten. Ravioli was the only big loser.

"It tasted like dishwater," spat one refined companion, obviously accustomed to elevated standards of palatal excitation.

Ravioli and all, we have to award four forks to Lawrence of Oregon. The price: volume ratio is pretty hard to beat, and for students, that's pretty well where it's at.

The Midtown Tavern (1684 Grafton St.) is located in the heart of downtown, where its wonderfully tacky atmosphere borders on kitsch. Red fake leather chairs, ugly brown walls and the omnipresent television set (which seems to be permanently channelled into sports programs) make the atmosphere, well, anything other than intimidating.

The 9-inch pizza is a substantial meal and a fantastic buy for \$3.05. *Real* pepperoni and *real* mushrooms (none of the canned variety for this establishment) make a delicious topping for the chewy, crunchy and crispy crust. And no complaints can

be heard uttered as the other customers scarf down steak, club sandwiches and fish & chips.

The Midtown Tavern has been offering good food and great service to Haligonians for 36 years. Standard tavern food is the norm — the factor that sets the Midtown above many of its competitors is the consistent culinary quality. It ranks four forks.

The LBR, or Ladies' Beverage Room (at the Lord Nelson Hotel on Spring Garden) has one very good idea that raises their ranking a notch — discounts for students. With a student ID, their regular fare is halved in price (not counting the brews). Other taverns in town, please take note.

Unfortunately, there's a few areas where the LBR could learn something from other taverns in town when it comes to food. The fries that come served with your burger, steak, or fish are julienne ones of the

storebought kind and storebought taste. A Nelson Victory Burger at half \$2.85 comes with an unbuttered bun, a coupla fried onion bits on top, and a handful of mustard, ketchup, and relish squeeze packets to D.I.Y. The half-inch burger (their top of the line) is on the bland side and looks too much like a computer formed it.

Their "English Style" fish and chips is missing in English accents, too. The fish is often undercooked inside enough to be mushy even though it looks golden-brown enough on the outside, and it lacks in taste as much as the burgers.

The atmosphere inside is a reassuringly old grungy tavern feel, with no big-screen sports or music videos to distract or a jungle of ferns and market-calculated bric-a-brac. The most striking features are the old chairs, the cartoons by Chambers on the wall and the distinctly un-YUPpie regulars. The bar service can leave a lot to be desired, especially when a polite request for a glass of water nets a warm-bordering-on-hot glass of liquid. It works out to three forks, with one of those due to the student discount.

The Bonnie Piper (Maritime Centre Basement) perhaps more so than any other pub in the city, specializes in the basic meat 'n potatoes approach to food. Nothing fancy, nothing ethnic, and nothing, with one exception, particularly good.

The one exception is the renowned Hip of Beef. This dish is as much an anatomy lesson as a meal, as you watch the server behind the food bar take your choice of slices from an entire roasted cow's leg. This is then served with roast potatoes, vegetables and salad, with lots of gravy and all the Ben's bread you need to sop it up. This is not a fave hangout of vegetarians.

The rest of the menu's choices are similarly served, such as the pork chops, which tend to be dry. Fish and chips and a few other dishes are served to you at the table; you don't need to stand in the food bar line to get th'

Like other pubs, the main virtue of putting on the feedbag at the Piper is that the bag is always full. One way or another, you don't leave the Piper with an appetite. But non-essentials, such as flavour, tend to get lost somewhere between the kitchen and your table. If you have an aversion to large quantities of salt and pepper the Bonnie Piper is not the place for you. Two forks.

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