

Bar Hoppin' With Hops
The Second Century Tour
Hops MacBarley's 2013
Key West Bar Boondoggle

Bar #128:
Benihana
3591 South Roosevelt Boulevard
www.benihana.com
Monday, 24 June, 5:45 PM

Heineken (bottle) \$5.00

Right after work, it was off to Dead Man's Curve to hunt for hops. Yes, Hops hunting for hops. Should be easy, yes? Hop into a hop for hoppy brews.



The eastern half of Cayo Hueso is nowhere near as ripe as the more festive, more toured, more *drunnnnk* western half. Using the Garrison Bight / Smathers Beach line of demarcation that cuts this little island in half -- Palm Avenue, First Street, Bertha Street -- only 15 bars have been hopped on the sunrise side. This would be the 16th. Out of 128. That's one-in-eight (12.5%). Man, that's pretty low, but a higher cut than I thought.

Some 49 bars (so far) can (or could) be found on Duval Street -- 43 of those were in the first 100! [I think I said 41 before, but I trust the recount.] This includes both those with Duval Street addresses (like Fat City, which is on Angela, but is listed as part of the 618 Duval complex) and those that can be accessed from Duval (Hog's Breath Saloon, for instance).

The 2012 census put the population of KW at 25,057. If this Tour can reach the coveted 200 mark -- and that looks like it will take some scrounging -- that will mean that there is a bar for every 125 men, women, and children on the island (without the under-21 crowd, it works out to about a bar per 108 adults). Given that same ratio, New York City would have 41,683 bars!

The area of Key West is officially 5.59 square miles, so that would figure out to be just under 36 bars per.

Taken to its extremes -- from the sea wall to sea wall -- Duval Street is 6,288 feet (1.19 miles) long. There will end up being more than 50 hops on

that esteemed thoroughfare, which means that you have a bar, on average, every 125 feet -- roughly every 40 paces.

OK, enough stats. Every now and then, I gotta get my nerd on.

Benihana was not likely to be packed at 5:45 on a Monday. I was pretty sure there was a bar in here. I thought I had scoped one out from the road on a drive-by; people had that stand-and-mingle look about them, clustered in one contained area. Seemed bar-ish enough to warrant investigation, and the time was now.

My first good indication that Benihana did indeed have a bar came when I responded to the hostess' *How many?* look with, "Just going to the bar," and got a knowing nod in return.

The bar itself was immediately impressive, mainly because of the mirror. This is one *niiiiice* piece o' glass! Most of the mirrored surface is covered by a beautifully painted Geisha girl contemplating a pond among cherry blossoms. I assume it was paint, but the lighting gave it a translucent glow, almost as if it were lit from behind. The black shelves, walls, and bar accentuated it even more.



Benihana opens their doors daily at 5:30, so it was not surprising that there was only one table taken in the restaurant. I didn't see any cooks doing anything fancy or daring or entertaining. Too early, I reckon.

I've never eaten at one of these franchises. Dunno why. Cost, maybe? I'm definitely not a sushi guy, so that's part of it. They do have steak and chicken on the menu, and it's probably good, but I get gun shy with foreign

cooking. Spices, veggies, sauces, juices, and god-knows-what-else might end up on my steak under the guise of "enhancing the flavor." I guess I'm just not an adventurous eater. Plain and predictable works for me. Steak is delicious, so leave it alone. If I had to travel to another country, I'd freaking starve -- or go to McDonald's (ugh).

Except for the staff, the bar was emmmempty. Fine by me. I ordered up my Heinie and started taking in the start-of-shift shit.

I was once offered a bump-up from barkeep to assistant manager at Uno's. I asked what it paid. I looked at my cash tips, my ability to engage in witty repartee with my patrons, and the on-stage aspect of being The Man Behind The Bar **versus** the whining and bleatings of a staff full of young, whining, disinterested, cigarette-breaking wome; the bitching of cranky, overworked cooks; the pissing and moaning of perspicacious diners whose precious screeching children didn't get extra cherries in their Shirley Temples; and wee-hours wrangling with dupes and tickets and batch reports that just will **not** reconcile. For less money. And I'd have to wear a tie. Slam-dunk no-brainer: no, thank you, please, I eschewed the "promotion" and stayed safely behind that bar.

All this trotted across my mind as I watched Benihana's shift manager deal with the myriad petty and not-so-petty issues of a restaurant kicking out of slumber. You need to warm up your car. You need to stretch and limber up before you run. You need some warmup swings before you tee off. You need your cup o' java before you can function. So does a restaurant, but, unlike your muscles that fall into the groove with a little convincing, the restaurant's various issues have to be nudged into their groove by that ubiquitous, omniscient, mind-reading shift manager.

The managers -- and their lackeys, the assistant managers -- have to know how everything works, how to fix all things when they do not work, how to whip or pet their staff, how to turn the public's frowns to smiles, and how to perform mathematical origami at the end of the night. And they do it for totally shit pay. Managers are obviously better paid than the assistants, but I think the assistants could make more money for less stress working at K-Mart. Good God, my hat is off to each and every one of them.

So, anyway, the first problem that this shift's manager faced was fairly key to me, the bar patron: TV not functioning. Static covered the screen. I was glad that the volume was down. She came in with remote in hand and started pushing buttons. What else would you do? It crossed my mind that maybe some numbnutz maintenance dude had messed with it while cleaning

up, and that maybe he had changed it off Channel 3. I didn't say anything, though.

After many button-pushes and a few crazy angle attempts -- remote over her head, remote held across the bar -- she sent for one of cooks, proclaiming that "he knows how this damn thing works."

Then she turned her attention to the barkeep's problem: dessert orders were pumping out of the bar printer. I took that in stride at first, and then thought, hey, there's one party of three in the dining room and the place has been open for twenty minutes. Who the heck is ordering dessert anyway? So that one was a tad uktup-fay.



The cook came out, touched one of the little buttons on the front of the TV, switching it to channel 3, and *SportsCenter* magically came into view.

For every problem, you need an answer. One of the servers had called in sick (we'll be slow anyway), something had not been delivered (we have enough for tonight), you have a phone call (I'll take it up front).

I would have been a lousy manager. Once things got busy, my responses to the above would have been short and not-at-all sweet: that bitch is fired; cancel the contract with that lameass company; and tell whoever it is not to call me during goddamn dinner!

But all here was smooth and peaceful. I finished my beer and pondered ordering dessert, just to see if it would print at the bar, but opted to hop onward instead.